



Our Congregation is Already Welcoming. Why Do We Need to Say So?

The Reconciling In Christ (RIC) program was established in 1983 as a way for Lutheran congregations to publicly declare their welcome to gay and lesbian people. As this ministry of reconciliation and hospitality continued, in 2002, that explicit welcome was expanded to include bisexual and transgender people. Synods, social ministry organizations, and other Lutheran communities have also joined this roster through their commitment to welcome people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Whatever the setting, the welcoming statement is affirmed by the whole community following a period of conversation and education. What began with a few congregations scattered across the United States and Canada has grown to a listing of hundreds of faith communities, with more joining all the time. The RIC roster has become known as a resource for people seeking a community prepared to welcome them.

Why would a congregation *want* to be on the RIC list? Perhaps you feel that your congregation is already welcoming to all people. What difference could having an explicit welcome statement make? Here are some reasons your congregation might want to engage in a formal welcoming process in order to be known as a Reconciling In Christ community.

To communicate who you are

If you are truly a welcoming community, how will people learn that about you? The RIC roster is one way to communicate that hospitality for all people is a value of your congregation.

As an evangelism tool

How can you extend hospitality to people who will not enter your church building? The RIC program is one way to invite people to take the risk of joining you. Having an explicit welcome statement will give visitors an assurance that your welcome is genuine and not a hollow gesture.

Hide it under a bushel? No!

When you are a community that is skilled at welcoming the stranger, living as the Body of Christ together, that is *good news*, the kind of good news the world is hungering to hear. Why would you want to keep that kind of good news to yourself?

Because people move around

The RIC listing encompasses all of the United States and Canada and is searchable online. As people experience the vibrancy of an RIC congregation in one place, they are likely to seek that same type of community elsewhere if they relocate or while traveling. The RIC roster will help them find you.

To reach and retain young people

Researchers are finding that young people value inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. They want their faith communities to be models of this same value. Some congregations fear that joining the RIC roster will somehow make them “a gay church.” Many RIC congregations report that the demographic most often drawn in by the RIC status is actually young couples with children. They are seeking communities prepared to help them raise their children in ways consistent with their values. They want their children to grow up surrounded by diversity, to see that they will be loved no matter who they grow up to become.

Because people continue to be hurt

Unfortunately, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people continue to experience exclusion and harm from people supposedly acting in the name of Christianity. Even churches that declare, “All are welcome” demonstrate to LGBT individuals and families that the welcome does not include them. For this reason, the invitation to LGBT people *must* be explicit that the welcome is intended to include them.

When *all* doesn’t mean *all*

LGBT people aren’t the only people who experience pain and exclusion from churches, who have experienced “all are welcome” to mean “all but you.” Many people sit in the metaphorical pew wondering, “If they *really* knew me, would I still be welcome here?” The welcoming process allows those fears to be named so that each person can be assured, “Yes, you too are welcome here.” The specificity of the welcome to LGBT people opens up the conversation about who is welcome in your community in ways that a generic “all are welcome” statement does not.

As a proclamation to the wider church

Other congregations in your synod/metropolitan region/state are wondering if they can be a place of welcome to LGBT people and continue in their current mission and ministry. Your public stance of welcome will help them be courageous in broadening the welcome they provide.

To be connected with other congregations

The RIC process connects you with a network of other congregations that have made a similar commitment to a ministry of reconciliation and hospitality. Information and resources for worship, education, and ministry are relayed as congregations

discover and share best practices with one another through ReconcilingWorks.

Because your ministry remains your own

The only requirement to join the RIC roster is to have passed a welcoming statement that includes people of all sexual orientations and gender identities *or* that lists lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people explicitly. That statement and a request to be listed is submitted to ReconcilingWorks for review. Once the commitment to welcome is made, it is entirely up to the congregation to decide how that welcome will be carried out in that location. Although there is no hidden agenda involved, many communities find that providing a true welcome requires involvement in issues in the wider church or within the surrounding culture. ReconcilingWorks is ready to partner with congregations on discerning how to engage in these advocacy activities.

For the health of your community

Engaging in a welcoming process deepens the faith life of the congregation. As members participate in dialogue with one another, they practice putting their faith life into speech and into action. Being able to tell one another the truth about our day-to-day lives allows us to know one another better, to create a more vibrant spiritual community. Engaging in a well-designed welcoming process will allow your congregation to deal with other potentially conflict-laden issues in healthier, more productive ways.

To remember

Having a welcoming statement printed in your bulletin or read during worship serves to remind your congregation who they are and how they have pledged to engage with one another. When visitors join you, the statement shows them the type of community they have entered.

These are just a few of the ways that the Reconciling In Christ program could be an important asset in the faith life of your congregation. As Abraham and Sarah discovered, surprises await for those who show hospitality to the visitors among us! We hope to be a support to you as you begin the journey of public welcome to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

For more information about this program of ReconcilingWorks: Lutherans for Full Participation, visit www.reconcilingworks.org/ric or call us at 651/665-0861.