

Reconciling in Christ (RIC) Reflection

Tom Solheim Shares His Story (from 10/7/2020 Bethelite)



– Tom Solheim, RIC Steering Committee Member

My connection with Bethel started with a warm welcome almost 40 years ago, and that time is still fresh in my mind. It came from people in my pew, the presiding minister at the end of the service, the lead pastor in a 1:1 meeting, and from co-participants in church activities. It does not seem like long ago. Since then my extended family has also been welcomed and drawn into children's programs, adult education, music, Horizons, and participation on church administrative and leadership activities. We have also formed many personal relationships with Bethel people encountered in those activities. As a member of Bethel's Reconciling in Christ Steering Committee I now have the opportunity to extend the welcome we have all received in a special way. I have close connections to LGBTQIA people, both those who have deep ongoing connections to Bethel and others who have been touched by Bethel but have not developed a sustained relationship to Bethel, so this opportunity is important to me.

Bethel's resources devoted to outreach and community activities attracted me in the 80s. The congregation was a "Citywide church with a worldwide mission." This expansive and open view drew me into the Bethel Horizons ministry to campers from everywhere, and later into the Latino ministry. The openness was also tangible in a book study group where people worked hard to broaden their understanding of new ideas and strangers. This outward focus might be in Bethel's DNA, since it was formed by and for newcomer immigrants who were perhaps feeling like outsiders.

The Bethel Bible Series taught me about being "blessed to be a blessing", from the story of Abraham. Genesis 12:1-3:

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

This seems like another way of describing the vision of Bethel for outreach.

Even more recently, this idea has been articulated as “Jesus loves you. Walk with him.” In all of these words and themes Bethel has continuously invited and welcomed me to come, and be not just an observer, but a participant in a welcoming and outreaching ministry.

Now we are on our walk to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation. As the Bethel Joint Council resolved, “Called by God in our journey of faith to carry out Jesus’ ministry of inclusivity, the Bethel congregation begins a series of educational and programmatic opportunities so that we become a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregation. An RIC congregation articulates – intentionally, specifically and publicly – full embrace of persons of all sexual orientation, gender identities and gender expressions.” This seems like a new initiative, but it also seems like the logical extension of something that has been happening at Bethel for a very long time.

As I was welcomed to be a participant in this work, we now cultivate a new, energetic welcoming for others, especially the LGBTQIA community. The people who will be attracted, like us, will not want to be observers, but will want to be active participants in the outreach that we are doing now and will continue to be doing, in new ways in the future. If our re-energized spirit of welcoming is to be effective, we must show our prospective new members how they can be active participants in extending the same outreach to others from all communities. Please join us in this RIC initiative. Pick up on the educational opportunities and follow the news about the process. Most of all, open yourself personally to being a part of this welcoming culture.

Tom Solheim
RIC Steering Committee Member