Notre Dame signals it is open to gay athletes

The Catholic Church in the United States has taken a lot of heat over its stance against gay rights and for policies that often bar openly gay people from participating in church life.

But the University of Notre Dame, an icon of American Catholicism, increasingly has been going against that current when it comes to gay athletes. On May 8, the school launched a new campaign to reinforce a message of inclusion wrapped in the wider message of the Catholic faith.

“Because the university values LGBTQ students in the Notre Dame community, as indeed it values all of its students, the university is committed to fostering an environment of welcome and mutual respect that is grounded in its Catholic mission,” Notre Dame athletic director Jack Swarbrick says in a voice-over for the two-minute video that kicks off the campaign.

The video features athletes from every men’s and women’s team on campus, including tennis player Matt Dooley and rower Olivia Kacsits, both seniors who have publicly identified as gay and both of whom pushed for the video and campaign.

“Our goal was to increase visibility of the supportive atmosphere created by the Notre Dame student community. Unfortunately, many Notre Dame observers have a different perception of the on-campus atmosphere,” Kacsits said in a statement. “Something I believe to be central to Notre Dame’s philosophy is that we believe in fostering and practicing unconditional, Christlike love.”

Given the university’s high profile in both the U.S. church and Catholic education, any move by Notre Dame is likely to have ramifications well beyond its picturesque campus in South Bend, Indiana. When Notre Dame awarded President Obama an honorary degree in 2009, nearly every U.S. bishop was forced to weigh in—many of them in disapproval.

Notre Dame recognized an official gay-straight alliance, PrismND, in 2013, after refusing to approve one for many years. Several other Catholic schools are following suit.

Dooley came out in a March essay in Outsports magazine, in which he told of growing up gay in a conservative environ-

Americans stretch the truth on attending church

“I KNOW WHAT you did last Sunday,” claims the title of a new survey. You skipped church. And then nearly one in seven of you fibbed about attending.

That’s according to a new survey by the Public Religion Research Institute released May 17. The study, to be presented at the national meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, was designed to measure the “social desirability bias in self-reported religious behavior.”

The survey finds that many Christians—and unbelievers, too—exaggerate about attending worship in live phone interviews. When asked in an anonymous online questionnaire, people answer more realistically.

On the phone, 36 percent of Americans report attending religious services weekly or more, while 30 percent say they seldom or never go.

But online, a smaller share (31 percent) of people surveyed say they attended church at least weekly, while a larger portion (43 percent) admitted they seldom or never go.

People who don’t attend worship—but say they did—may not mean to lie, said Robert Jones, CEO of the research institute.

People respond to phone surveys as they think “a good Christian” would or should answer, he said. “There’s an aspirational quality here,” he said. “People see themselves as the kind of person who would go.”

Once you remove the social pressure of speaking on the phone, “you see people willing to give answers that are probably closer to reality,” he said. “People feel less pressure to conform.”

Three groups were most likely to inflate attendance:

• White mainline Protestants: by phone, 29 percent say they don’t go to church. Online, that jumps to 45 percent.
• Catholics: on the phone, 15 percent. Online, 33 percent.
• Adults age 18–29: on the phone, 31 percent. Online, 49 percent.

The PRRI study is an update of studies on inflated church attendance conducted in the 1990s. In those studies research teams surveyed Catholics and Protestants in Ashtabula County, Ohio, and compared self-reported attendance claims with actual head counts in scores of churches.

The result: “Actual church attendance was about half the rate indicated by national public opinion polls.”

Since there’s no way to do head counts of people not attending services, PRRI found a contemporary technological approach—two different survey formats. Both surveys of American adults were conducted in 2013, with 2,002 people interviewed by cell and landline phone and a demographically comparable group of 2,317 who answered questions online.

People don’t even have to be religious to inflate claims of religiosity, PRRI found. Those one in five Americans who are “nones” also may feel greater pressure to fib because “they are the farthest outside general social expectations,” said Jones.

On the phone, 73 percent of nones say they seldom or never attend, but 91 percent say so when interviewed online.

In the overall study, 19 percent of adults answering online said religion was not important to them; only 13 percent said so on the phone.

However, among the nones, the gap on the importance of religion was markedly wider—49 percent on the phone, compared with 73 percent online.

—Cathy Lynn Grossman, RNS
ment in Texas and then arriving at a campus where the “religious affiliations and its resulting culture can be easily described as a pressure cooker for someone struggling with his sexual orientation.”

Dooley continued to contend with the “mental burdens” of being closeted and in September 2011 attempted suicide. He recounted his journey to recovery and to finally coming out to his teammates last September and the support he has received since.

That includes the latest project, done in conjunction with You Can Play, an organization dedicated to promoting respect for athletes “without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity.”

You Can Play was cofounded by Patrick Burke, a 2006 Notre Dame graduate, who also worked with Jason Collins, the NBA star who came out as gay last year, and Michael Sam, the All-American University of Missouri football standout who announced he was gay earlier this year.

“The church is supposed to be a place where people come together, where people are united in an idea of love and caring for each other,” Burke said. “When you start being exclusionary, that is not what Jesus taught.”

“From day one, nothing we have ever done has ever contradicted Catholic teaching,” he said, noting that the group even received an OK from a canon lawyer. “We are tremendously excited that Notre Dame recognizes that as well.”

When Sam came out at Missouri, Notre Dame football coach Brian Kelly told the Chicago Tribune that he thought gay players should be welcomed and that Notre Dame “is about embracing diversity” even though “that doesn’t necessarily mean we agree with homosexuality.”

Dooley and Kacsits are not the first athletes at a Catholic school to come out, nor the first to be welcomed for doing so.

Last May, Jallen Messersmith, a basketball player at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, publicly identified as gay and told of how the school had supported him after he informed officials and teammates there in 2012.

“We are a Catholic college, and we take our mission and values seriously,” Benedictine president Steve Minnis said.

“Our duty as Catholics, straight from the church, is to treat everybody with respect and accept them for who they are.”

Many dioceses and Catholic schools have come under fire in the past year for firing people who publicly identified as gay or who married their partner under the same-sex marriage laws that are being adopted in a growing number of states. —David Gibson, RNS

**Fashion designer creates clerical line for women**

A London-trained fashion designer has launched a new line of clerical wear for women in the Church of England.

Camelle Daley, who founded the label House of ilona, says it’s high time for a shake-up among Anglican clergy who, like Roman Catholic priests, still wear traditional black shirt and collar.

Daley said she got the idea when a recently ordained friend said she wanted a new look for a new age.

The result? Daley’s collection, now selling briskly, includes peplum dresses and tops, classic black dresses, and a fitted green blouse with chiffon detail.

She has received hundreds of orders from women, who now make up one-third of the clergy in this country’s established church.

“Today, more than ever, women in ministry are complaining about the boxy, shapeless shirts on offer,” she said. “Why should a woman’s style go from stylish and elegant to manly and boxy when she is dressed in her clerical attire for ministering?”

The launch of her clerical clothes coincides with the 20th anniversary of the ordination of women as priests in the Church of England.

Within a year or so it’s likely that women will be consecrated as bishops.

“The style is not about flaunting the body,” added Daley. “It is about clothes that accommodate the female shape in cut and fit.”

For Daley, the latest line is a labor of love. “I love designing,” she said. “This is my way of giving back to the women in ministry who have affected my life so greatly.” —Trevor Grundy, RNS

**Ohio measles outbreak tied to Amish group**

A measles outbreak tied to a group of Amish missionaries in Ohio has reached 68 cases, giving the state the dubious distinction of having the most cases reported in any state since 1996, health officials say.

The Ohio outbreak is part of a larger worrisome picture: as of May 9, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had logged 187 cases nationwide in 2014, closing in on last year’s total of 189. The CDC warned several weeks ago that the country could end up having more measles cases than Ohio has now was in 1996, when Utah had 119, according to the CDC.

The last time a state had more measles cases than Ohio has now was in 1996, when Utah had 119, according to the CDC.

The Ohio outbreak, like ongoing outbreaks in California and elsewhere, has been linked to unvaccinated travelers bringing the measles virus back from countries where the disease remains common.