

Reconciling in Christ (RIC) Reflection by Pam Shellberg

(from 8/5/2020 Bethelite)



– Pam Shellberg

In 2009 I moved to Bangor, Maine, to teach at a UCC seminary there. Not knowing a soul, I connected right away with the only ELCA church in town (there are only 17 ELCA churches in all of Maine!). They were just beginning the very same RIC process in which Bethel is now engaged. Although quite small in size, my Bangor church had a spirit similar to Bethel's with respect to the RIC process. People were caring, generous, open-minded, and open-hearted. Most people felt like we were already welcoming and good on LGBTQIA+ issues, so why did we need to go through the process? Here is what that community came to understand.

First, a community can be as warm as can be, but if an LGBTQIA+ person doesn't ever walk through the door, they won't experience your welcome spirit. It's left completely to chance. And honestly, it's a chance not many LGBTQIA+ people will take because so many have found themselves not only unwelcome in the church, but often also berated and belittled there. The RIC designation, along with its rainbow heart logo, are visible signs to LGBTQIA+ people that they can - and should! - take a chance on walking through Bethel's doors, that (as we well know) the chances are very good that they will receive a genuinely warm welcome.

But, more importantly, what will be the deepest character of the welcome we'll extend? On its own, being welcoming in the name of Jesus the Christ who welcomed all is really important. But a spirit of warmth and welcome alone moves in just one direction; there is an "us" welcoming "them," and the direction of support and acceptance goes in just that direction - from "us" to "them." It can all take on the air of charity, resulting in a good feeling about what has been done for the "other." Can we instead imagine the the direction of the blessing also coming from "them" to "us"? This is what Jesus did every time he accepted an invitation to a meal; he gave a gift to the host by being a guest, graciously receiving the host's hospitality. The RIC process can help us imagine this.

Even more, can we imagine that no one can be all God intends them to be without receiving the blessings of the experience, teachings, and wisdom of LGBTQIA+ people? This is also the nature and character of a true welcome. We are not only

hospitable. We also acknowledge the deep need for one's own life to be examined through LGBTQIA+ lenses. We humbly acknowledge that one's own heart will only be as full, deep, and alive as God longs for it to be - and then we do the spiritual work of introspection with compassionate curiosity, vulnerability, and a genuine desire to continue to grow into God's purposes. The RIC process can help us imagine this.

-Pam Shellberg Director of Lifelong Faith Formation and RIC Steering Team Member