

Building an Inclusive Church

A Welcoming Toolkit 2.0

Helping Your Congregation Become a Community
that Openly Welcomes People of All Sexual
Orientations and Gender Identities

INSTITUTE FOR
**Welcoming
Resources**



National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

ALL ARE WELCOME

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People of All Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities

Preview
Edition

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Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit

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From the 2009 Edition:

This Toolkit would not have been possible without the years of work, experience and support of the leaders of the Welcoming Church Programs with whom we partner:

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

PART A

- 3 The Welcoming Process: Laying the Groundwork
- 3 Tool: Graceful Engagement
- 4 Step One: Leading the Process
- 4 Tool: One-to-One Visits
- 4 Step Two: Gathering Information
- 6 Tool: Choosing the Right Frame
- 6 Step Three: Outlining Your Process

PART B

- 7 The Welcoming Process: Taking it Public
- 7 Step Four: Building Relationships
- 7 Tool: Public Storytelling
- 7 Step Five: Making it Official
- 8 Step Six: Setting the Frame and Providing Educational Opportunities
- 9 Step Seven: Writing Your Welcoming Statement
- 10 Step Eight: Conducting an Exploratory Survey
- 10 Step Nine: Holding the Vote
- 10 Step Ten: Celebrating and Publicizing
- 11 Step Eleven: We're Welcoming... Now What?

APPENDICES

- 12 Appendix One: Graceful Engagement Worksheet
 - 14 Appendix Two: Sustainable Action: Planting the Seeds of Relational Organizing
 - 18 Appendix Three: Congregational Assessment and Welcoming Process Outline
 - 26 Appendix Four: Congregations and Conflict
 - 30 Appendix Five: How Does Change Happen in Churches or Any Organization
 - 32 Appendix Six: Framing Worksheet
 - 37 Appendix Seven: Telling Your Public Story: Self, Us, Now
 - 40 Appendix Eight: Public Storytelling and the Welcoming Church Movement Worksheet
 - 43 Appendix Nine: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
 - 49 Appendix Ten: Sample Welcoming Statements
 - 51 Appendix Eleven: We're Welcoming... Now What? A Check List
 - 54 Appendix Twelve: Resources, Resources, Resources
 - 60 Welcoming Church Programs
-

Introduction

“Welcome, we are so glad you are here!”

These words of welcome and the accompanying atmosphere of support, understanding and love are what we all long for as we enter our churches, live as members, or experience important life-cycle events (falling in love, marrying, having children, baptism, confirmation, coming out, transitioning, etc.). This experience of God’s Extravagant Welcome and the justice and societal witness that go with it are the heart of what we hope to facilitate with ***Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit 2.0***. Embodying God’s Extravagant Welcome is both a critical goal of this Toolkit, for it calls upon the very core of the Christian gospel, and it is a goal that requires prayerful, conscious, faithful action.

A Welcoming Process is an officially recognized path that includes relational organizing, education, some kind of public vote and a public statement of Welcome for persons of ALL sexual orientations and gender identities. Additionally, we have sought to use “general” language in this Toolkit. For instance, we use “Welcoming,” but within the Lutheran and Methodist traditions, it is known as “Reconciling” and, within the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), “Open and Affirming.”

Thank you for joining with us. And may God bless and guide us in the endeavor.

This Toolkit is designed as a guide for a small group of congregants who wish to facilitate a Welcoming Process in their local congregation.

As we compile it, we make four important assumptions:

1. A Welcoming Process needs to be well-thought out, planned and drawing upon wisdom from other congregations that have done a process of their own.
2. A Welcoming Process needs to be grounded in the culture and “personality” of the congregation.
3. A Welcoming Process needs to be based in relationship-building with the pastor, the formal lay leadership (councils, boards, sessions, etc.) and the informal lay leadership (“pillars of the church,” “matriarchs,” “patriarchs,” etc.) and the rest of the congregation. This is known as “relational organizing,” and one of its key components is listening deeply to what God is saying and doing – in the individual and in the congregation. Relational organizing is very different from debate, which should be avoided.
4. A Welcoming Process is a spiritual opportunity for the congregation to grow in membership, stewardship and vitality.¹ As such, it should always be presented in the context of the life of faith of the congregation.

Again a Welcoming Process is rooted in relational organizing. Relational organizing strives to take seriously our role as the Body of Christ, and building and strengthening relationships within the congregation is central to the work. These relationships include those amongst leadership, within key areas of ministry, across ideological and affinity-group lines and across generational and cultural groupings.

A Welcoming Process has key parts that are somewhat linear. We strongly encourage you to follow the wisdom presented in this Toolkit. However, in the end, crafting a Welcoming Process is more of an art than a science. Therefore, the assessment of your congregation – its culture and personality, its theological roots, its likely pace with Welcoming issues – is vital.

¹ For the positive impact welcoming processes can have on stewardship and membership numbers, see Heckles, Rev. Dr. Jane, *Stewardship Trends in Open & Affirming Churches of the United Church of Christ*, [Doctor of Ministry Thesis, Andover-Newton Theological Seminary: Newton Centre, MA, 1997]. For the positive impact welcoming processes can have on vitality see Voelkel, Rev. Dr. Rebecca, *To Do Justice: A Study of Welcoming Congregations*, [National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2009]. For these and many other resources to support a Welcoming Process, visit www.WelcomingResources.org

INTRODUCTION

Part A of this Toolkit is designed to help you lay all the groundwork you need before you begin a public educational process. We cannot overemphasize the importance of this groundwork. Please read through this entire guide to get a sense of the order and flow of things before you begin your process. In particular, don't miss the appendices. They offer worksheets, preparatory materials and background information on relationship-building, storytelling, conflict, assessment tools and the Welcoming Process outline.

In addition, we suggest you read:

A La Familia: A Conversation About Our Families, The Bible, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

by Rev. Dr. Miguel De La Torre. This bilingual guide is available for free download from www.WelcomingResources.org

Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing

by Dennis A Jacobsen. This book, available online for about \$14, will enable you to understand more quickly the organizing concepts used in your Welcoming Process.

"Living Openly In Your Place of Worship"

Available for free download from the Human Rights Campaign's Religion and Faith Program at www.hrc.org/issues/religion/7163.htm.

To Do Justice: A Study of Welcoming Congregations

by Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel. This resource is published by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and available for free download from www.WelcomingResources.org.

Umoja: Christian Education for African-American Faith Communities

by Rev. Roland Stringfellow. This resource is published by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at Pacific School of Religion and is available for free download at www.clgs.org/Umoja.

In-Person Trainings

We strongly encourage you to attend a ***Building an Inclusive Church*** training which will teach you in depth the relational organizing skills you need to become an advocate for a Welcoming Process in your congregation. All the tools and techniques suggested in this Toolkit are covered at length at these trainings.

For more details and a current calendar of trainings, please visit: www.WelcomingResources.org/communityorg.htm

Online Training

An online version of the ***Building an Inclusive Church*** training is being uploaded, piece by piece, on the Task Force's Online Organizing Academy. You may access this important resource by going to www.thetaskforce.org/onlineacademy. The online version offers more time to work in-depth with many of the concepts of the Toolkit, broken down and explained in a step-by-step process including videos, exercises, interviews and charts. This online resource can be especially helpful as a complement both to an in-person training and to reading this guide. Additionally, it can stand on its own if it is difficult for members of your team to get to a Building an Inclusive Church training. New modules are being added all the time.

PART A

The Welcoming Process: Laying the Groundwork

THE WELCOMING PROCESS

We have divided our description of the Welcoming Process into Steps and Tools. The Steps are more or less sequential (remembering that this is more art than science). The Tools, however, are intended to be used throughout your entire Welcoming Process and beyond. Within this Toolkit they appear interspersed amongst the Steps at the point when they can first be utilized. However, unlike the Steps, the Tools are not to be used only once and then crossed off your To Do List. For more guidance about how to use them throughout, consult the Welcoming Process Outline in **Appendix Three**.



STEPS

- One: Leading the Process
- Two: Gathering Information
- Three: Outlining the Process
- Four: Building Relationships
- Five: Making It Official
- Six: Setting the Frame and Providing Educational Opportunities
- Seven: Writing Your Welcoming Statement
- Eight: Conducting an Exploratory Survey
- Nine: Holding the Vote
- Ten: Celebrating and Publicizing
- Eleven: We're Welcoming... Now What?



TOOLS

- Graceful Engagement
- One-to-One Visits
- Framing
- Public Storytelling



TOOL: GRACEFUL ENGAGEMENT

The “spirit” with which a congregation does a Welcoming Process can make all the difference. It requires deep listening, seeking “that of God” in the people with whom you engage and finding the ways in which God is revealed to you through them. So must the Welcoming Process carry a similar spirit. We call this spirit “Graceful Engagement.”

Graceful Engagement is a way of practicing holy conversation, where each person is treated as a loved child of God. It is about listening, sharing one’s own story, hearing one another’s perspective, finding commonalities and shared experiences. It is about building relationships around values that bring us together as opposed to things that polarize us.

Through Graceful Engagement, we strive to reach out to others in Love and Grace, listening to their stories and telling our own so that we may come to a renewed understanding together as the Body of Christ, overcoming estrangement and discord no matter what their sources may be.

We are committed to accompanying others in respect and mutuality, walking alongside those who both agree and disagree with us as we discern future directions for shared mission. We avoid and do not value divisive rhetoric or actions. We begin and return to prayer for guidance and renewal.

As we read the Scripture, we see that Jesus engaged everyone with whom he ministered with a deep sense of God’s Grace. Each person is a beloved child of God. Every individual is God’s creation. Even those whom the world would call enemies, Jesus engaged with Grace-filled love and commands us to do likewise. Encouraged by Jesus’ example, prayer can lead us back again and again to an awareness of God’s Grace.

Such a posture is what discipleship is all about. And because we understand the Welcoming Process to be an opportunity to practice discipleship and help the Church to be the Church, the Welcoming Process is a perfect place to practice Graceful Engagement.

Graceful Engagement is not a separate step. Instead, we recommend that it be woven throughout every aspect of the Welcoming Process. **Appendix One** contains more information on Graceful Engagement. You will use this Appendix beginning in **Step One** below.



STEP ONE: LEADING THE PROCESS

The first step in a Welcoming Process is to gather a group of five to ten people who share your passion for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the life of your congregation. These people will form your Core Team, and will work together to advocate for, design and shepherd the Welcoming Process.

To begin, using the Tool of One-to-One Visits (see below), meet with a few folks in your congregation whom you believe might be interested in joining you in this work. As you meet with them, listen deeply, ask their passions, interests, history, etc. If you hear that welcoming fits with their passions, vocation or sense of discipleship, invite them to join you as part of your Core Team. Ask each of them to read this Toolkit and other resources you have consulted.

Ensuring LGBT People are at the Table

A Welcoming Process can be a difficult time for LGBT members of your congregation. They may not be supportive of the process at all, fearing that a negative outcome will mean a loss of their sense of community. They may be concerned that this process will put them under a spotlight. They may be supportive of the process but not feel called to a leadership role. They may also be excited about the process, awaiting an invitation to participate. As a Core Team, check in with the known LGBT members of your congregation. Determine their preferred role in the Welcoming Process, and their willingness and ability to be publicly identified in their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Assure them that you will check in with them periodically throughout the Welcoming Process.

Once you have gathered your Core Team and they have looked over this Toolkit, complete **Appendix One** together. This will help ground you in a shared understanding of Graceful Engagement and will build relationships among the members of the Core Team.

For denominationally-specific guidance as you begin your Process, contact your denominational Welcoming Church Program (see **Back Page**).



TOOL: ONE-TO-ONE VISITS

In the same way that Graceful Engagement flows throughout the Welcoming Process, relationship-building is another tool that you will use throughout. We do so because we understand that the core of Jesus' ministry was about gathering people and bringing people in relationship together. He felt so strongly about this that he declared, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20 NRSV) We believe that a Welcoming Process rooted in relationship-building is another act of faithful discipleship.

To prepare for and to conduct these visits, read and follow **Appendix Two**. Another fine resource is the Task Force's Online Organizing Academy modules on 1-on-1's (to utilize this free resource, visit www.thetaskforce.org/onlineacademy). When the tool of One-to-One Visits is used within communities of faith, many find this to be spiritual practice. When you invite someone into a One-to-One Visit, thinking of that person as your guest (with you as the host) can tap into the traditions surrounding hospitality as a faith practice. This "guest and host" mindset can also help keep this conversation from devolving into debate.



STEP TWO: GATHERING INFORMATION

In order to begin this work in your congregation, it is helpful for your Core Team to spend some time looking at how your congregation handles change, how it talks about difficult topics, how it responds to social issues, and how it handles other justice issues. Step Two: Gathering Information is a key part of any Welcoming Process. Below are three avenues of collecting data (Congregational Assessment, Conflict History, and Power Analysis) which will be invaluable as you begin to craft your Process.

1. Congregational Assessment

The Congregational Assessment (**Appendix Three**) is a tool to help you more clearly understand how your congregation operates and how ready it is to engage in this work.

Have all the members of your Core Team individually complete the Congregational Assessment and then, together, complete the Group Scoring. Gather the Core Team to discuss the results.

Some Ideas for Discussion:

- Was anyone in the group surprised by the average score your congregation has? Were the results encouraging or discouraging? Why?
- Were there any questions that received a very low average score? A very high average score? What are the possible reasons that these conditions or measures are out of line with the overall assessment?
- Are there any questions for which the circumstances or conditions are likely to change in the next six months? One year?
- Are there any factors or indicators that might change as a result of proactive work or intervention on the part of a few interested persons?
- Did any individuals doing the assessment misunderstand any questions? (If so, discuss the question, and feel free to re-score the Worksheet, and re-tabulate results. Did it make a difference in the final score?)
- Take the answers and wisdom you gained from the Congregational Assessment and choose a pace (cautious, moderate, or adventurous) from the Welcoming Process Outline that follows the Assessment and estimate the length of time you hope your Welcoming Process will take. Although those of us who want our congregation to become Welcoming want it to become so today, it is very important that we not rush the process. It is also very important that, even if we choose a “cautious” pace, we keep moving and not allow the fears of some to paralyze the Welcoming Process.
- What are the next steps the Core Team might take to plan your congregation's Welcoming Process?

NOTE: If your congregation has had a history of sexual misconduct by its clergy or staff, it is important and useful to do the Congregational Assessment in order to collect data. HOWEVER, we recommend that any congregation with such a history of abuse choose the “St. Cautious” pace and path.

2. Conflict History

In addition, have the Core Team talk about the history of conflict or splits in your congregation. What were the issues? In particular, has your congregation ever had an experience of sexual misconduct by clergy or staff? How did the congregation deal with it at the time? How does it continue to deal with it?

How does your congregation deal with conflict in general?

Read **Congregations and Conflict (Appendix Four)** and **How Does Change Happen in Churches or Any Organization (Appendix Five)** and make a determination about your congregation's culture around conflict. Taking seriously the role of conflict, make a plan for how you will guide the congregation through the Welcoming Process. For instance, will you explicitly do a session on conflict during the educational phase of the Process? Will you utilize the **Tips for Handling Conflict** and **Communication Strategies** (both in **Appendix Four**) for your discussions about LGBT issues? How will you utilize this information?

3. Power Analysis

With your Core Team, map out the power structures – both formal and informal – within your congregation.

What are the formal decision processes?

- Who's on the church council, session, or governing body?