

# TO DO JUSTICE

## **A Study of Welcoming Congregations**

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# TO DO JUSTICE

## A Study of Welcoming Congregations<sup>1</sup>

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The past twenty-five years have seen exponential growth of Christian and Unitarian Universalist congregations that have named themselves Welcoming of persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities.<sup>2</sup> This growth is the result of prayerful, intentional work by clergy and lay leaders within local congregations and by leaders of Welcoming Church Programs within many denominations.<sup>3</sup> The fruit of this labor is a vibrant and growing movement that has helped congregations become more vital, less conflicted and more focused on their mission of hospitality and justice.

In reaction to this growth and vibrancy, an equally intentional but more covert effort has arisen to attempt to quash the power of the Welcoming Programs and to advocate for homophobic, trans-phobic and heterosexist Church policy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this report is taken from Micah 6:8... *And what does God require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.* The use of the language of “Welcoming” refers to congregations that have gone through an intentional process regarding their welcome of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons which includes education, a vote and a public statement of welcome. These congregations are recognized and “rostered” or listed by an outside organization—usually a “Welcoming Church Program” which operates within a particular tradition. For example, the Reconciling Ministries Network rosters congregations within the United Methodist Church. Each program has its own language for a Welcoming congregation—“Reconciling,” “Open and Affirming,” “Welcoming and Affirming,” etc. It is important to note that many of these Welcoming Church Programs are over twenty years old and the criteria for Welcome have changed. Therefore, some of the congregations that are listed have only done intentional educational work around lesbian and gay persons. Each of the welcoming programs is working with those congregations that have not engaged transgender issues to do so. In particular, the Institute for Welcoming Resources’ new resource *transACTION* is currently being used to do such educational processes. A free downloadable version of the curriculum is available at [www.WelcomingResources.org](http://www.WelcomingResources.org).

<sup>2</sup> In the last five years alone, the number of publicly Welcoming congregations listed on the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s Institute for Welcoming Resources website ([www.WelcomingResources.org](http://www.WelcomingResources.org)) has grown almost three-fold. While an official Welcoming Program does not currently exist in other religious traditions, a project within the five major movements of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and Renewal) is in the planning and testing phases.

<sup>3</sup> For a list of these programs, see Acknowledgements.

<sup>4</sup> One of the prime movers in this anti-welcoming movement is the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD). Using largely secular money sources and covert community organizing techniques, the IRD has sought to dismantle denominations (American Baptist Churches), take over leadership (Southern Baptist Churches) or significantly disrupt the welcoming gains in many denominations (the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church (USA)). There are several books documenting these phenomena including Howell, Leon, *United Methodism @ Risk: A Wake-Up Call*, [Kingston, NY: Information Project for United Methodists, 2003] and Culver, Sheldon, and John Dorhauer, *Steeplejacking: How the Christian Right is Hijacking Mainstream Religion*, [Brooklyn: IG Publishing, 2007].

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY** *(continued)*

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In order to both highlight the vibrancy, faithfulness and power of the Welcoming Movement and to counter the “false witness” of those who seek to quash this movement of hospitality and justice, the Institute for Welcoming Resources of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force surveyed pastors and leaders of 1,200 Welcoming congregations to ask them about their work and witness.

Two areas emerged that warrant particular focus and celebration:

**Successfully completing a Welcoming Process makes a congregation more likely to work and witness on other justice issues.**

**Congregations that directly engage the question of welcoming lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons have low levels of conflict.**

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## INTRODUCTION

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In April and May of 2008, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources surveyed the pastors of 1,200 Welcoming congregations listed on our website: [www.WelcomingResources.org](http://www.WelcomingResources.org). Although we list over 3,200 congregations, these 1,200 were chosen because they were affiliated with a Welcoming Church Program whose leader had agreed to write a letter requesting the completion of the survey. We received 364 respondents, for a return rate slightly higher than 30%.

We engaged this research because there exist very few studies on Welcoming congregations and pastors. With the exception of Rev. Dr. Jane Heckles' 1997 study, *Stewardship Trends in Open & Affirming Churches of the United Church of Christ* and, perhaps one other in the Lutheran tradition, Welcoming congregations have not been the subject of analysis.<sup>5</sup> And yet, much of the life in Progressive Christianity emerges from those congregations which have engaged a formal Welcoming Process.<sup>6</sup> Why are Welcoming congregations seemingly so healthy and engaged? This was one of our guiding questions.

Beginning the study, we were working under two assumptions that were borne from anecdotal evidence:

1. Congregations appear generally stronger, healthier and more faithful because of having successfully completed a Welcoming Process.
2. Welcoming congregations seem to find that the experience of a Welcoming Process leads to an awareness and action around other social justice issues.

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<sup>5</sup>Heckles, 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].

<sup>6</sup> Progressive Christianity embodies "an understanding of Christian tradition marked by an awareness of social sin, a consciousness of institutional and human potential and shortcomings, and an emphasis on the Church's mission to engage the world." In particular, Progressive Christianity asserts that:

- a. Christian faithfulness requires public action by churches and people of faith.
- b. Christian social witness and public action should correspond to accepted practices of deliberative democracies.
- c. The causes of social problems are often structural or systemic. (Peters, Rebecca Todd and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, *To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians*, [Westminster John Knox Press, 2008].)

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## **INTRODUCTION** *(continued)*

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These assumptions were based in several theological assertions:

One of the central tenets of Christianity (that arises from the life and ministry of Jesus and his grounding in Jewish tradition) is that life is stronger than death. Or to say it another way, that which is about wholeness, fullness, integrity, justice, love, and joy always, in the end, triumphs over that which is about death-dealing, injustice, brokenness, hatred, fear and violence.

Those congregations that engage a Welcoming Process, at some point, have to engage this core tenet. Will they follow what they have learned because of their love of their brothers, sisters, mothers, brothers, etc who are LGBT or will they be guided by their fear? Will they allow the cultural messages of hatred to trump the Biblical imperative for hospitality and justice? Will they allow the “Peter and Cornelius moment” in which they witness the “fruits of the Spirit” present in LGBT people to triumph over what they believe the tradition says?<sup>7</sup>

Congregations that engage this central tenet go through a deeply spiritual process. In much the same way that the “coming out” process for LGBT people offers a profound opportunity for spiritual growth and transformation on an individual level, so does the Welcoming Process on a community-wide level. And this process impacts not only their openness and affirmation of LGBT people but their entire congregational life.

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<sup>7</sup> Book of Acts, chapter 10.

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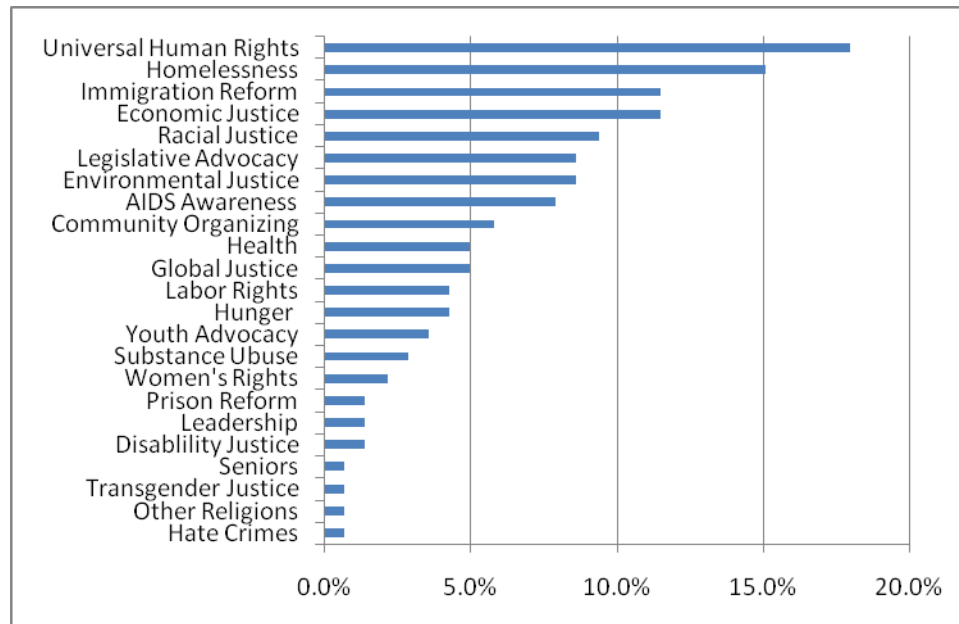
## ANALYSIS

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### The Welcoming Process Creates and Supports an Environment for Justice

When asked, “*Has your congregation's work on LGBT issues made your congregation more active on other justice issues?*” over half of the pastors of Welcoming congregations responded with a yes. Of those who said their Welcoming Process impacted their work and witness on other justice issues, they listed disability rights, economic justice, environmental justice, global justice, hate crimes, HIV/AIDS, health care, homelessness, hunger, immigration, community organizing, labor, racial justice, universal human rights, and women’s rights as the areas of their congregational focus. The chart below illustrates these areas of focus.

**Other Justice and Charity Work  
Done By Welcoming Congregations**



As you can see, of the Welcoming Congregations that said their Welcoming Process was connected to work on other justice issues, almost twenty percent of those congregations said they also engaged in work around universal human rights, fifteen percent on work regarding homelessness, just over ten percent working on economic justice and immigration reform, etc. (Many congregations engaged in more than one area of other justice work.)



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## ANALYSIS (continued)

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When asked to describe the connections between the LGBT Welcoming Process and witness on other justice issues, pastors of Welcoming congregations responded as follows:

*“We are more open to the plight of the oppressed and marginalized—specially those in poverty here and around the world. We are small, but we support LWR, the Heifer Project, Equal Exchange, and other programs.”<sup>8</sup>*

*“We talk about environmental stewardship. As the pastor at this small, mission congregation in a very conservative town, when asked about my stance on LGBT inclusion in the church, I bring up the fact that it—along with such things as being stewards of creation—is part of what it is to be a person of faith (we are to hold up the personhood of others).”*

*“We now work with a homeless day shelter... it was through working with a young man with AIDS that the church found a face that they could reach out to and now are reaching out to homeless people.”*

*“We now have an active advocacy program involving 25 people for hunger and justice in our state government.”*

*“We have a very strong outreach now, led by LGBT people in part, to impoverished elderly, both gay and straight.”*

This data highlights a crucial, three-fold reality:

1. Engaging an official process of Welcoming provides a local congregation the opportunity to clarify their theology, mission and life of faith.
2. This clarity often requires the congregation to choose between fear (of loss of membership, conflict, outside perceptions, etc.) and the kind of life and faith that takes appropriate risks.
3. Choosing life and faith often results in the same kind of appropriate risk-taking in other areas that might induce fear (immigration, racial justice, etc.).

Thus, the Welcoming Process, when done well, is a deeply spiritual process for a congregation whose impact is felt far beyond LGBT issues. Welcoming congregations become spiritual communities whose work and ministry are more faithful to the breadth and depth of the heart of religious vocation—helping to remake the world as God would have it to be—more just and equitable and joyous—for ALL created persons and beings.

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<sup>8</sup> Lutheran World Relief is a denominationally supported organization that addresses global economic justice. The Heifer Project (started by the Church of the Brethren but now an independent organization) is focused on the eradication of hunger and on development efforts both in the United States and abroad. Equal Exchange is a fair trade program partnering with farming cooperatives all over the world.

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## **ANALYSIS** *(continued)*

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### **Welcoming Congregations Exhibit Low Levels of Conflict**

One of the primary fears of a Welcoming Process is that it will cause catastrophic conflict within the congregation. Our survey greatly reduces concerns that welcoming LGBT persons into congregations will cause divisions or reduce membership.

- Just 7% of the respondents indicated that their congregants have difficulty talking openly about LGBT issues.
- Less than a third (29%) reported any significant conflict within the congregation within the last two years. Among these, the most common sources of conflict were pastoral leadership, finances and worship, not homosexuality or gender identity.
- Nearly three-quarters of the respondents disagreed with the statements, “Our congregation risks losing members by talking too much about homosexuality” (73%) and, “Becoming more welcoming to LGBT persons could hinder our congregation’s ability to reach racial/ethnic minorities” (72%).

These data support the finding that, instead of hindering work on racial justice or causing the kinds of conflict that will disable the congregation, Welcoming congregations exhibit lower levels of conflict, in general and on issues of LGBT concerns than other congregations. These data are further supported by a similar national survey of progressive congregations conducted by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing. Their report showed similar results regarding the potential for congregational conflict. According to the Religious Institute survey—which included clergy from Welcoming congregations as well as from congregations that had not completed a formal Welcoming process—just 34% of progressive clergy reported that their congregations had experienced any significant conflict over the last two years. For these clergy, the primary sources of conflict were pastoral leadership (cited by 57%), finances (42%), building/grounds (21%) and worship (20%). Homosexuality was cited by only 21 clergy (16% of respondents to the question). When presented with the statement, “Our congregation risks losing many members by talking too much about homosexuality,” 86% of clergy from Welcoming congregations disagreed, compared with 64% of clergy from other congregations.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Haffner, Debra W., and Timothy Palmer, *Survey of Religious Progressives: A Report on Sexual Justice Advocacy in Progressive Faith Communities*. Westport, CT: Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, 2009. [www.religiousinstitute.org](http://www.religiousinstitute.org).

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## **ANALYSIS** *(continued)*

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This comparative data from the Religious Institute highlights two areas:

- There are higher levels of conflict reported when non-Welcoming congregations are factored into the mix (29% of Welcoming congregations versus 34% of congregations that have not completed a Welcoming Process).
- When congregations have not completed a Welcoming Process, homosexuality is reported as an area of conflict. In particular, over thirty percent of congregations that have not completed a Welcoming process fear losing “many members” by talking too much about homosexuality.

Coupled with the data that shows the relationship between successfully completing a Welcoming Process and higher levels of work in other areas of justice work, this information on conflict is very good news. The Welcoming Process helps congregations witness more faithfully and helps to reduce the conflicts that can distract congregations from their mission and ministry.

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## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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Religious congregations stand at an important moment in history. The public conversation in the United States around LGBT persons is at a crossroads. Will churches be the leaders in articulating God's justice and ministry of inclusion and hospitality or will they be the barrier to that welcome? This is a very concrete and practical question. But it is also deeply theological and Biblical.

At the core of the Hebrew Scriptures, at the center of Jesus' ministry, and at the forefront of the early Church's formation was the same question: exclusivity or hospitality? In *Aliens in the Household of God*, the editors argue that Jesus' ministry directly engaged the societal and religious structures of his day.<sup>10</sup> Those structures were based on concentric circles of exclusivity. Starting in the middle and moving outward, the circles were these:

- Holy of Holies—the space in the Temple where only the Chief Priest could enter and only on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement)
- The parts of the Temple where only the Priests could go
- The parts of the Temple where only members of the minyan (men who were circumcised and had undamaged testicles) could go
- The parts of the Temple where women who had performed the right ritual cleanings could go
- The parts of the city where folks had been allowed through the gates
- Beyond the walls of the city—"beyond the Pale"

These circles of exclusivity were upheld by laws about cleanliness, ritual purity and ethnic identity. As a Jew who was rooted in the Jewish Prophetic tradition, Jesus' ministry was dedicated to breaking them down. He touched people he wasn't supposed to touch. He ate with people he wasn't supposed to eat with. He healed people he wasn't supposed to heal, and he healed at times he wasn't supposed to be healing.

Jesus did all of this because he understood that the "divine economy"—the reality that all creation is valued, honored and beloved and has the resources to thrive—called him to challenge the human economy and societal structures. He did this because he stood as a direct heir of the Hebrew prophets of old who understood this same economic structure. And those who followed Jesus as leaders of the early Church understood the same economy.

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<sup>10</sup> Germond, Paul and Steve de Gruchy, editors, *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith*, [Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa: David Philip; 1997].

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## **THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION** *(continued)*

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Particularly in the Book of Acts, this same trajectory is present:

- Acts 2—the Pentecostal experience taught the early believers that it was ALL Jews from all over the Mediterranean that were to be part of the community, not just those in Jerusalem.
- Acts 8—Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch teaches him that even a sexual minority was to be baptized and part of the community because he bore the “fruits of the Spirit.”
- Acts 10—Likewise, Peter’s dream and his subsequent encounter with Cornelius teaches him that those with the “fruits of the Spirit” are to be welcomed into the community even if they are gentiles.

This trajectory of ever-widening circles of extravagant welcome is Jesus’ model, rooted in the Jewish prophets and embodied in the early Church. And when the Church makes it its model today, it is standing as an heir to Jesus.

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## CONCLUSION

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An official Welcoming Process, and the attendant work on theology and mission, can be great assets for a local congregation and for the wider Church. Instead of being feared for the conflict that might arise from it, a Welcoming Process is an opportunity that can enliven and focus the work and ministry of a church. Life, energy, and a sense of greater faithfulness are all positive benefits that come to local churches that complete a Welcoming Process. The prophet Micah asked and answered a powerful question that still challenges us today as the Church engages the question of whether or not to embark on a Welcoming Process:

*And what does God require of you  
but to do justice,  
to love kindness  
and to walk humbly with your God...*