



RECONCILING IN CHRIST PROGRAM  
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## Will Our Church Become a "Gay Church"?

**Have you asked this question out loud? Have you rolled your eyes in frustration when someone else did?**

**It is a serious question, often lurking in the background of any discussion of becoming an RIC congregation.**

**There are two circumstances that might cause a congregation to become predominantly gay/lesbian, etc. Would you like to guess?**

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### Wild Success

One scenario would be if the dedication and energy given to outreach and evangelism—blessed by the Holy Spirit—were so wildly successful that hundreds or thousands of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people from all around suddenly swarmed into the church, loved it, joined, and began trying to run the place! Such a scenario is the kind of church growth success story that would make many people nervous.

*Why this is not very likely.*

Successful evangelism and real growth require trust and other signs of secure relationships with new people. Relationships and trust take time to build. When reaching out to a specific population of people such as the GLBT communities, overcoming the decades of distrust and fear which they have experienced is not likely to happen in a short period of time. And, sudden, explosive growth of GLBT membership is also not likely as long as the secular GLBT communities in the area (and across the continent) sense that the Christian Church as a whole despises and rejects them.

A Reconciling Congregation provides a ministry of patience, caring, thoughtfulness and trust-building. Reconciling in Christ means quality growth, not runaway change.

Some GLBT persons who come to the church may be returning to a Christian church for the first time in many years. They need time to emotionally test what genuine hospitality, welcome and reconciling mean for their lives. Other GLBT persons may have been completely unchurched or have had only a limited exposure to the church, the Gospel and Christian theology. They, too, will need time.

### Panic and Desertion

The other possible scenario would be that all the heterosexual members who have belonged to and

supported the church for years or generations suddenly run for the doors, never to return, after the first two or three GLBT persons come to visit—causing a huge disaster from which the church could never recover.

***Why this is not very likely.***

Congregations working through a Reconciling Ministry process are engaged in building bridges and in re-uniting individuals, families and groups which have been estranged. Because the recommended process of beginning a Reconciling Ministry program takes time, there is ample opportunity for all members to ask questions, to study issues and, of course, to talk through the fears, feelings and prejudices which they may have.

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The Reconciling process, too, strongly encourages the congregation's team to work closely with pastoral leadership. Good leadership will seek to build bridges with members who may—at first—be diametrically opposed to opening the church doors to GLBT people. This is a process of "in-reach" which assures conservative or reluctant members that their views and feelings are being taken seriously, and that the church intends to be faithful to the Gospel and faithful to one another.

Neither the invasion of any kind of "newcomer" nor the abdication and retreat of "long-timers" is an acceptable pattern for undertaking a Reconciling Ministry. Lutherans Concerned believes that a Reconciling Ministry will do exactly what it says it will do: bring people together in Christ, not separate them.

## **Try to Detect Underlying Fears**

If someone seriously raises the question, "Will We Become a Gay Church?" or a very similar question, it may be evidence of the underlying fears of unmanageable, even catastrophic change in the congregation. After all, too many Lesbians joining a church in a sixth month period would overwhelm a church's sense of normalcy, control and order. But it would be the same if too many ex-Catholics, college students, Blacks, parents of two-year-olds, or any other conceivable demographic group suddenly moved in.

It is to be expected that many people in churches—which usually experience changes slowly— would be fearful of rapid change. Planning a Reconciling ministry should anticipate that these fears will be present to some degree. When people love their church, they will not want to lose what they love (a good thing). Some, however, do not want to let go of their prejudices (not a good thing)..

But, while it is understandable that many church members would not welcome the onset of either "wild success" (too many new members at once), or "dire failure" (loss of large numbers of current members), it should be recognized that many churches have a historic penchant for stifling

all changes. Rather than taking a robust direction in outreach and evangelism, some congregations effectively resist all revolution and evolution as a community, and eventually fall victim to erosion and attrition instead. A church that cannot change will not live long.

### **Change Does Not Destroy a Church. Resisting Change Could Kill It.**

Congregations may wither or disappear precisely because they would not address changing circumstances but steadfastly resisted them. This can be true whether the changes are social and demographic, natural and internal, or historical. For example,

- Churches in smaller towns are profoundly impacted by the changes with which corporate agribusiness is absorbing the family farm, thus erasing the community life of people whose families and social institutions, including the church, were centered around farming.
- Suburban congregations that were established near new housing subdivisions and reached a membership zenith then begin to shrink, after helping an entire generation raise its children, as those children move away and the older generation declines.
- Congregations that were once part of a critical and vital effort to meet the needs of historical circumstances, such as ministry to an immigrant population, are at a loss to find a new sense of purpose when the original circumstances have played out.

No mission or opportunity for outreach is permanent. Congregations which are the strongest and most vibrant are usually the ones which recognize and anticipate changes in the communities around them, look for positive opportunities as a result of those changes, and thus "re-invent" their congregational life and mission.

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### **The Seven Last Words of the Church:**

*"We Never Did It That Way Before"*

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Outreach in the GLBT communities is one such circumstance calling for a renewed and re-invented sense of congregational purpose. Forty years ago, a Reconciling Ministry was unheard-of because GLBT persons were invisible and living in closets of fear. Forty years from now, a Reconciling Ministry may have become so second-nature as to require no special planning at all!

### **Watch out for Fears Being Intentionally Sown**

We have recognized that church members and leaders may have legitimate fears about rapid, unpredictable change. Honest conversation between people of opposing viewpoints will go a long way to ease or erase those fears.

But leaders working for a congregation's Reconciling Ministry should be aware of fears which are intentionally planted, like weeds sprouting where good seed has been sown. (cf. Matthew 13:24-28.)

This is not a warning to look for enemies within the congregation, but to recognize when gossip, stereotypes, myths, and even lies about GLBT persons are raised or repeated within the congregation.

Sometimes these myths and lies are generalizations about homosexual people. They are typically repeated from public antagonists such as politicians, talk show hosts, or popular televangelists: "Homosexuals are child molesters," or, "All homosexuals have AIDS." Myths and stereotypes are typically spread by people who have little or no knowledge of the facts, but who accept the word of someone else who claims authority or respectability.

But sometimes myths, lies or gossip will take the form of innuendos or very specific threats about the life of the congregation: "The homosexual members are taking over everything," "I know dozens of families that will leave immediately if those people are allowed in," or "You can get AIDS from the communion chalice."

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**The shortest distance  
between two points of view  
is the truth.**

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The only effective way to work with such irrational and destructive fears is also the only legitimate course for a Christian church:

- Take the road of peace, understanding and patience.
- Emphasize our unity in Christ alone.
- Bring together real people, who are unique and different from one another, for honest dialogue.
- Neither over-react to nor ignore individuals or groups which are responsible for repeated, negative and fearful comments.
- Listen respectfully, and try to elicit facts, not hearsay.
- Respond with integrity.
- If necessary, challenge individual troublemakers in private with sensitivity and patience.

Unchallenged myths or lies, when intentionally spread in a congregation, are often meant to intimidate others or to sabotage relationships of trust and the spirit of reconciliation. But if challenged with love, in a reconciling spirit, they can be calmed, minimized or eliminated.

In extreme circumstances, it may be necessary for a Pastor or Bishop to intervene in order to stop unwarranted antagonism and to restore trust. In the overwhelming majority of RIC congregations, however, these circumstances simply have not occurred, and the possibility of intimidation or sabotage should not become yet another fear. If extraordinary circumstances occur in the process of developing a Reconciling Ministry, leaders should ask for help and support as soon as those circumstances are recognized.

—Daniel M. Hooper  
Lutherans Concerned/Los Angeles

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I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord,  
beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,  
with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,  
making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

—Ephesians 4:1–3

