

St. Paul's Reformed: Process to Welcoming and Affirming

St. Paul's began to seriously examine the issue of full inclusion in 2005 while putting together a set of Core Beliefs and Values to help us focus our ministry. During this process, Acceptance was one core value that repeatedly came up. As we examined what acceptance means we started listing various things including age, gender, appearance, finances, etc.

When it was suggested to include "personal relationships" in the list, the discussion centered on how this would include gays and lesbians. When the finished statement was brought to the congregation for discussion and a vote, it overwhelmingly decided to include the following language defining one of the core values: Accepting - We respect all who want to develop a relationship with Jesus Christ, regardless of age, appearance, finances or personal relationships.

Through the years since 2005, there were various discussions among members of the congregation on moving toward becoming a welcoming and affirming church. These discussions were carried out at our local Room for All gatherings and informally among members and friends.

In November 2010, St. Paul's Consistory voted to move from informal discussions to a formal process of discernment to see if we, as a congregation, desired to become a welcoming and affirming church. The Vice-President of Consistory was put in charge of implementing the process, and plans were made to begin at the start of the new year.

In February 2011, two Bible studies focusing on homosexuality with related discussions were held. These Saturday morning sessions were extremely well attended. The Bible studies resulted in very meaningful discussions and covered a wide variety of issues related to full inclusion, especially within the Reformed Church in America.

The Consistory also decided to meet with a lesbian minister who had pastored an Open and Affirming UCC congregation in the area. This meeting gave the Consistory further insight into how an existing congregation in a similar setting experienced the transition to a public statement of full inclusion.

A congregational meeting was held on Sunday, April 10th. Following a brief report by the Consistory on the congregational studies and its meeting with the local minister, there was a lively discussion on the pros and cons of declaring St. Paul's a Welcoming and Affirming church. Issues discussed included how the local community and, possibly, the Reformed Church in America, might react. These issues were openly and honestly dealt with. At the end of the meeting it was noted that the consensus of the congregation was to support the Consistory in moving the congregation to a declaration of Welcoming and Affirming.

At its meeting on April 18th the Consistory unanimously voted to declare St. Paul's Reformed Church a Welcoming and Affirming church. The news was immediately shared by various means of communication and the reaction by the congregation was one of joy. St. Paul's was happy to declare that it is willing to follow the leading of God to establish justice and share God's love with all.

We know that making the declaration is one part of the journey towards full inclusion. With that in mind, we are continuing to examine our programs and ministries to find ways to fully implement the welcoming and affirming values that we have declared to be integral to who we are as a congregation.