CIRCLES OF INQUIRY: ANNUAL GATHERING, 2014

RADICAL INCLUSIVENESS: GA RESOLUTION 1327: “BECOMING A PEOPLE OF GRACE AND WELCOME TO ALL”

The resolution passed at GA 2013 resolving that: The CC (DOC) recognize itself as striving to become a people of grace and welcome to all God’s children though differing in race, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, ethnicity, marital status, physical or mental disability, political stance or theological perspective; and that [we] affirm the faith, baptism, and spiritual gifts of all Christians regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and that neither is grounds for exclusion from fellowship or service within the church, but we celebrate that all are part of God’s good creation; and finally that all expressions of the CC (DOC), as a people of grace and welcome, acknowledge their support for the welcome and hospitality to all.

SESSION ONE “STORY” QUESTIONS:

1) Share a personal story, experience or feeling (or a story of a person you know) of welcome and grace, or rejection and exclusion, in the church.

2) What values have shaped your thinking and feeling around this issue?

3) What do you celebrate, or grieve, as you consider what it will mean to practice being a church that welcomes all to the full life of church service, regardless of differences in culture, perspectives, sexual orientation or gender identity?

SESSION TWO “PERSPECTIVE” QUESTIONS:

1) As a community of faith, what are the justice, equality and relationship values and concerns we might wrestle with as we practice being a fully welcoming and inclusive body?

2) What might be the benefits or barriers for a community of faith to engage in conversations around these values and concerns?

SESSION THREE COLLECTIVE GROUP HARVEST

1) What did you hear or say that surprised you?
2) How are you feeling as a result of these conversations in this moment?
3) What would you like to hear more about?
4) Suggestions from the group about how the regional body might move forward with continuing the conversation and forming additional circles? What would you like to see happen next?
5) What word(s) of compassion, support or grace would you offer about this issue?
Harvest for Radical Inclusiveness Track at Annual Gathering, May, 2014
Larry Love, Track Host

Summary:
There is a lot of pain and grief around the whole issue of exclusion, especially for LGBTQ persons. Much of that pain has come from repeated experiences of rejection or the fear of rejection which might come if a person is open about who they are. Rejection is a powerful shaper of life in a negative way. There is, however, great power in a rejected person coming to acceptance of him or herself as a beloved child of God. Accepting oneself and even celebrating oneself is life-giving. Opportunities for healing are desperately needed.

Some, however, who see the pain caused by rejection and exclusion, are challenged by that exclusion to work for justice and inclusion. Change does happen when people begin acting in a just, inclusion way, and begin speaking up on behalf of persons who have been rejected and pushed to the margins. There is great power in living a welcoming life.

The church needs to step up and really listen to the Good News Jesus proclaimed. Jesus’ words and actions were inclusive of a whole range of persons his culture and religion said should be rejected. The church needs to reclaim that story. When it does it will not only be good for folk who get included, but it will be deeply enriching for the church. The church must not let the exclusive culture around us set the tone for our life and ministry, but must reclaim the way of Jesus and reclaim the Bible’s witness to the welcoming and gracious way of God, and to do so by creating a sacred space where persons are safe to be themselves. The church must diligently guard that space. Even as we welcome those who may struggle with an inclusive stance, we must never let them violate that safe, sacred space we have created.

This will require hard work on the church’s part as we seek to develop open and honest, respectful and challenging conversations around the issues of inclusion and welcome. It will not be an easy process as we seek to give people the time to wrestle with new ideas, but at the same time not delay in extending justice and welcome to persons who have waited too long to be included.
Though the way ahead is daunting and requires hard work, the benefits will be well worth the effort.

Here are the major points that came out of the Conversation on Radical Inclusiveness (note, the size of the font indicates how prevalent this idea was in the conversation):

- **Rejection is a powerful shaper of life.** When asked to share a story about acceptance or rejection, most shared a story of rejection. The stories were remembered vividly. One rejected from ministry for being female--when we reject someone, we lose her/his gifts. A gay church camp counselor hid his sexual orientation for fear of rejection by campers--when not welcome, a person feels like a non-entity.

- **Lot of pain.** Pain of:
  1. a gay ordained minister who struggles to find church to pastor.
  2. a brutal experience of “coming out” and a family member reacting in a hurtful manner.
  3. rumors regarding a person’s sexual orientation.
  4. entering a heterosexual marriage in an attempt to be “normal” even though it is not who they truly are as a gay or lesbian person.
  5. hiding one’s true self.
  6. not being accepted even though sexual orientation or sexual identity just is, a given normal part of life.,
  7. a gay man trying to be an active father in his children’s lives being questioned as to the “safety” of him volunteering to do childcare at church after he came out.
  8. a gay man telling his gay friends he’s a Christian and being turned aside because of “preaching negativity” they have heard from too many Christians.
  9. of being “held down” for so long and people thinking “I’m sorry” is enough. Some deeper healing is needed.
  10. straight folks not realizing the hurt for the LGBTQ community.
  11. despair, hopelessness. “Can the issue ever be resolved—can the issue be ‘done’? Probably not.”
  12. straight folk concerned about how wrestling with GLBTQ issues affects them rather than hearing the hurt of the gay community.
  13. people seeing GLBTQ as a disability instead normal part of some people’s humanity.
  14. Isolation, people oblivious to another’s experience of rejection. It is important to realize the depth of the pain. The level of pain expressed in the conversations was surprising. **The prevalence of pain around exclusion is seen in the fact that when asked what they celebrate or grieve, one group responded with 19 things they grieve and only one thing was named that they celebrated.**

- **A lot of grief.** Much more grief expressed than celebration.
1. Grieve for those who will not accept full inclusion, who won’t accept being open and affirming
2. Grieve those who can’t handle this much diversity
3. Grieve that some find a safety in excluding others, insulating their lives from people who are different.
4. Grieve those who exclude themselves because they require the church to be a certain way, and if a church body isn’t the way they want it to be, they withdraw…and thus remove themselves from the gifts that church community might bring to them, and the gifts they might bring to it. Miss so much opportunity for growth.
5. Grieve that one participant took 25 years of wrestling to come to open and affirming stand. Grieve the energy and time that took.
6. Grieve that inclusiveness isn’t more natural and has to be called “radical,” because it is so uncommon.
7. Grieve for those who are afraid they won’t be accepted, so they keep their distance or hide who they really are. Grieve they can’t act authentically.
8. Grieve the deep hurt that’s done when people exclude in the name of God. Grieve the pain caused by attempts to be loving when one says, “love the sinner not the sin.”
9. Grieve lip service to change
10. Grieve for youth: 1) youth groups who hate, 2) lack of programs for youth to prepare them for life so great energy doesn’t need to be expended later to repair the damage.
11. Celebrate and grieve because as one said, “It’s easier to talk about LGBT than race.” Celebrate that LGBTQ conversations are becoming easier, but grieve that race conversations are so difficult.

- **There is however a great serendipity in acceptance of self,** celebrating who a person truly is.

- **Seeing pain can spur to action.** Seeing/hearing people rejected can lead one to choose to act more welcoming. One person stated that hearing a priest publicly condemn LGBTQ members led that one to become a minister to teach what a church should be—a welcoming community of faith for all.

- **Change does happen.**
  1. At least three people told of growing up in a culture/church that was more closed with no appreciation of diversity, but having experiences that opened their eyes to something new—a more open and accepting approach.
  2. Celebrate the wonder of “marriage” between gays at this time (that it is a possibility in a growing number of states) and celebrate the growing number of long-term gay/lesbian relationships.
  3. Celebrate and grieve because as one said, “It’s easier to talk about LGBT than race.” Celebrate that LGBTQ conversations are becoming easier, but grieve that race conversations are so difficult.

- **There is great power in living inclusivity,** great power in having a significant person in one’s life who lived acceptance and welcome
• **We need to discover the “real gospel.”** What God, Jesus, Spirit are about is welcome, reconciliation, true community, real justice that brings people together.

  1. Jesus was inclusive, welcomed marginalized, but many religious (like Pharisees) are quick to reject.
  2. Good biblical interpretation is essential to prevent the Bible from being used unjustly to condemn or even demonize LGBTQ folk, and to counter the “biblical” interpretations that dominate in so much of church culture.

• **Use common sense.** If sexual orientation is a given (genetic) then acceptance is logical.

• **The church and individual Christians must act and speak up in the face of exclusion. Must live out Jesus values.**

  1. Stay vigilant watching for rejection based on sexuality or race. Don’t let it go unnamed.
  2. Love all, serve all
  3. Value holding firm to a community of faith, equality, justice, the grace of God, humility, understanding, acceptance, respect, acknowledging “You are a beloved child of God,” recognizing the dignity of others.
  4. Importance of asserting the welcome of every person…and giving people the benefit of the doubt without forming preconceived notions of them.
  5. Celebrate that MCC (Metropolitan Community Church) exists as a faith community which welcomes and speaks up.
  6. The church needs to proclaim that all persons have value, everybody deserves to be picked on the team, and that God does not make junk, everyone is valued by God, everyone is invited, loved.

• **Church needs to act for the benefit of others and for its own good.**

  1. “The church has been complacent, sitting on the sidelines while people are hurt.”
  2. Celebrate that though there has been so much pain out of exclusion, there will be a lot of joy in churches that can welcome inclusiveness

• **Benefits of inclusiveness for the church:**

  1. Inclusiveness means we are being what God intends church to be—Sacred Space: the church is a place of love, equality, joy, peace, trust and hope
  2. Focus on the Lord’s Supper. Open Communion: Emphasis on Communion; encourages interaction, inclusivity, growing as family; everyone is welcome at the
Table of Grace

3. Family: Comes in all flavors, varieties, & sizes including the church family itself.
4. Church can more directly talk about sex issues and effectively jump into liberation
5. People who invite others in, learn as much as those who have been invited in.
6. Do practical things: Gender neutral bathrooms make a statement to young kids. You don’t have to choose which box you want to be in.
7. Growth in church; fairness; catalyst for change; preach without words
8. This gives the church the opportunity to be “A movement for wholeness in a fragmented world”
9. Being different can open doors or be terrifying

- **Radical Inclusiveness, being “Open and Affirming” is not just about welcoming GLBTQ persons, but a whole range of persons.**
  1. The challenge to be inclusive does not default to LGBTQ issues. Being “Open and Affirming” means openness to many different people and issues. Racism is still an issue. Christ brought radical inclusiveness. Invited all kinds of groups—how far can we push ourselves for inclusiveness—including a gang member in your church is a challenge.

- **Change is difficult for many people**

- **Too often society sets the tone and the church follows instead of being at the forefront living the ways of God shown in Jesus.**
  1. Society’s prejudices and values infiltrate the church making it hard for us to live the Bible’s inclusive values and theology. Think society’s values/prejudices are biblical when they often are not.
  2. What news media you watch or hear will affect your attitude on justice.
  3. Foster interaction between the community of faith and workplace and family/relationships. Let our community of faith inclusiveness and stances be known in the workplace and in our family and friend relationships.

- **Those in the dominant culture need some self-examination.** Important to ask, “Am I in the privileged class?”

- **Always include the LGBTQ voice.** Need “More LGBTQ voices in conversation.”

- **Creating a sacred space...and carefully preserve it. We must create a safe place for LGBTQ and other persons who are often excluded, and never let anyone who disagrees undermine that safe place.**
  Make sure we stand our ground for inclusiveness, even as we hear the voices of those who struggle with inclusiveness. Make sure we don’t let the opponents of inclusion “violate the sacred space of the Church of Love.” Make sure that our listening to the voices of those who struggle with inclusiveness doesn’t look like we are considering their point of view. We don’t want those who have been excluded to think we are considering excluding them again. Make sure we hold the sacred space of inclusion
even as we continue to engage in conversation with those who exclude.

- **It’s important to do the hard work necessary for true conversations and to put ourselves in learning situations that can transform us.**
  1. Entails creating social connections, getting to know real people who are members of the group we tend to exclude. Having real conversations with them breaks down the barriers. Requires intentional work.
  2. Can’t just declare we are open and affirming; must live it.
  3. Entails including those who don’t want inclusiveness—a big challenge.
  4. Sociologist see extreme diversity and big diversity problems in our culture.
  5. When mixing cultures, you can easily put your foot in your mouth. Equality is understood and implemented differently in different cultures.
  6. Each culture has its own inclusiveness issues. Some churches are struggling to include women. Sometimes change comes slow—20+ years.

- **Creating a respectful approach to these conversations is essential**
  1. People tend to react at a gut level to things instead of listening and carefully thinking issues through.
  2. Must avoid an adversarial approach and look for listening and collaborative tools.

- **Be willing to struggle without getting angry at the people whose presence and voice (their willingness to speak up) cause some discomfort.**
  1. People think LGBTQ, persons with disabilities, persons of different ethnic backgrounds, etc. are selfish when they come into a church and make people uncomfortable by their presence or by sharing their thoughts.
  2. Can you have a place of comfort and radical inclusiveness at the same time?

- **Gay/Lesbian marriage is important. There is no real “Open and Affirming” without it.**

- **Working on inclusiveness will reap benefits down the road even if we don’t see it arrive as fully as we might like in our lifetimes.**
  1. Working on challenging issues will have benefits for generations
  2. Inclusive deeds will be appreciated many years later.
  3. Tiny steps are important
4. We are “A Journey Church” rather than a solution church or easy answer church.
5. Important to remain hopeful in spite of the slowness of the journey.

- **Tension between 1) taking the time to listen and educate and bring people along toward greater (or radical) inclusiveness and 2) the need to do justice for GLBTQ persons who have waited a very long time to be included.**
  1. Not moving fast enough, but the process takes time/understanding…step by step.
  2. Taking a stance and then dealing with the repercussions
  3. Overcoming undercurrents/bias is part of the process and takes time
  4. Internal feelings need to be changed…and that sometimes takes time
  5. Issues cause division; people leave. (How do we hold a prophetic and justice oriented faith stance in creative tension with our desire for Christian unity?)

- **Problem of misinformation regarding LGBTQ folk.**
  1. Negative stereotypes about LGBTQ folk are ingrained in culture and persons and are terribly damaging, such as when being LGBTQ is equated with being a pedophile.

- **There is a need to clarify language and use language carefully**
  1. Instead of “same sex” marriage, maybe use “same gender” marriage
  2. Lose labels—have a marriage NOT a “gay” marriage. Let marriage be marriage.
  3. Are “Open and Affirming”; “Open and Accepting” and “Open and Welcoming” the same?
  4. There’s a need to define “Open and Affirming.”
  5. Grieve language that can lead to exclusiveness and create “others” and “them.”
  6. Using politically correct language is not always the solution. Politically correct does not equal welcoming and understanding.
  7. Want labels to go away, but want people to claim who they are. Let people name who they are, but also want to lose the need to label people.

- **Barriers or Challenges**
  1. Open & Affirming is Whole Congregation, not every single person. Even as we hold that sacred space of welcome for those excluded, we welcome those who are still wrestling with the idea of “all are welcome.”
  2. We are a culture of fear.
  3. An open and affirming church may very well be ostracized by other faith communities in town.
  4. The struggle to share or start a conversation without being shut down in the process
Persons’ responses to the Circles of Peace Process itself:

- Supportive
- Felt very good—connecting w/ others and getting to know them
- Deeper connections than usual; internal life
- Feel seen/connected; have a safe place
- Vulnerable…willingly vulnerable; safe
- Encouraged and motivated
- Comfortable in sharing feelings
- Great to hear other’s journey
- Felt presence of God
- Felt wonderful to be in a group who was also on a spiritual journey
- Touching
- Less ideological conversation
- Agitated, Scared, Risky
- Realize others have much in common
- Frustrating
- Validated
- Better than I expected to
- Energized
- Encouraged in the face of fear
- Incomplete (no answers)
- Turned a corner; darkness-to-energy
- Courageous conversation
- Possibility in “yes, and”
- Relieved
- Desire to carry conversations forward, but difficult
- Feeling deeper heart-level connection x 4
- Access to more info
- Thanks justice commission for opportunity
- Appreciated chance to go deeper
- Imagining the beloved community
- Intimacy—people feel listened to (no cross talk)
- Not alone in your longing
- Hearing you are heard…seen
- It’s a journey
- OK to risk
- God keeps showing up
- Don’t fear the alley