

God is still speaking, About Extravagant Welcome

Resources for Churches on Welcome and Inclusion of People of Color, People with Disabilities, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Persons

This collection grew out of numerous comments from congregations. New people were visiting their churches, and they wanted resources, ideas, worship tools, etc. to help them build on and enlarge their genuine welcome—especially to persons who might be of color, have a disability, or who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered.

The Stillspeaking Initiative is grateful to leaders of the UCC Disabilities Ministries, the Council on Racial Ethnic Ministries, and the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns for the preparation of these resources. We especially thank Delbert Lancaster, Peg Slater and Rebecca Voelkel for assembling these new materials. We hope you find them helpful and easy to use.

There are several folks in the national setting of the UCC who can be of assistance should you have additional questions about offering welcome and hospitality.
Rev. Peg Slater—Minister for Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator
Rev. Mike Schuenemeyer—Executive and Minister for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns and HIV/AIDS Ministries
Mr. Delbert Lancaster—Minister for Affirmative Action and Diversity Initiatives

Reach any of them by calling toll free 866-822-8224.

The Stillspeaking Initiative is interested in what you are doing to practice extravagant welcome. Please share your experiences, and the ideas or tools you have used. Send them to us at stillspeaking@ucc.org

With gratitude for your partnership in this gospel endeavor.

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Resources for Churches on Welcome and Inclusion of People of Color, People with Disabilities, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Persons

Welcome to this potpourri of resources to help your congregation become an even more welcoming and inclusive local Body of Christ. There may be pleasant surprises for you as you welcome people who may have felt excluded from your place of worship in the past. Hopefully the Bible study, stories, suggestions for use, liturgies, and resources will be helpful. In any event --- take delight and be prepared for unexpected sojourners.

Bible Study

Read **Acts, Chapter 10** (Suggestion—have different people read the parts of Cornelius, Peter and the other characters. This allows folks to hear the story in a new way.)

Group Questions

1. Who is the “host” in this story? Who is the “guest”?
2. Whose responsibility is it to offer hospitality?
3. What insights of faith and belief does Peter gain? Cornelius? Other player?
4. What is at stake for Peter and for Cornelius for following the visions they have been given?
5. What insights does this scripture give you? Your church community?
6. What is at stake for your community from the implications of this portion of the Book of Acts?

Suggested Uses: small groups, as a frame for worship, use with regular Bible study group, after-worship discussion, or modified as a children’s message.

Stories

Jorge’s story:

I belong to an inner city church that is trying to grow again. We were once a large, wealthy congregation with many of our city's leaders in attendance. Times have changed, the neighborhood has changed, yet, the congregation is committed to stay in town.

Our congregation works hard at being a truly multiracial and multicultural church. On a Sunday morning you can look around and see lots of diversity. A little over a year ago the men in the congregation decided to go deeper and recreate the Men's Council. Men, lots of men, African-American men, Latino men, white men, meet on the fourth Saturday of the month and share their lives and stories with each other. We work at trying to support our children and youth in the congregation and beyond. We just funded a mission trip to Mexico for a young woman in the community. Next year we plan to send 2 young people to this UCC sponsored mission program.

What is exciting for me is to be part of a group men who are willing to risk getting to know each other and then talk about difficult issues. We challenge each other, we surprise each other with our openness, we grow with each other. It is great to be a part of this totally diverse group. We are a blessing to each other and to the whole church.

Our church is growing as African-American brothers, white brothers, Asian brothers, and Latino brothers get to know each other, trust each other, and serve our brother Jesus. It is great to have the men back sharing responsibility in the whole church community. God is still speaking...even to men!

Discussion Questions

1. Does your congregation have a men's group?
2. What is the purpose of the group?
3. What roles do men play in your congregation?
4. Do you believe that men would like to be in a diverse group where they can share important aspects of their lives and faith?
5. Are men's groups different from women's groups?
6. What is it to be a 'blessing' to another/others?

Martha's story:

My name is Martha. I am legally blind, which, for me, means that I can see some shadows or shapes when the light is especially bright. I wear dark glasses to keep the light stable. This prevents headaches and dizziness from too much light interplay. So, basically I see very little at all.

I belonged to a church when I was a child, but left as I got older. People were kind, maybe too kind, they treated me as if I were helpless. I felt like an object of pity and I was angry. Over the years I missed music and sermons and being with others when I prayed. I heard the “God is still speaking’ ads on television and looked up a UCC church near me. I thought I would give church one more chance.

The first Sunday I attended church was wonderful. People were welcoming and nice, but two incidents made me very happy. First of all the usher, a nice young man who had been a student of mine, asked me what would be helpful. He didn’t try to guess what would be helpful. He asked me what I needed. That may seem like a little thing, but believe me it is not. It made me feel very welcome as a person.

Second, a little boy asked me why I wore glasses inside church. His Mom didn’t try to hush him up. I explained that I am blind, but some light bothers me and gives me a headache. I said that I was a nicer person without a headache, not so crabby. He said that that made sense and maybe he should get some, too. We all laughed.

I have been back to this hospitable congregation over and over. I will be joining in May.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why is it important to ask a person with a disability what they need or want?
- 2) What would you do if your child asked a person with a disability about their disability?
- 3) How do you feel when you greet people with disabilities?
- 4) What can you do to make people with disabilities feel welcome?

Andrea’s story:

The other day, I was watching TV and saw the UCC ad. It said that Jesus didn't turn people away and neither did the UCC. This made me very excited and I called my partner to tell her that maybe we could finally find a church home for the two of us and the kids.

The next day I looked in the phone book and found the local UCC church. I was nervous to call, which surprised me. There was so much that came up for me as I picked up the phone---memories of Sunday School and church choir, Confirmation class and youth group trips, Bible study and all those committee meetings---my life had been the church for so many years. But then there was also the sting of rejection and shame of being asked to leave because I might hurt the children I was teaching. It all came flooding back as I dialed the number.

And then the voice on the other end of the phone answered. When I explained why I was calling, she interrupted me before I could finish, "Don't you know that homosexuality is a sin...."

Discussion Questions

For a gathered group—

1. What do you believe the Realm of God really looks like?
2. Who is present in the Realm of God?
3. How does or vision of the Realm of God impact what we do in our daily lives?
4. How does our vision of God's Realm impact what we do as a church community?

For an individual to write—

1. What kind of people scare me, really, honestly, scare me?
2. Why do they scare me?
3. What kind of behaviors make me angry? Why?
4. What do I think the Bible has to say about my fears and the things that make me angry?

Bradley's story:

My name is Bradley. I love God and Santa Claus. I like going to church. Communion is good. All the food is good.

The first paragraph is what Brad has to say about the congregation I served a few years ago. The congregation can tell a lot about Brad's gifts to God's

church. Brad lives two houses down from the church in a group home. He is a 45 year old man with developmental disabilities. He wears a Santa Claus hat all year long because “Santa is my favorite, except for God who doesn’t wear special hat.” Brad comes to church for the postlude and coffee hour each Sunday. On Communion Sunday he comes for the whole service.

One Sunday a group of folks, including Brad, were at coffee hour. Someone asked Brad why he came to the whole service on Communion Sunday. He said he came “because the food is extra good on those days.” What do you mean, someone asked? “I mean the Communion snack is extra good food. You eat it and God goes in you and through you and gives you energy to be good like God.” I guess biology and theology do mix if you have a good teacher like Brad.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Do you believe that people with disabilities bring gifts to a church?
- 2) When people with disabilities belong to your church is that a ministry to people with disabilities or a gift to the church?
- 3) There are so many different kinds of disabilities. How can a church be prepared to welcome everyone?

Lannie and Pete’s story:

My husband and I live near the military base where I am stationed. I grew up in a traditional church and my husband’s parents never attended church. Neither of us had been near church for a long time. We hated the way ‘Christian’ was being used to describe who was good and who was bad., who was in, who was out, who was saved, who was going to hell, yet both of us felt something was missing from our lives.

We heard the UCC ad and heard about the fuss. We thought we would take a chance and see if church had changed. We looked up the nearest UCC church in the phone book and went.....late for worship. Imagine our surprise when we discovered that we were in an almost totally African-American church. We didn’t know what to do, but a nice man brought us to a seat, made us welcome, and kindly said “You don’t have to do anything, just look around and see what God wants you to do”.

The worship was different, but the joy people felt in worship was so real and powerful that I felt things I hadn't felt since I was a little kid...the last time I truly believed. After worship people were very, very welcoming. I asked the minister if we could come back. He looked at me as if I were silly and said "of course".

Discussion Questions:

1. What would you have done if you were in Lannie and Pete's place?
2. How do you think your congregation would welcome someone like Lannie and Pete?
3. Do churches change when new people join?
4. How do you talk about the possibility of change in your congregation? Is change always a good thing? What would be gained or lost if diversity occurred?

Martin's story:

I saw the God is still speaking ads on TV. There was a guy in a chair in the ad, I thought what the heck...let's see if they mean it. I went to church and they had a ramp. They had accessible rest rooms, too. The church was on one floor so things looked pretty good.

When I came in the usher said why don't I sit down front, to the left side, that way I won't be in anyone's way. I said I had to go home. The guy looked puzzled.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What is going on here in Martin's story?
- 2) What could the usher have done differently?
- 3) The church looked accessible. What was missing?

Mariah's story:

Sometimes I think I am a freak. You see, I am an African American, same-gender loving woman who lives with a disability. I grew up in the church, but when I started to not be able to walk, it got harder to go. Then, when I came out, well, they didn't want me there, anyway.

But a little over a year ago, I found this church. And do you know what, ALL of me was welcomed. They had just remodeled their sanctuary and put in an elevator so I could get to every part of the church. When I opened their bulletin, I read their statement of inclusion. And when I had been there for a few weeks, they asked if I would like to be a part of any of their programs---as a participant or as a leader. They inquired about my interests and skills. They treated me like the whole, complex, blessed woman I am.

When the ads came out, I was so excited because others need to know what genuine hospitality can be like.

Discussion Questions

1. Is your church really hospitable...what does hospitality mean?
2. Can your church still be hospitable even if it is not fully accessible?
3. Would your congregation see Mariah as a person with a lot of needs or as just another new person?
4. Is your church capable of **EXTRAVAGANT** hospitality? Are you?

Suggested Uses: sermon illustrations, newsletter items, discussion group starters, children's sermons.

Worship Resources

Call to Worship

One: God of exquisite beauty, You spin the universe and weave the planets. You gather the continents and pour out the seas. You call all things into being and proclaim them 'good.'

All: Make us to celebrate Your creation.

One: God of tender care, You reach out when Your people tear apart all you have made. You come to us again and again, offering Your healing and reconciliation and redemption. You walk the earth as one of us, yearning to know and be known.

All: Make us reach back to You, claiming your saving grace.

One: God of unimaginable creativity, You blow through our lives---making new what was old and dead. You come to each one of us and to all of us,

challenging our assumptions and our fears. You ignite our imaginations and push us towards fullness of life.

All: Make us open ourselves to your Holy Spirit.

One: Creating, Saving, Liberating God, in our worship and our living, make us to be more like You---extravagantly welcoming and loving all that is yours. Amen.

Call to Worship

One: In snow and ice,

All: Mountains and valley,

One: In small sanctuaries and in searching hearts.

All: Amidst joy and heartbreak,

One: God is present.

All: God is present.

One: Nothing can separate us from the love of God,

All: Nothing,

One: And so we welcome and worship and pray and live,

All: In certitude and in gratitude and in praise. Amen

Prayer (Read the first paragraph slowly enough to really hear it.)

“GRIM---is the way you feel when you are not sad enough to cry, happy enough to smile, angry enough to scream. It just feels like it sounds-----grrrimmm!”*

Oh, God. The world is filled with your grrrimmm people.

Oh, God. The church, maybe this church, is filled with grrrimmm people, people who want to be welcoming as well as welcome, who want to be inclusive and included, who want to belong to You and to your church.

Oh, God. Please God, come to us today and convince us that Your love is big enough for everyone.

Oh, God. Please God, help us to recognize that we all need You and each other....that we are whole only when we are the Body of Christ.

Oh, God. There is so much sadness and emptiness in your people. Please bring us together and fill us so that we may smile, feel that we are one, and be as one in You.

Oh, God. We pray that we may leave our grrrimmm selves behind and move forward as Your people, one people who worship and serve You this day and all the days of our lives.

Amen

- The definition for grrrimmm come from [A Smile From Andy](#), by Nan Holcomb. Turtle Books, Jason & Nordic Publishers, Exton, PA. Andy is a little boy who has cerebral palsy and is too shy to make friends, so, he feels grrrimmm.

Prayer (based on Job 37:14-24)

Holy One, Your vastness, Your creativity, Your wisdom is beyond our wildest imaginings. Your welcome, Your grace, Your in-love-ness with us exceeds what our hearts can hold. And we give You thanks and praise that You are our God and we are Your people.

Make of us a community that genuinely seeks to love and worship You. Make of us a Body that truly reflects all You are and love.

Bless us with the extravagance and hospitality that befits those who bear Your name.

Amen.

Acknowledging Our Humanness/Confessing Our Sin

Holy One, you have come to us in family and friends, visitors and strangers. You are present in the hymns we sing and the words we speak. You move us in our youth group activities and our coffee hours. You massage us with choral anthems and coax us with calls to action.

And yet we, too often, insist on our own unworthiness. We, too frequently, persist in our unloveableness and the unloveableness of others. And we act as if our place is apart from you.

Dissuade us, God, of our folly. Persuade us, Holy One, of Your abundant love, that we might love ourselves and ALL of your creation extravagantly and with abandon. Amen.

Communion Liturgy (as used by Spirit of the Lakes UCC, Minneapolis, MN)

Words of Remembrance

We remember on the night before he was killed by those who feared him, Jesus sat at table with his friends---women and men and children---sharing in the feast of the Passover, which is the celebration of God's liberation of God's people.

And remembering God's power, Jesus took bread, and after he had given thanks and blessed it, he broke it saying, "This is my work and my life, for you and with you. Take it all of you, and do this remembering me."

After dinner Jesus took the Elijah Cup, the cup that was traditionally reserved for the Holy One to come. But instead of waiting, Jesus passed it to them as it is now being passed to us, and he said, "This is the cup of the new covenant. It is the cup of justice and peace poured out for all. Drink of it, all of you, and do this remembering me.

Each time we break bread together, we participate in the Body of the Risen Christ, for we are the Body of the Risen Christ. And each time we share this cup, we participate in the New Community, for we are God's hope for the New Community.

Resources

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Gaventa, Bill, and David Coulter, eds. Journal of Religion and Disability, and Health. Haworth Press (etinfo@haworthpressinc.com)

Disabilities Ministries Resource Packet (PLLDM) A collection of materials to help the local church become accessible to all (A2A) 1-800-537-3394. Free

Any Body, Everybody, Christ's Body A congregational study guide for welcome and inclusion. Congregations may commit to become A2A congregation by vote, practice and support of UCC Disabilities Ministries. Available through UCC Resources (1-800-537-3394) after July 10, 2005.

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