

Where Hands Will Reach

Devotions, Stories, Reflections

Lutherans Speak Out Against Bullying



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Where Hands Will Reach

*Let us build a house where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone*

*To heal and strengthen serve and teach,
and live the Word they've known.*

*Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God's face;*

Let us bring an end to fear and danger.

— “All Are Welcome” Marty Haugen

Beginning in the fall of 2010, a wave of media reports of anti-gay bullying brought national attention to a matter which has affected lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people for generations. Video messages saying “It gets better” have come from entertainment and sports celebrities, from governmental leaders such as President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, and from ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, providing crucial words of support and hope for millions of vulnerable youth.

But we know that we cannot just *say* it will get better. We also know that as a people freed in Christ to lead and serve, we need to work to *make* it better. To that end, this booklet contains responses to bullying from ELCA pastors, parents, theologians, and others. You will find devotions, personal stories, and theological reflections on the problem of bullying and what some have done to help. We invite you to read these pieces in the groupings indicated on page one. Although originally written for the 2011 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Orlando, these reflections offer an ongoing-testimony for the need, as contributor Jeremy Posadas writes, to “activate and organize the passion of God’s people for justice to transform the life of the church and society.”

While anti-LGBT bullying has taken center stage in the media, anyone who is perceived as “not like us” can become a target of both physical and verbal bullying. Acts of bullying and related violence cut across all communities,

often occurring in a multi-faceted context, where issues of race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, gender, body shape, age, and physical and mental abilities intersect in complex ways. If we focus on only one facet, we run the risk of unintentionally making it more difficult to see the inequality and injustice perpetrated within other contexts. You will see some of those intersections reflected in the pages of this booklet.

Bullied kids have witnessed that they feel there is nowhere for them to turn, no place where they will be accepted for who they are. Schools have often been unable to adequately address the needs of all students, particularly those who are most vulnerable. Tragically, a great many young people feel that the church is exactly where they will not find meaningful support. We need to work to change that perception. We need to change the climate in society and in the church.

Lutherans Concerned/North America (LC/NA) is committed to organizing people to provide our loved ones, no matter their age or situation, the help and support they need, in schools, in churches, and in public policies. As Richard Perry writes, members of the Body of Christ are called to “serve the world by bringing a prophetic word to it.”

This booklet provides just a beginning. On page 19, we provide a list of further resources which address bullying, violence prevention, disability/anti-ableism, and anti-racism.

Through the Reconciling in Christ (RIC) program, LC/NA has long been working to ensure that every Lutheran congregation is a safe place for all. We know the difference it makes for congregations to offer a clear, intentional welcome for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities—welcoming all who share the worth that comes from being unique individuals created by God. There is great power in the simple act of saying those words of welcome out loud, making it known that *all are welcome in this place*.



Devotion on Galatians 3:26-28

Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus.

(The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation)

At the high school I attended everyone was sorted into four neat categories: jocks, brains, preps, and burnouts. You may have had different names for them, but I think you'll recognize the divisions. Jocks included all those who played sports as well as cheerleaders. Brains were those who excelled in school as well as anyone who dressed funny or was socially awkward. Preps were all the beautiful people, most of whom were affluent. Burnouts included those who smoked in the school parking lot, wore lots of denim and black T-shirts, and often came from low-income households. Kids didn't choose their category. It seemed to be decided by some higher power. Once you were labeled, there was no moving from one category to another.

Fate landed me in the category of "brain." Therefore, I did what all brains are destined to do; I tutored math! My first student was a soccer player. I rolled my eyes as he walked through the door, wondering why I was forced to tutor this "dumb jock." I'm sure he had similar negative feelings about having to associate with a "brain" as well. However, as we worked together, our prejudices began to be dismantled. In the end, we became friends and discovered we had a lot more in common than either of us could have possibly imagined. Thanks to him, I learned a valuable lesson about the pitfalls of labeling others.

Paul is trying to teach us this same lesson in Galatians. Christians are pretty good at labeling each other. We like to sort ourselves into categories by denomination, theology, race, etc. We are also tempted to demonize those who are different from us. This leads to all sorts of hostilities, prejudices, and name-calling. It is not what Christ has in mind for his Church, and it hurts our witness to the rest of the world. Paul says that the only label we should wear is Christ alone. Any other sorting and categorizing we attempt to do is pointless and even harmful.

What would the Church of Jesus Christ look like if we took Paul's words to heart? Instead of spending our time in endless debates with one another, we could become a healing and reconciling force in our world. We could confront those who taunt and bully others because they perceive them as "different." We could dismantle prejudice based on race, socio-economic status, or any other label that builds walls of hostility between people. Can we really live without labels? I hope so. ❖

— Rev. David Eck

Freed in Christ to Serve



I am a Luther scholar, and one of the basic texts from which I teach my students almost every semester is Martin Luther's "On Christian Liberty" of 1520. It's a remarkably important work, and it shows us Luther at a critical moment in his life—just as he is coming to terms with what it will mean for him (and the world) that he can no longer tolerate what he sees as a terrible injustice going on around him, and—worst of all—coming from the very heart of the church. This injustice has many aspects, but at

their root, Luther thinks, is this: humans have presumed to claim the mind and heart of God, and to pass judgment on other humans in God's name—when in fact, it is God's Word that both passes judgment on all humans, and at the same time liberates them with forgiveness and mercy to live in love. What Luther sees as human usurpation of God's message is this: limiting the scope of God's love so that its true meaning is obscured and God's people are left in fear and bondage—and in spiritual dependence on religious leaders who gain from their fear and do not have their best interests at heart.

Luther uses two texts from Paul to illustrate his point. In First Corinthians 9:19, Paul insists that though he "is free from all," he has made himself "a slave to all"; and from Romans 13:8: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." But to love one another is not just a single thing, but *everything* for which our whole life is meant! So Luther is embracing Paul's paradox and lifting up the tension between the freedom from fear and inadequacy God gives us through Christ and the obligation and duty we have toward one another, not *in spite of* but precisely *because of* that freedom. How could we possibly owe *more* than love, if by love we mean the kind of godly love that truly leads us to treat our neighbor as we ourselves would be treated?

Luther's text is full of wonder and joy, and also considerable anger at those he believes are deluding Christian people. Toward them he turns his withering scorn—and we can also be made uneasy by the sharpness of his language. But Luther's goal is to protect and defend those he believes the church has "bullied" by claiming for itself authority and wisdom and power over them—power that belongs only to God—in order to subject credulous people to its power and the will of its leaders.

But the spirit that breathes through this text most powerfully is one of liberty and hope, and that is why it still inspires us almost half a millennium later. It helps us remember that the church always runs some risks when it—and its leaders—presume to exercise a judgment on human life that actually belongs only to God. At least we should avoid any judgment that doesn't put love ahead of law—for we are still called (as Luther was) to stand with the weak and the defenseless and the poor against those who would intimidate or abuse or take advantage of them.

As Americans, we hear a great deal in our political discourse about freedom and liberty, but we don't generally mean by them what either Luther (or Paul) mean by the words: a liberation from the fear of sin and death, from fear and meaninglessness, that propels us forward to work for the benefit of others, not simply to please God, but because it is what we, as Christians, are called to do by a God who loves us, and to whose love we respond. ❖

—Rev. R. Guy Erwin
California Lutheran University



Devotion on Genesis 1:27

*Humankind was created as God's reflection: in the divine image
God created them.*

(The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation)

While I was on a Faith and Arts retreat at Camp Lutheridge (Asheville, North Carolina), I participated in a Bible Study on the creation stories from Genesis. One of the concepts put forth by the retreat leader was that “*Together* we are the image of God, *not* separately.” Every person. Every culture. Every race. Every nationality. All of us, combined together, form a vivid and diverse image of the nature and character of the God who created us.

The power of this view of creation is that we are challenged to see the image of God in those we like as well as those we don't like. Liberal and conservative. Gay and straight. Illegal immigrant and legal resident. Christian and Muslim. Americans and Iraqis. Each of us, somehow, reflects the nature and character of God. If this is the case, it makes it hard for us to hate our neighbors since they are as much a reflection of our Creator as we are.

Much of the violence that exists in our world begins because we cannot see the “other” as part of the tapestry that makes up the image of God. This gives rise to wars, bullying, hate speech, genocide, and the like. Growing up as a young gay man, I was keenly aware of what it felt like to be the “other.” I was sometimes the recipient of taunting as well as bullying during this period of my life. I mostly suffered in silence. I felt like I had no adults I could confide in and was even afraid to talk with my pastor. I felt like I was less than a part of the tapestry that is woven together as the image of God. Thankfully, this led me on a spiritual quest toward a new understanding of who God is. I claimed my place as a part of God's image and have never looked back.

Now that I am an adult, I have a heart toward any person or group of people experiencing the same kind of oppression. I write a spirituality blog for LGBT Christians. My husband and I made a video for the “It Gets Better” anti-bullying campaign. I'm active in my local community helping to fight homelessness and racial profiling. If all of us make an attempt to see the face of the Creator in all our brothers and sisters, and not just the ones we like, perhaps we can begin to transcend the prejudices and fears that prevent us from being a more loving, peaceful, and just world. ❖

— Rev. David Eck

In Christ There Is No Creeper

When kids at school ask Anya Casterton why she wears a hat all the time, she says, “You need to ask my parents about that.” Anya has just finished the ninth grade at a public school in a Minneapolis-area suburb. Her hair is cut very short and

Anya Casterton and Marcia Stevens-Casterton



she hides her head with a cap and hooded sweatshirt so that others don't see the bare spots on her scalp. Anya has a hair-pulling disorder, perhaps acquired because of the high levels of stress she endured as a young child. Her parents, Marcia Stevens-Casterton and Jerry Casterton, adopted her and her brother Nikolay from an orphanage in Russia when she was four years old. Anya still grieves the loss of a younger sister who was taken from the bed they shared in the orphanage, was sent to a family in Moscow, and never heard from again. Anya has only recently wanted to talk about memories of her sister.

Although she has been able to parlay the hat-and-hoodie look into a kind of sassy style for herself, Anya still gets questions. Far too often, the questions are more taunting than curious. Not long ago, Anya had to prepare a firm answer to another hurtful question: “Are you the Creeper?”

“You need to ask the social worker about that.”

The school social worker has been a great help to

Anya as she has had to cope with a cruel form of Internet bullying. Someone—it's still uncertain who began it all—obtained an electronic photo of Anya and posted it on an online social networking site popular among kids her age. Posing as “The Creeper” and pretending to be Anya, the perpetrator wrote hateful, often obscene things about kids at Anya's school. Falling for the ruse, other kids using the site retaliated, posting retorts and counter-insults, and soon just about everyone, it seemed—even kids at several other neighboring schools—was talking about the awful Creeper. Students seeing Anya for the first time would “recognize” her and either draw away or verbally attack her.

Anya's mother, Marcia, has worked hard to put an end to the bullying. It has not been easy. The managers of the social Internet site were not particularly responsive, much less helpful, though they eventually removed the Creeper account at Marcia's continued insistence. The school principal told Marcia that he could do nothing to help, since the bullying did not happen on school property or at a school-sponsored event. The social worker was supportive of Anya and her family, but could do little to change the situation at school.

Such experiences are not

uncommon in Minnesota, despite the state's overall reputation for an excellent educational system and progressive social policies. Bully Police USA, a watchdog group that tracks state anti-bullying laws throughout the nation, has given Minnesota a grade of C-minus. The only states given a lower grade by the group are those that have no anti-bullying law whatsoever: Hawaii, Michigan, Montana, and South Dakota. Fortunately, the anti-bullying policy at the high school Anya will be attending in the fall has been strengthened recently and is better than many in Minnesota; for instance, it covers Internet bullying "regardless of whether such acts are committed on or off school property." However, the policy lacks concrete measures of accountability; there are no requirements that bullying incidents be tracked or reported to the state.

Like other forms of violence, experiences of bullying—both of those who bully and those who are bullied—can become entwined with other hurts and harms in complicated ways. The two kids who have been the most active in perpetuating the Creeper hoax, through online gossip and in-person interaction, are a pair of sisters, one of whom was herself bullied, presumably because of her sexual orientation. The sisters have proclaimed their innocence in the Creeper matter, but in an unguarded moment, one of them was heard saying, "It wasn't just us. There were other kids who did it." When Jerry, Anya's father, called the girls' father to talk about the problem, he heard a lot of angry shouting on the other end of the line and the call was ended abruptly. A few hours later, one of the sisters called Jerry back and said, "Thanks for making my father hit me."

Through all this, Marcia, too, must manage painful memories of her own victimization as a child. At the age of six, she was sexually assaulted as she walked to kindergarten. The police were called. The child was asked to view a lineup of men, but the perpetrator was not among them and was never caught. Afterward, Marcia's parents told her that the experience never happened. They insisted that she'd had a bad dream. They instructed her to just forget about the whole thing.

"Mom, you have to stop looking at that garbage on the Internet." Anya said this to her mother because she felt Marcia was spending too much time checking the site to see if the offensive material had been removed, or if it had perhaps increased, and to see who was saying what about whom—holding on too tightly to the grief the site has caused the family. Anya wants to forget about the Creeper and wants her mother to forget about it, too.

While there are many differences, sexual abuse is similar to bullying in that it attacks the core of a person's



Anya

self identity. For people of faith, there can be comfort in the knowledge that neither we nor our antagonists are in charge of that identity, since we live in the promise that each of us has been made in and through the unconditional, inseparable love of God, and as such our image is part of the Divine image. Knowing this, we are able to confess our hope, working to change the climate in our schools as well as to strengthen legislation, so parents like Marcia and Jerry are not left to act as their own cop, private investigator, and lawyer all at once; so kids like Anya are not forced to endure the cycling violence of bullying; and so no one must pretend that what happened did not happen. Christ happened, and because of that, we know that each of us is a beloved child of God: nothing—no power or principality, as St. Paul puts it—can harm that image. In Christ there is no Creeper. ❖

— Tim Fisher



Seeing God in the Neighbor

As a religion professor at an ELCA college, I get to know my students well. One student (I will call him David) recently shared that he attempted suicide three times during high school because of the bullying he experienced as a gay man. Although David was not kicked out of his home, his family viewed him as a sinner and was verbally abusive. School was no safer; many of the students saw David as a “fag” and harassed him.

There are different ways to hear David’s story. Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Christians hear their story in David’s and recall their own struggle to find safety and authenticity. Others might sympathize with David on account of the bullying he experienced, but they still see him as different, a stranger, a sinner, unclear, or someone in whom God is less present than in straight people.

As Lutheran Christians, one of the first steps towards serving the neighbor is seeing God in them. Seeing God

in the other is deeply rooted in Lutheran theology, and it can help us overcome the ways that we objectify others, or see them as different because of their language, nation of origin, ability, religion, body shape, race, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Once we see someone as “other,” it is easy to stereotype and bully them. Martin Luther’s teaching that God is really present in the bread and wine, the world, and others can help us see our neighbors—and ourselves—as filled with God’s presence and as bearers of God to one another.

During the Reformation, Luther, Roman Catholics, and Reformed leaders couldn’t agree on how Jesus Christ was present in the bread and wine. In these debates Luther found himself arguing that God is omnipresent, present everywhere. He believed that Jesus Christ was not limited to a seat at God’s right hand. Rather, God—incarnate in Jesus Christ—is everywhere, in all places, in the bread and wine, and in all persons. Luther wrote, “Therefore, indeed, he [God] himself must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power. For it is he who makes the skin and it is he who makes the bones.... Indeed, he must make everything, both the parts and the whole.” (LW 37:58)

If Luther is right, God is within all creatures. This word of promise helps us see that LGBT persons like David are equally filled with God’s presence. Luther also says that God’s power is truly present. We can use this power to resist stereotypes, claim our birthright as God’s adopted children, and speak out for the neighbor who is being bullied and excluded. Luther reminds us that God makes the bones, the parts and the whole of *all* creatures. The person whom we stereotype, ignore, criticize, or harm is our neighbor because that person was created in God’s image.

Imagine what high school might have been like for David if his family had recognized him as a precious child of God and if other students had regarded him with dignity. Rather than being bullied, David might have seen himself as created in God’s image and his years in high school would have been filled with academic challenges, school activities, and hopes for the future. Remembering the promise that God’s presence, creativity, and power is in *all* persons can empower us to resist objectifying and bullying others and instead respect, protect, and speak out on behalf of—and in service to—the neighbor. ❖

— Mary Elise Lowe
Augsburg College



Devotion on Ephesians 4:1-6

I therefore, the 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. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

(NRSV)

Several years ago I had the pleasure of escorting art history students on a tour of Greece and Italy. While we were in Athens, we toured the Parthenon, an ancient worship site dedicated to the goddess Athena. Right next to the Parthenon is an artesian spring that comes up out of the ground and empties into a large, rectangular, stone basin. The tour guide told us that this spring has been flowing for thousands of years and is one of the purest water sources in the area. Needless to say, no one had to ask me twice to take a sip. I put my hands together to form a cup and brought some of the water to my lips. It was cool, clean, and refreshing.

As I drank from this ancient spring, I thought about all of the people throughout history who had come to this same spot to quench their thirst. People like the apostle Paul who did some of his missionary work in Athens and preached a sermon on this very hill. The water from the spring connected me to something far greater than myself, something that spanned time and place and joined me with people of ancient times and distant lands. Drinking that water is an experience I will never forget.

The waters of baptism connect us to something far greater than ourselves. When we were baptized we became a part of God's family. God's family is a very big family indeed, one that spans centuries and continents. It includes people of every tribe, race, and nation. Baptism connects us to one another with a bond that cannot be broken. We are a part of one great big family whether we like it or not!

As the baptized people of God, our challenge is to learn to get along with all of our "siblings," especially those whom we find hardest to love. Paul tells us that we can accomplish this task by embodying humility, gentleness, patience, love, and peace. Let us focus on what ties us together rather than on what pulls us apart. Remembering our baptism is a good place to start every conversation, every activity, today and always. ❖

— Rev. David Eck

et al



A couple of years ago, our congregation in Saline, Michigan, voted to publicly proclaim our welcome of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities by designating ourselves as Reconciling in Christ, a program of Lutherans Concerned/North America.

Then, in the fall of 2010, God gave us a chance to step more deeply into this affirmation. A brave group of teens in our local high school's gay-straight alliance were petitioning the school board to include "sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression" in its non-discrimination policy. These students shared experiences of harassment and bullying at the high school, and asked the school board to

take this step towards changing the school's culture.

I met the students and got involved, speaking at some school-board meetings and preaching at church about Jesus' call for us to be prophetic voices in the community, to stand alongside the bullied in asking for protection and justice. Ours is a small congregation (average Sunday attendance is 83) and is generally middle-of-the-road politically—and yet five people from the congregation contacted school

board members to urge them to vote yes to the proposed added language.

On the night of the vote, the room was packed with people from the community who supported the change in policy, including about ten of our church members. Teachers, students, community members, and even the mayor spoke. We bore witness to the pain bullying causes. We set out a vision of an inclusive community, where all can fully be who they are. We urged the board to approve the change.

The school board defeated the motion by a vote of four to three.

It was a setback. But more important than winning or losing this vote was the sense of the Spirit moving among us in the room that night. We were galvanized to start an organization devoted to promoting equality and welcome for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) people in our community. We have named the group *et al*, from the Latin meaning "and others," because our vision is to affirm the full inclusion of LGBTQ people who are often treated as *other*, especially in small towns like ours. As at the school board meeting, the organization includes members of our congregation and meets monthly at our church.

Through the advocacy of *et al*, our town's city council passed a resolution to support the high school's participation in the "Day of Silence" protest against the silencing effect of bullying. Even more recently, with our encouragement, the council unanimously passed a resolution declaring June to be "LGBT Pride Month" in our city. The decision made front-page news in our local paper.

In a state that sometimes seems to be resolutely backsliding on bringing equal rights and inclusion to the LGBTQ community, our work is far from over. But the Spirit is moving among us. Freed in Christ to serve as a voice for inclusion, our congregation continues to add new members, both gay and straight. And in our meetings, members of *et al* like to quote a saying, often attributed to Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." ❖

— Rev. Ian Reed Twiss

As a young man growing up, I was a physically challenged youngster. My peers ridiculed me because I was thin, I had big ears, and my head was shaped like a peanut. Back then, our society did not say much about bullying. It “just happened,” and young men like me had to defend ourselves. Consequently, I grew up with a poor self-image. The church, however, assisted me in moving beyond those situations of bullying. Two functions of the church come to mind: refuge and prophet.

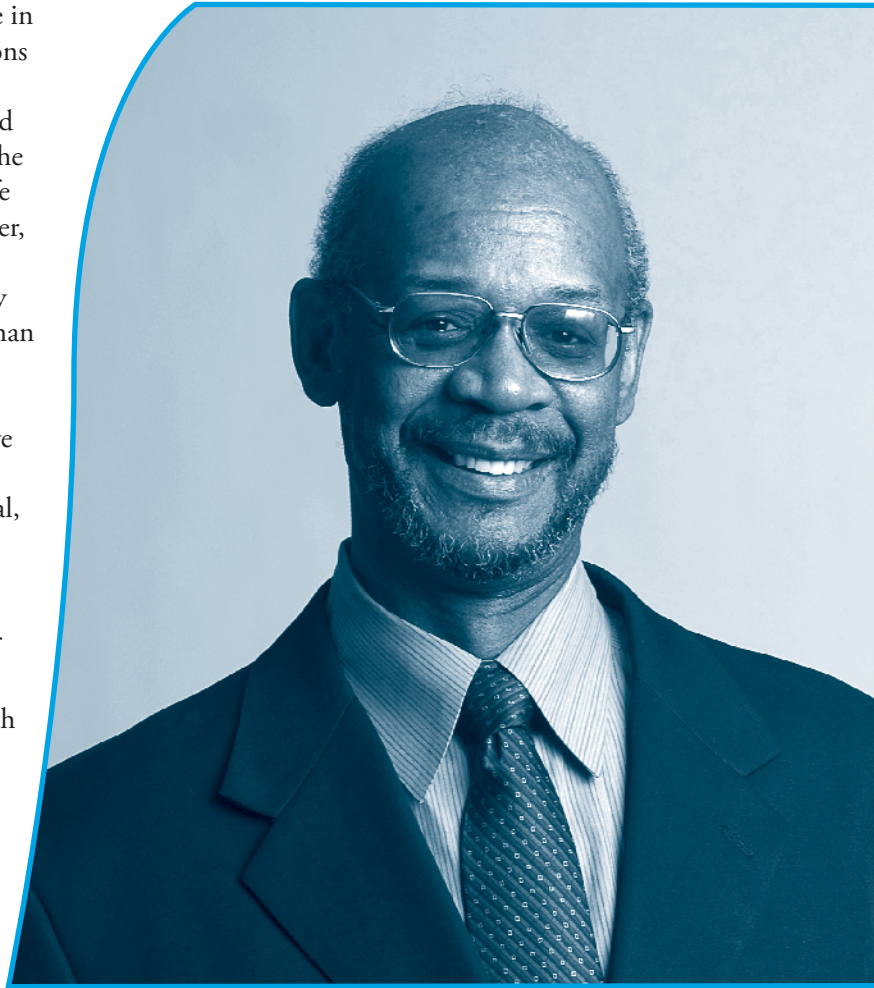
The Church as Refuge. The church, for me, functioned as a place of refuge. In some traditions, the function of the church as “refuge” may mean being uninvolved in the life of the world; such is true of some congregations. However, there is a positive view of the church as refuge. First, the church as refuge, through baptism, confirms our primary identity. We are children of God. Our identity is more than the “difference” others may ascribe to us. Our identity is oriented to God’s loving action in baptism.

Second, in the church as refuge, through baptism, we are united with the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ becomes a safe space for receiving the spiritual, emotional, and social needs necessary for the development of our humanness. The church as refuge nurtures each person in the faith and testimony of the mothers and fathers of the Christian tradition. Through baptism, affirmation of baptism, and receiving the Holy Eucharist I experienced and received God’s magnificent grace. We receive strength and courage to return to a world where bullies exist.

The Church as Prophet. The church’s proclamation of God’s grace also frees the church to function as a prophet. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “[the church] seeks to change the environmental conditions of [people] so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed” (*Strength to Love*). The mission of the Body of Christ now is to identify all conditions and institutions that feed or enable the pain done to God’s people through bullying. The church, as the Body of Christ, is free to do that task because our freedom was purchased through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; God’s grace has been sprinkled upon it and upon God’s people.

The ELCA’s social teaching document, “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective” makes an often overlooked statement. It says, “This church must participate in social structures critically, for sin also is at work in the world.” The document goes on to say, “It needs constantly to discern when to support and when to confront society’s cultural patterns, values, and powers.” Participating or being free to serve means that the Body of Christ values God’s world enough to become involved in the work of justice for people who are bullied because they are perceived to be “different.” Freedom to serve our neighbor also means announcing that the vocation of the church and its members is to serve the

The Church as Refuge and Prophet



common good. Yet, there will be a “Thus, says the Lord” when it is necessary to proclaim such a word.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls those who experience bullying to the church for its message of love and care. They are freed people through God’s grace and through baptism, they too have been incorporated into the Body of Christ. The church as refuge provides safe space for nurture in the faith of our mothers and fathers and affirmation of how God created us. The Gospel of Jesus Christ also frees the Body of Christ to serve the world by bringing a prophetic word to it. These two functions contribute to building a global society where all of God’s people can enjoy an abundant life. ❖

— Rev. Richard Perry
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago



Devotion on *Luke 10:36-37*

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (NRSV)

I met Steve when I moved to Asheville, North Carolina. He lived in an apartment across from mine. Steve was about 50 years old, was well read in religion and history, and his apartment was jam packed with books on every subject imaginable. I enjoyed visiting with him, and we often discussed in great detail the state of the world and our place in it.

Steve was also generous and giving to people around him. Everyone in the apartment complex seemed to know him. Steve was cheerful, quick with a smile or a clever joke, and children absolutely adored him. Steve taught me a lot about what it means to be a Christian. He was caring and compassionate. His spirit shone brightly with the love of God.

But before I go any further, there are three things I want you to know about Steve. He is Buddhist. He lost both of his legs in Vietnam. He is African American. Tragically, for some people in some communities, any one of these three things might automatically exclude him from their list of friends.

Well, guess what? This Buddhist, double amputee, African American taught me—a white, gay Christian—volumes about Jesus and what it means to live a Christ-centered life. Those who would exclude him because of the labels they attach to him, and the meanings they attach to those labels, would put a stumbling block in front of themselves, in front of the joyous life of transformation, reconciliation, and freedom that is in Christ.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a powerful story. One of the things we learn from it is that each of us in our own way is like the lawyer who asks the question, “And who is my neighbor?” We want to narrow our circle of friends and limit those for whom we care. Jesus will not stand for this limitation. He blows the doors off of our definition of neighbor to include anyone who is in need. In Christ, our circle of friends is very broad indeed. It extends to all of humanity, even to those with whom we are not personally comfortable—even to those who may challenge our assumptions. In the freedom that is in Christ, we get to expand our definition of neighbor. It may very well be the most life-changing thing we do. ❖

— Rev. David Eck

“You’re acting like a Pharisee” said my Hebrew professor at California Lutheran University (CLU) after I proudly proclaimed that I had correctly interpreted a prophecy in Isaiah, which the Jewish people had gotten all wrong. I scoffed at his comment, as I did for most of the theological positions he took. I was the one who was a true Bible-believing Christian—who was he to call *me* a Pharisee? Sadly, that was my attitude during my years at CLU. I was on staff at a local conservative evangelical church; since we were the big game in town, I fell into thinking that even in God’s eyes, might makes right.

Now that I’ve got a little time and maturity on my side, I have realized just how right my professor was. In my arrogance and pride I was acting like a Pharisee. I was being a spiritual bully without even knowing it. I was using my theology to determine how humanity should live and believe, all the while shunning those who didn’t measure up.

Whenever we use the spiritual as a source of power to hold against or over others, I believe we’re acting against the heart of Christ. I have repented many times for my actions, and while I know that Christ forgives, I can’t help but think that part of my penance is being keenly aware of the amount of bullying that takes place in our society. When Christians partake in that bullying or even stand by idly while others are bullied, we are most certainly not living out what we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.”

After my time working at the evangelical church, I found my way into Christian schools where I taught Bible classes before finally landing in the public school system. While many parents put their children into Christian schools for the safe environment they offer, I have seen firsthand that bullying is still a present reality for kids who are different even in these faith-based communities. I’ve heard my football players talk about girls as if they were objects. I’ve watched students prayerfully raise their hands in chapel and then exclude and make fun of the “losers” at the table across the lunch room. I’ve seen overweight kids cry because they were teased. Christians bully more than they realize.

Christ Has Called Us to Offer Hope



Bullying still thrives in part because there aren’t enough adults standing up against it. The church has been slow to respond to this issue and only now, after a rash of gay students committed suicide, are we beginning to take the stands that should long have been a part of our theology. A memorial brought to the ELCA churchwide assembly won’t be the final word and the final cure, but it will be a good step. We don’t have all the answers and yet Christ has called us to offer hope to the suffering and defend “the least of these.” These are noble pursuits, worthy of our commitment. May God guide us on the journey. ❖

— Burke Wallace

Many recent issues in our church have pushed us to consider again Luther's concepts of Law and Gospel. This conversation brings us back to our theological roots. There is no doubt that Lutherans have an excellent understanding of the Gospel. Where we flounder, collectively, is in our understanding of the Law. At our worst moments, we invoke the Law *performatively*, calling it down or enacting it on others and judging or harassing our neighbor—rather than allowing it to function *descriptively*, revealing the world's shortcomings. Indeed, in turbulent times and changes, we tend to reach for "the Law" as something to safeguard and prove the right of our own morals or ethics. Unfortunately, the Law becomes

When the Law Bullies and Oppresses



a weapon we use against one another, blocking both our understanding of our neighbor and our own ability to convey and experience love and grace.

Theologian Douglas John Hall writes about a similar propensity for abuse that comes from false certainty concerning one's knowledge of God or Christ. When we feel like we have "got Jesus," that we know the one correct definition of God, we have really created an object or idol which we can manipulate and use. There are two results of such false certainty. First, there is a temptation to use the object we have created to oppress others (in the name of God) and, second, we lose connection with the true, wholly Other, Holy Being, who is God and who cannot be held in any human concept or moral laws.

Likewise, it is important that we remember that the Law is not our tool—it is God's. When we understand the Law as God's loving way of revealing our world's brokenness so that we can meet healing, we properly understand the Law to be *God's* action, not our own. When *we* claim the power of the Law, to invoke and judge, we tend toward abusive bullying and oppression of our neighbor.

C.F.W. Walther, who wrote the Lutheran classic *The Proper Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel*, was concerned with such uses of the Law in Lutheran practice. He warns against preaching the Law to those who are already downtrodden and states that "to the broken-hearted not a syllable containing a threat or a rebuke is to be addressed, but only promises conveying consolation and grace, forgiveness of sin and righteousness, life and salvation" (Lecture 12, Thesis 8). In addition, he states that teachers and theologians who emphasize the Law over the Gospel pervert, offend, and desecrate their office. The consolation, joy, and comfort of the Gospel is to be prominent so that people will experience the power of the Gospel in their lives (Lecture 39, Thesis 25). Just imagine if we, as a church, could keep this attitude of grace and comfort for one another in turbulent times! Let us put down the temptation to make the Law a human instrument and use it as a sword against one another. Let us always, instead, meet the abused and afflicted among us with the balm of grace that we have received in abundance! ❖

— Marit Trelstad
Pacific Lutheran University



Devotion on Isaiah 58:6-8

This is the sort of fast that pleases me: Remove the chains of injustice! Undo the ropes of the yoke! Let those who are oppressed go free, and break every yoke you encounter! Share your bread with those who are hungry, and shelter homeless poor people! Clothe those who are naked, and don't hide from the needs of your own flesh and blood! Do this, and your light will shine like the dawn—and your healing will break forth like lightning! Your integrity will go before you, and the glory of YHWH will be your rearguard.

(The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation)

Recently someone told me that he couldn't continue to be a member of my church because we were too involved in social justice and community service. He told me he wanted to attend a more "traditional" church. I was a bit perplexed as to how to respond to him. What did he mean by "traditional"? Does a "traditional" church focus solely on what happens inside its walls? Is "traditional" Christianity solely about worship, meetings, Sunday School, and potluck suppers? Is the mission and outreach of a "traditional" church fulfilled if the members send checks to Lutheran World Relief or the ELCA Disaster Response?

I certainly hope not.

The prophet Isaiah indicates that God is much more interested in justice-making and social ministry than fasting or other liturgical acts of devotion. In fact, the kind of stuff Isaiah is challenging us to do means we're going to have to leave our pews and get our hands dirty every once in a while. This kind of faith is not neat and clean. It's hard work and requires effort.

In the New Testament, this same theme is repeated by Jesus. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus said the kind of work he would be doing included bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovering the sight of the blind, and letting the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus also told us that he would be found among the "least of these," the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, and imprisoned (Matthew 25:37-50).

As the church emerged after Jesus' resurrection, the disciples continued this same benevolent, justice-making spirit. In the midst of a contentious argument, the one thing they agreed on was that "we remember the poor," which Paul says he was "eager to do" (Galatians 2:10). The traditional church has a long-standing tradition of justice-making and social ministry. It is woven into the fabric of both Old and New Testaments. Mother Teresa once said that Jesus is all around us, but in "distressing disguise." I hope and pray that we will seek to meet our Savior on the road as much as we do in the pew. ❖

— Rev. David Eck

Let's Stop Making Excuses



The bones of her face were broken in multiple places from the beating. Covered in blood, searing in pain. One of our residents at Trinity Place Shelter, targeted for her sexual orientation and gender identity, had been beaten by a group of people. She required facial reconstruction surgery, followed by weeks of bed-rest. We wanted more than anything to simply eliminate her physical pain, but that was impossible. Yet when the options are to recover post-surgery on the streets while homeless or sleep in modest comfort in a church basement, our shelter was just enough of a manger to allow this beloved child of God to rest and begin healing.

Trinity Place Shelter is sponsored by Trinity Lutheran Church of Manhattan, a congregation of the ELCA's Metro New York Synod. When the 2011 Churchwide Assembly convenes, Trinity Place will be in its 270th week of continuous operation. It's hard to imagine two rooms more

different from each other than the ELCA Assembly hall and the homeless shelter. After all, ELCA mission support dollars pay for luxurious accommodations (compared to the street or a cot in a church basement) during the Assembly and every voting member, I'm fairly certain, has stable housing to return to afterwards.

But the Assembly hall and the homeless shelter are linked in a cycle of violence and healing: for Trinity Place is a shelter specifically for youth and young adults who have been targeted as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) people. And the reason such a shelter needs to exist in the first place is in no small part because Christian churches, in collusion with other organizations in society and government, have for decades told parents that their children's sexual or gender identities are sinful, unnatural, and contrary to the Bible—and these parents have listened well and kicked their kids out of their home!

Even now, in its Social Statement on Human Sexuality, this church explicitly includes, as one part of its mission and ministry, the understanding and practice that same-gender sexuality “carries the grave danger of unrepentant sin.” Almost every one of Trinity Place's residents has been assaulted for their sexual or gender identity at some point in their lives. And all too easily, their assailants are allowed to wipe the blood off their hands with pages of Scripture offered freely by the Body of Christ. God's work, our hands?

Although this church has committed to “attend to the need for . . . just treatment for those with varied sexual orientation and gender identity,” the vast majority of the ELCA's 10,000 congregations would struggle to make the residents of Trinity Place feel safe, much less precious and beautiful in the eyes of God. And they would struggle not only because the residents identify as LGBTQ, but because they are mostly black and Latino people, because they are young, because *few* of them have college education (or access to it), and *all* of them are poor. They are, in a word, the people Jesus meant when he said, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing”; the people Luther meant for us to serve when he said we were to be “little Christs” for our neighbors.

Imagine, though, for just a moment, that *your* congregation decided it would do whatever it took to be welcoming as a guest-home for Trinity Place's resident; what, in fact, would it take? Whom could you ask to help organize the effort? What resources would you be willing to put on the line for it? Christ calls us now to take up this challenge: in the name of Jesus, let's stop making excuses! ❖

— Kevin Lotz

How Will We Use Our Freedom?

It is fitting that the theme of the 2011 Churchwide Assembly is “Freed in Christ to Serve,” since that is a central principle underlying the Social Statement on Human Sexuality, adopted by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly—and in many ways, adopting that social statement has freed the ELCA from the seemingly endless process of establishing this church’s teachings on sexuality. Now that the ELCA has resolved that congregations are free to call qualified ministers in a same-gender relationship and that pastors can preside over same-gender marriages (where they are not prohibited by civil law), we are free, as ELCA members, to focus on issues other than sex. We are free to spend endless hours and millions of dollars figuring out the best ways to help hasten the end of poverty, hunger, homelessness, and violence in all its other forms, both in the United States and around the world.

Or at least we *should* be that free. But instead, almost all of our energies seem focused right now on survival, not service. How many congregations can survive with so many of their members struggling to find work or cover their bills? How many synods can survive when many congregations are unable to keep up their mission support? And is it even financially possible to sustain a churchwide office of the ELCA? These questions dominate our conversations as a church right now. Far from free to serve the neighbor, we are fearful for our survival.

But we need only be afraid if the thing we are trying to preserve is church-as-we-have-always-done-it. The present economic implosion of the ELCA can also be an opening to greater freedom—freedom to imagine a whole new way of doing church. We have always assumed that synods and the churchwide office should operate as bureaucracies, focused on churning out policy documents and enforcing them. But as anyone can see from the collapse in mission support over the past few years, we simply cannot afford to fund bureaucracies any longer.

What would it be like if we claimed our freedom to re-imagine the ELCA, and chose to call organizers and trainers rather than administrators? What if we ELCA members mandated that most of the people on the staff of synods and the churchwide office would be employed as field organizers, spending most of their time meeting with congregations rather than at the synod office or the ELCA headquarters in Chicago? Synod organizers would work with each congregation to identify major problems in their local community—addressing bullying in the local schools, for instance—and create a concrete agenda for



helping transform those problems. Churchwide organizers would focus more on developing lay leadership, offering leadership trainings across the country in core skills for the renewal of both congregational life—how to facilitate small groups, how to explore new forms of creative worship, and so on—and the life of the community, such as assessing community needs and establishing effective partnerships with other local organizations.

Activate and organize the passion of God’s people for justice, to transform the life of the church and society, both now and for the long haul. This has been a principle of practical theology guiding the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer members of the ELCA and their allies (LGBTQA) over decades of painful advocacy. This has also been the imperative lived out by ELCA congregations involved in faith-based community organizing networks, such as MICAHA (Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope), East Brooklyn Congregations in New York, and CCO (Communities Creating Opportunity) in Kansas City. So we already have in our midst all the wisdom we need to be an organizing church, rather than a bureaucratic one. We are free in Christ to make this choice. ❖

— Jeremy D. Posadas
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Resources

“Where All Can Safely Live”

www.lcna.org

An anti-bullying curriculum defining bullying, how it functions, and why Christians are called to prevent it from happening in our communities. Developed by Lutherans Concerned/North America in consultation with the Pacific Violence Prevention Institute and others.

The Pacific Violence Prevention Institute

www.pvpi.org

PVPI creates safer and more effective communities by helping them prevent and respond to acts of violence. PVPI holds workshops in schools, congregations and other communities on violence prevention and intervention of all kinds, from bullying to domestic violence.

“Stop Bullying”

Department of Health and Human Services

www.stopbullying.gov

U.S. Government site on bullying; provides educational materials and recommended actions about bullying in U.S. schools.

“Bullying: The congregation’s responsibility”

www.elca.org/Our-Faith-In-Action/Life-Transitions/Youth-Issues/Bullying.aspx

From the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s (ELCA) website.

Family Equality Council

www.familyequality.org

Contains resources on a proposed federal amendment to the Safe Schools Act to include bullying regulations.

AMAZE

<http://amazeworks.org>

Creates safe and respectful communities through the Families All Matter Book Project.

***Bullied* (film)**

The story of Jamie Nabozny who endured bullying through his school years and went to court as an adult to fight for change.

“Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus’ Nonviolent Way” (article)

Theologian Walter Wink provides cultural context and analysis of Matthew 5:38-42.

ADAPT

www.adapt.org

A national grass-roots community organization working for disability rights.

GSA Network: “How to Start a GSA”

www.gwanetwork.org/get-involved/start-gsa

Guidance for starting a Gay-Straight Alliance or similar club in schools in order to support and advocate for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

California Safe Schools Coalition: “Get the Facts”

<http://casafeschools.org/getfacts.html>

Resources on transgender and gender variant issues, including creating safe space and educating others.

GLSEN: “A Safe Space in Every School”

<https://safespace.glsen.org/campaign.cfm>

Resources for creating safe space in schools; especially helpful for educators looking to show their support in the classroom.

***Out in the Silence* (film)**

Citizens of a conservative rural town address bullying and anti-LGBT sentiment in their community.

Crossroads

www.crossroadsantiracism.org

Organizes and trains to dismantle institutional racism.

National Association of Black and White Men Together

www.nabwmt.org

A gay, multiracial, multicultural organization fostering supportive environments wherein racial and cultural barriers can be overcome and the goal of human equality realized.

Teaching for Change

www.teachingforchange.org

Working to make schools centers of justice; provides resources for parents and teachers.

***White Like Me* (book)**

Tim Wise’s classic book on how racial privilege affects the everyday lives of whites in America.

Goodsoil & LC/NA

Goodsoil

A collaboration of allies working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their families in the full ministerial and sacramental life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Goodsoil is comprised entirely of lay and clergy members of the ELCA. Lutherans Concerned/North America is the fiscal agent for Goodsoil. Visit Goodsoil at www.goodsoil.org.

Lutherans Concerned / North America

Empowered by the Holy Spirit using our hearts and hands to support, embody and inspire the full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the church and the world.

Since 1974, Lutherans Concerned/North America (LC/NA) has ministered to thousands of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and heterosexual persons seeking to affirm both their faith and sexuality. An independent, pan-Lutheran, membership-supported organization, LC/NA is committed to fostering personal empowerment for individuals as well as systematic change within the church.

All of this is from God, who reconciled us through Christ—and made us ministers of that reconciliation. This means that through Christ, the world was fully reconciled again to God, who didn't hold our transgressions against us, but instead entrusted us with this message of reconciliation.
(2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

Reconciling Lutherans

Reconciling Lutherans are *individuals* calling the church to extend God's welcoming embrace to all. Reconciling Lutherans empowers individuals to publicly witness to their call for a church and world that welcome and include all. Each name added to this public roster will strengthen the call to the Church to become truly welcoming and inclusive. Signing up is easy and free. View the list and sign up as a Reconciling Lutheran at www.lcna.org/RL

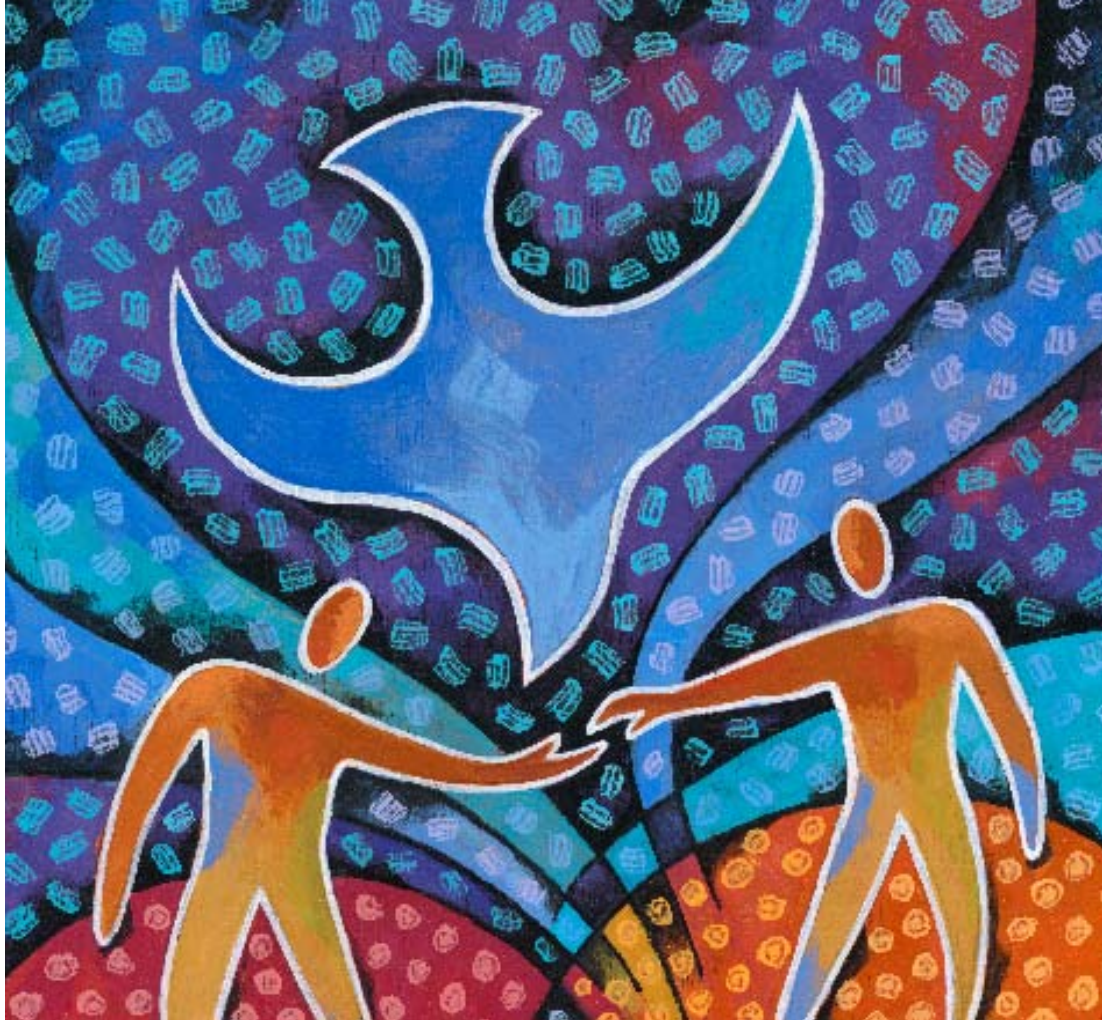
Reconciling in Christ Communities

Reconciling in Christ (RIC) is a program for *communities* (congregations, synods, colleges, seminaries, and other organizations) answering the call of Christ to spread the news of God's redeeming grace through authentic welcome. Founded in 1983, the RIC program of LC/NA recognizes Lutheran communities that affirm God's welcome to all persons regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. It supports congregations in study and discernment leading to the adoption of a public statement of welcome and affirmation and identifies these congregations on its RIC roster.

The Affirmation of Welcome is central to the RIC program. It is simple yet powerful in its witness. Any Lutheran community that adopts a statement which includes the naming of LGBT people as welcome to full participation is eligible to be designated as Reconciling in Christ after review by Lutherans Concerned.

Visit www.lcna.org/ric for a current listing of RIC communities and more information on the RIC program.

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