

EVANGELICAL SOFTENING TOWARD GAYS

THE HEART of the evangelical movement is broadening its political agenda and backing away from trying to be the nation's self-appointed moral police force. The effect on the next generation could be profound, potentially drying up the prime source of anti-gay activism.

That gay rights are becoming less of a hot button issue among religious conservatives is evident in a recent survey of members of the National Association of Evangelicals. Given the chance to name anything in the world as one of America's top three problems, only 8 percent of those polled listed



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homosexuality. Almost twice as many — 15 percent — had pointed to homosexuality in 1990. Meanwhile, other polls reveal surprising levels of support among evangelical Christians for laws to protect gay Americans from job discrimination and hate violence.

"I don't think you see as vociferous an opposition on gay rights," says John Green, an expert on religious conservatives who conducted the NAE survey. "There is a sense that one can have one's own views about morality without needing to force them on other people."

Green says evangelical Christians, whom he has studied for two decades, are facing the painful reality that they are not going to be able to use the ballot box to remake the nation in their own image. Rather than giving up on politics, they have taken to heart criticism that they've been too obsessed with what they view as moral issues, including abortion and homosexuality. Their focus is expanding to pay more attention to social issues, such as education,

health care and the environment.

"I see an evolution here," Green says. "Basically, this large religious community is coming to terms with what it means to live in a diverse, pluralistic society."

Compared with a generation ago, evangelicals are better educated, less concentrated in rural areas and more likely to know gay people — in their churches, workplaces or families. Knowing openly gay people, Green says, has led many to conclude some of their early anti-gay stands were "very harsh and based on cardboard stereotypes."

"Conservative Christians may never completely accept homosexuality, but what we've seen happening is a lot more moderation on the political questions of what kind of laws we should have on how people treat one another," says Green, a University of Akron political scientist.

Green's survey is a window into the evangelical Protestant world because the NAE stands at its ideological center. (Evangelical Protestants think the only route to eternal life is through the belief in Jesus Christ, the Bible is infallible and they should convert others.)

Evangelicals still tend to view homosexuality as wrong. A March 20 *Newsweek* poll found that 75 percent of white

evangelical Protestants call it a sin compared with 46 percent of Americans overall. Yet the overwhelming majority of evangelicals want gay Americans to be treated decently: 73 percent favor outlawing anti-gay job discrimination and 74 percent say anti-gay violence should be considered a hate crime, according to a 1999 Feldman Group poll.

All Americans, of course have a right to their own spiritual beliefs. And Green strongly cautions against challenging evangelicals on their interpretation of the Bible. Making evangelicals defensive slows the process of their finding a way to reconcile their religion with more moderate attitudes. Green notes that evangelicals already have reconciled themselves to divorce and don't crusade to outlaw it, even though Jesus condemned it.

A productive way of staking out common ground between evangelicals and the gay community was demonstrated last fall. Mel White, an openly gay evangelical minister, and other gay people met with the Rev. Jerry Falwell. Since then, several evangelicals have told Green: "These aren't the evil libertines that we had thought . . . They just seem like ordinary folks."

Common ground can be an amazing fruit. Let's till it creatively.