

Are All Welcome Here?

By Pastor Wendell Hendershott
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On January 29, 2017, Grace Lutheran, at its Annual Meeting, adopted its second welcome statement as part of our ongoing process of being a Reconciling in Christ Congregation. Our first one was adopted 16 years earlier at another Annual Meeting. The first one passed by a fairly close vote. This new statement passed unanimously. There were no nays, nor abstentions voiced. Doubtless, not everyone in the congregation was there, but those who were there by and large supported the statement.

Now comes the really hard work of putting the welcome into action. We can talk about welcome until we are out of breath, but the real task of welcome is the implementation of the way we receive others into our midst. Moreover, the task is made doubly difficult when we welcome new folks as those who have been here for some time begin to wonder about their own welcome as the congregation grows and evolves with the arrival of new folks. Whenever new folks come, change comes with them and adaptations and adjustments become necessary.

That being said, let's examine the welcome statement a little closer. We first encounter a sort of preamble, a first glance welcome. And the preamble is ambiguously broad. It is hoped the preamble will draw people into the text to see where those first words take us and whether or not we are really serious about welcoming others.

The first paragraph begins with a statement of faith that God loves us. God's incomparable love is the basis for our welcome of others. Since a main objective was to welcome people of different sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions those are stated explicitly, but the feedback we got from the congregation was that there was a need to expand that welcome to a broader segment of society and the welcome goes to folks with all sorts of different life circumstances. Since God loves broadly we also extend that love broadly as well. It is not that we *only* love those mentioned in this paragraph--there is a further expansion of the welcome below in the text--but rather that we explicitly mention those who have at times been excluded.

The second paragraph is something of a confession. Welcoming the other is hard work and we don't always do it well. Nonetheless, God still calls us to this difficult work of reconciliation in order to change us from a self-centered community to one that is a living expression of God's extravagant mercy. Though sometimes we are flawed and in need of improvement in this regard, that doesn't keep us from trying.

Some folks have said we should just say, "All are welcome here." So in this final paragraph we say just that and we emphasize that welcome as beginning in Christ's name. If there is anything missing in the words above, we hope this welcome-to-all conclusion will fill that in.

The final sentence is an even deeper welcome to invite others into the process of making our vision of welcome a true reality. Those who come to Grace Lutheran Church honor us with their presence and deepen our understanding of what it means to be the diverse people of God in this place. By inviting others into the participatory endeavor of reception we acknowledge that the business of welcome is something that we cannot do solely on our own. We need others to join us if we are to truly be a hospitable people.

I hope this will not be our last welcome, but rather I hope we will take this as a beginning to the actions we will take to express further welcomes. At the 75th Anniversary banquet, I remarked that Grace is an incubator in this community. We get things started and we do that through our welcome of others and our interactions in the community at large. We are always re-learning what it means to do that. In this 500th anniversary year of the reformation we might be said to be reforming this statement in the spirit of *semper reformanda*, always reforming. My hope for this statement is that it becomes the impetus for even more expressions of welcome to come.

Am I Welcome at Grace?

The question has come up, what if I disagree with the new Welcome Statement? In our Lutheran practice of theology, we have always had a conscience exception. If in good conscience after having examined an issue biblically and theologically we find we cannot agree with it, then we have the option, even the responsibility, of voicing that opinion. The stipulation is that mutual respect of conscience is accorded on both sides of any issue of conscience.

That exception around this particular issue was expressly noted in 2009 when the Churchwide Assembly passed the resolutions allowing for same-sex unions and clergy in same-sex, committed relationships to be part of the official rosters of this church. Those who disagree, because of conscience, are permitted to disagree and will not be forced to go against conscience. So, yes, if because of your biblical and theological outlook you disagree with the welcome statement, you too are welcome here.