

Destination: Pride
Psalm 139:1-18 and Ephesians 2:11-18

You can often read the phrase “Everyone Welcome!” on church signs, as you drive around town. It’s a jovial, friendly-sounding sentiment – just as it is intended to be. Is it an effective evangelism tool, encouraging people to visit an unfamiliar congregation for the very first time? I really don’t know. But one thing I do know is this: I don’t trust it.

I know, I know...why would I be so suspicious of a cheery, neighborly-sounding message to newcomers displayed on a church sign? Because more often than not, it isn’t true.

I have fallen for the trick before: assuming that a church would keep its word and truly welcome everyone, only to learn – quickly and painfully – that they were not sincere in that greeting, at all. They didn’t welcome me. They didn’t mean me. They mean everyone is welcome...with some notable exceptions: no lesbians, no poor people, no one who doesn’t dress “appropriately” – whatever that means.

It’s stunning when it happens to you. It can make your head spin. You feel like you’re the victim of a bait and switch. I thought when you said “everyone welcome,” you meant...everyone. I guess not.

When you’re searching for a spiritual home and this happens to you – even once – it can make you leery of putting yourself out there again. When it happens to you over and over again...it can make you swear off the church entirely. Why risk being judged and hurt, again and again? It’s better to stay away.

But some of us aren’t built that way. Spirituality, a faith community, corporate worship, service alongside peers, Bible study, fellowship with other Christians: those are important to us. We can’t imagine our life without church. We want to be part of a church family. We want to belong to a faith group. It’s important to us. It’s important to our relationships. It’s important to our kids. Just like it’s important to our straight, cisgender counterparts.

North Christian Church decided in 2014 to become an Open and Affirming congregation – meaning you accept and celebrate the gifts of the LGBTQ+ community. Folks like me are welcome to serve in all areas of leadership – including the role of ordained clergy.

I wasn’t here in November of 2011, when you all began the discernment process that would eventually lead to this designation as an Open and Affirming congregation. But I can imagine that there were probably those who said “why do we have to say we are open and affirming? Everybody knows this is a welcoming congregation. We don’t need to make a big deal about it.”

I can imagine that was said here because it is said in virtually every church I know that went through the discernment process of becoming Open and Affirming.

To that sentiment I would simply start my sermon over again and share my personal experiences about how “everyone welcome” – even when it is on the church sign – does not always mean “everyone welcome.”

How do people know – especially new people, searching for a safe place – that this is a church that welcomes everyone, unless you demonstrate it in specific, clear ways?

It is important to label yourselves “Open and Affirming.” It is important to put that phrase on the website, in the Republic ad, on our bulletin, on our Facebook page. It is important to hang the rainbow flag and the transgender pride flag in the windows. It is important to show up to Pride – with a booth and in the parade. It is important to collaborate with others on the Transgender Day of Remembrance service. It is important to celebrate Pride Sunday!

You need not only SAY “Everyone Welcome,” you need to DEMONSTRATE that EVERYONE is WELCOME! Prove it, over and over again. Not just once: Every. Day.

If you want, as a congregation, to follow Christ’s example of radical hospitality; if you believe that God created each and every one with their own intrinsic worth and value; if you feel the spirit compelling you to love everyone – without exception – because God first loved us...then it is important to be explicitly clear that that is your intention. That is your will. That is your calling.

In 2013 there was a resolution that was brought before the General Assembly of the CC (DOC), meeting in Orlando, FL, that was summarized thusly:

The General Assembly calls upon the Church to recognize itself as striving to become a people of grace and welcome to all God’s children though differing in sexual orientation or gender identity, affirming that neither are grounds for exclusion from fellowship or service within the church, and calling upon all expressions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), as a people of grace and welcome, to acknowledge their support for the welcome of and hospitality to all.

The resolution was nicknamed the “All Means All” resolution, because even Disciple congregations had been guilty of putting on their church signs “Everyone Welcome,” and not really meaning it. A major portion of the population was left out of what they loosely called “everyone.” This resolution stated unequivocally “All Means All.” “Everyone Means Everyone.” No one left out. No one excluded.

It’s sad that there was even a need for a resolution. Sadder still is that we lost a lot of Disciple congregations after that Assembly. Churches just could not agree that all were welcome at Christ’s table. So they left the denomination altogether, rather than associate with other congregations that desired to be inclusive of everyone.

So you see, it is a special gift that North Christian Church has given to this community, to this Region, to this denomination: to declare itself Open and Affirming is a gift! It is a gift to those who feel their personal spiritual journey craves a faith community. It is a gift to those who have been damaged by the church when they try to square their identity with their religious upbringing. It is a gift to those who may not be LGBTQ+ themselves, but want to raise their children – or align themselves – in a faith community who celebrates diversity and warmly welcomes the most marginalized groups in our society.

North Christian Church: you are a gift! Thank you for this gift!

Now that we have patted ourselves on the back and are feeling pretty smug, I would not be serving you well as your pastor, if I didn't now offer you a challenge!

Just how Open and Affirming are we? Are you aware that – in the two years that I've been here – we've been visited by many, many same gender couples in worship? We've had transgender folks visit, and at least one person I know of who labeled themselves gender fluid. We've had lesbians who wore ballcaps, and from a distance could be mistaken for men. We've had LGBTQ+ youth with their parents; and LGBTQ+ parents with their youth. We've had persons struggling with their sexual identity and not sure, yet, how to label themselves. Did we welcome them with open arms? Are we comfortable with persons outside our comfort zones and outside our personal circles of experience? Can we sincerely say "Everyone Welcome?" Or do we, too, have our limits?

Destination Pride is a website, created by PFLAG Canada and ad agency FCB/SIX, that rates global travel destinations as to how LGBTQ+-friendly they are. For the LGBTQ+ traveler, destinations can be more than merely unwelcoming. They can be unsafe, or even deadly, as same-sex relationships can be illegal, or even punishable by imprisonment or death.

Using the colors of the rainbow flag as a data slider, the website ranks any global location based on six criteria:

The red bar rates marriage equality.

The orange, sexual activity laws.

The yellow indicates gender identity protections.

The green designates anti-discrimination laws.

The blue, civil rights and liberties.

And the purple marks social media sentiment.

You can enter any location into the website and come up with a rainbow flag specific to that place. The bulletin cover shows the rainbow flag data slider for Columbus, Indiana. Marriage equality is the law of the land, and sexual activity laws are considered equal, here in Columbus. We have full-length red and orange bars. We only have some gender identity protections in place, so our yellow bar is about 50%. General, employment, and housing discrimination protections are not equal, so our green bar is almost non-existent. Age of consent, military service rights, and adoption rights are equal, but blood donation rights are not – and conversion therapy is not banned – therefore our blue bar is slightly more than half. Social media sentiment is somewhat neutral, here in Columbus, and our purple bar captures that.

Destination Pride considers locations that are ranked a 70 or more as generally safe for the LGBTQ+ community. We rank a 46 overall. That's less than 50%! That's not good! We can be proud of our 100% on the red and the orange. But what about our non-existent green, and our middle-of-the-road yellow, blue, and purple? Overall, we didn't score that great!

What if North Christian was ranked by a similar rainbow-colored data slider? What if we got a 100% on our red bar for being an Open and Affirming congregation, and another 100% on our orange for having an out lesbian as our pastor, but we scored 50% on yellow because we didn't want women – lesbian or otherwise – to wear ballcaps in worship? Or we scored a 0% on green because we were nervous around someone who preferred the pronoun "they" and identified as gender fluid? Or we received 25% on our blue category because we didn't know exactly how to feel about someone who moonlighted as a drag queen on the weekends? Or we ranked a 0% on our purple because we didn't support, as a congregation, the LGBTQ+-focused events in our community, like Pride and Transgender Day of Remembrance?

Just how Open and Affirming are we? We hang a rainbow flag in our window that shows all colors are at 100%. Let's let that be our goal! Let's let that be our vision! Let's let that be our call:

To follow Christ in radically accepting each and all persons into our fellowship and leadership: 100%!

To celebrate the gifts each person brings to this faith community – no matter their cultural background, gender, gender expression, race, sexual orientation, familial relationship, socioeconomic status, physical condition, mental health status, or political affiliation: 100%!

To keep expanding the welcome to an ever-widening circle – welcoming all to the Lord's table, as Christ has welcomed us: 100%!

Let us pray:

Living, loving God, you have given us the gift of diversity in this world, and right here in Columbus. You have also given us the gift of love, and the example of radical inclusiveness in Jesus Christ. Help us to always keep expanding our circle of hospitality, pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones, and inviting ALL to your table of welcome. Amen.