



■ Columnists' opinions

Monday: On Religion

Illuminating the national conversation

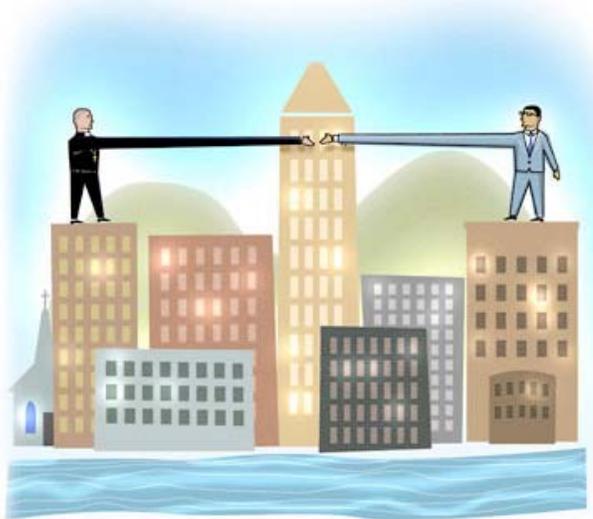
Evangelism 2.0

Stereotypes simply don't apply these days in Portland, Ore. A conservative Christian minister and an openly gay mayor of this progressive city provide a glimpse of what could be Christianity's future. Welcome to "Jesus' favorite city."

By Tom Krattenmaker

PORTLAND, Ore. — This city, it would seem, is the last place where evangelical Christianity would show its brightest colors. The Rose City sports an ultrasecular reputation. The voting tendencies here are as blue as the Columbia River on a clear-sky day. Regional land and transportation planning is so progressive that conservative pundit George Will has likened the Portland ethos to a disease, worrying in a column about it "metastasizing" to other parts of the country. And we have, of course, a gay, liberal mayor.

(Illustration by Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY)



Yet a pair of City Hall officials and a famed international evangelist had the audacity to stand together at a Baptist church altar earlier this year and declare Portland "Jesus' favorite city"?

They did, and with their tongues only 90–something% in cheek.

As was clear from the winks and grins, the Portland leaders were mainly engaging in wry playfulness in tossing out the "Jesus' favorite city" line when they gathered at Hinson Baptist Church to launch the second annual Season of Service, a church–city partnership to serve the homeless and other suffering people. The characters in this scene locally based evangelist Luis Palau, Mayor Sam Adams and City Commissioner Nick Fish are not so foolish as to claim Portland has achieved perfect virtue and enlightenment.

Yet they have a legitimate point in suggesting that Jesus might smile on what's happening in Portland. What wouldn't Jesus like about people from supposedly opposing camps tossing aside their differences to do right by the city's least fortunate?

Although Portland is hardly the only place where evangelical Christianity is evolving (and making new friends in the process), there is little doubt that evangelicals here are on the front end of a deep–change trend that is taking Christianity into its new future. What's especially interesting is the "why?" — the strong likelihood that Christianity's best face is showing up here in the unchurched mecca not in spite of the city's secularism and skepticism, but because of them.

Church winning its soul

As observed by the widely respected religion scholar Rodney Stark and others, history teaches that the church is often at its vibrant best in competitive, pluralistic environments, where it has to be at the top of its game. The age–old dynamic appears to be playing out today in Portland, and in a way that might be consoling to those troubled by signs of evangelicals losing the upper hand in American culture and politics. If this region is any sign, the evangelical church may be losing temporal power but winning something more important: its soul.

In many ways, Kevin Palau is the human symbol of the new–century evangelicalism. Palau is the 46–year–old executive vice president of the Beaverton, Ore.–based Luis Palau Association and the son of the organization's founder, who for decades has staged mass evangelism festivals around the world.

Unlike his brother Andrew, Kevin Palau does not share his father's gift for preaching. He has a different project: inventing a model for sharing the gospel — think of it as evangelism 2.0 — that emphasizes serving the needy and forming relationships with citizens of whatever religious (and political) persuasion.

"We evangelicals have been mainly talking to ourselves," Palau says. "The evangelical community wants to make a difference and show people what we and our faith are about. We recognize that the only way we're going to do that is by the way we live."

Out of that realization was born the Season of Service. This year, some 500 area churches — mostly evangelical, but also some Catholic and mainline Protestant — are fanning out across the Portland area to feed and clothe the homeless, provide free medical and dental services, fix up local public schools, and support their low-income students with supplies, mentoring and other resources. All this with "no strings attached," Palau emphasizes, meaning the service comes without the proselytizing that is often associated with Christian missionary outreach.

Not that the Palau organization has abandoned its stock in trade. The evangelism festivals continue around the country and world, including one in Portland where more than 100,000 people thronged to celebrate the completion of the first Season of Service. Nor are the participating evangelicals shy about who they are. As Kevin Palau told Portland's Willamette Week newspaper, "If you give me the opportunity and you want to hear, I'll happily tell you about how Jesus Christ changed my life. But I'm not going to shove anything down anybody's throat."

In turning his father's famed ministry in a new direction, the younger Palau has turned a lot of heads, too — including the news media's. Christianity Today, evangelicalism's leading chronicler, has published an in-depth feature on the Season of Service under the apt headline "Servant Evangelism." Local media have devoted copious ink and air time to the story, and Reader's Digest this month dubbed the Season of Service the nation's best group service project.

Actions over words

Let's be clear: America's evangelicals have long served the needy, and in all parts of the country. What is new and different about the Season of Service, though, is the participants' emphasis on "preaching" through idealistic action rather than pious words, and their partnership with the progressive politicians who run City Hall. Weren't evangelicals supposed to condemn liberal politicians rather than work with them?

As it turns out, this Portland story is chock full of stereotype-busting subplots. The most intriguing of all might be the way the Season of Service has thrust the area's evangelicals into partnership with Sam Adams, who last year became the first openly gay candidate elected mayor of a major American city.

On multiple occasions, Adams has represented city government at Season of Service events held at theologically conservative churches packed with evangelical pastors. Judging from the culture-war rhetoric of recent decades, one might expect the evangelicals to give the mayor the cold shoulder — especially after a well-publicized sex scandal made him an even more tempting target. Yet Adams has never received anything but a warm welcome.

In his religious history book *Discovering God*, Rodney Stark, a Christian, points out that the church, over the centuries, has often lost its way when it has been in charge of countries and cultures. Think Western Europe at various points in its history, where the church's dominant status correlated with periods of arrogance and listless participation.

Given the demographics, dominant status is not a "problem" that's going to afflict Portland's evangelicals anytime soon. That's hardly stopping them from doing what has always served Christianity best. Shane Claiborne, a Christian activist based in Philadelphia, described it this way when he came to speak in Portland earlier this year. The best way for Christians to make people know about Jesus, Claiborne declared, is by "doing fascinating things."

That's clearly what's happening here in "Jesus' favorite city." And more and more of the non-evangelical rest of us are becoming fascinated.

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