



The Reconciling in Christ Team is a group of members (Suzanne Terry, Celene Welch, Nathan Graham, Chris Clarkson, and Pastor John Bell) tasked by the Congregation Council to explore whether it is time for Christ The Servant to be formally recognized as a 'Reconciling in Christ' (RIC) church. An RIC church is one that proclaims itself to be welcoming and inclusive to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQIA+ people).

Knowing You're Welcome

By Nathan Graham

When I came out as gay, my former church family did not react well. The pastor advised my parents to cut me off and tried to get me fired from a babysitting job with a young family in the church. According to my dad, others in the congregation were praying for disaster to strike so that I might be brought “back into the fold.” Later, an elder let me know that while I was still welcome at social events, I could no longer worship with them unless I repented of my “lifestyle.”

Of course, by that time, I was long gone. I hadn't set foot in the church where I'd grown up since my parents, long-time members, found out that I had come to terms with and accepted my sexuality.

Instead, I consulted a web page of gay-affirming churches in the area, culled from databases like Reconciling Works's for Lutheran churches. At the time, there were at most five or six listed congregations in Denton, and Christ the Servant was not one of them. I started making the rounds, hoping to find a new spiritual home.

At that time, a friend from Arkansas sent me a link to a slideshow and audio interview from a New York Times series about LGBTQ+ youth. In an entry titled “Gaining Confidence from God,” a teen girl spoke about the acceptance and strength she'd found within her own Lutheran family and church. My friend was just hoping to encourage me by sharing this story. They hadn't noticed that the church was located here in Denton, where I'd lived all my life.

That's how I came to CTS in early 2013. When I sat down in an empty pew and glanced at the worship folder, my heart warmed to see the welcome statement on the back. Then, while preaching on Jesus's conflict with religious leaders at the temple during Holy Week, Pastor Bell mentioned the irony of Jesus not being accepted in the places he most belonged. As he spoke about religious bullying, I started to cry, because I knew exactly what he was talking about. It was as if the sermon was in direct response to my situation.

“What a coincidence!” you might say, or even, “What an act of God!” Both true, but as time has gone on, I've come to believe that it should not have taken such an incredible coincidence or act of God for me to know I'd be welcome. It shouldn't have taken an article from The New York Times. Yes, I could have found the welcome statement on the website, but how would I have known to look at this church to begin with? Even after I'd been attending two months, I visited Pastor Bell during office hours to make sure that I would be just as welcome in church if I began showing up with a boyfriend. I knew from experience how many religious welcomes are conditional, and that people who are tolerant of queerness in theory do not always remain so when it becomes visible.

Christ the Servant's welcome has not been conditional, at least not for me. When I officially joined in 2016, so many of you told me how glad you were to have me here, and how surprised you were that I wasn't a member already. It made me think of all the other LGBTQ+ people and allies out there who are looking for an inclusive place of worship but are not aware that we might be exactly what they're looking for. If we choose to become a Reconciling in Christ community, explicitly welcoming and affirming queer people and relationships, more might find the spiritual home they're seeking. And believe me, our lives and our ministry would be the better for it.