

Essay Title: Becoming a Welcoming Congregation

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RECENTLY, I PRESENTED A SMALLER CONGREGATION with the certificate for becoming a Welcoming Congregation. This congregation was, and is, remarkable in many ways. This was the first time I could remember preaching where there were no out bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people in the pews that Sunday—nor any who had endeared themselves to the congregation or who had agitated them through the Welcoming Congregation process. This was a group of straight people who had worked on homophobia because it was the right thing to do.

Secondly, this congregation not only wanted its certificate but wanted to know what to do next. In the several months since, they've distributed information to libraries and counseling centers and are having continued conversations about what else they can do.

This congregation has experienced a conversion. A conversion that revolves around moving from a lack of faith to religious belief.

Let me paint a picture.

A lesbian hears inclusive language in the worship services at her congregation sometimes, but not always. She has been asked if she has a husband, has never seen two people of the same gender hold hands at any church function, and sees only one person who is not straight—a gay man—in leadership. He leads the choir and everyone knows he's gay and he's funny, and he knows a lot about music.

The congregation has a non-discrimination clause, teaches *Our Whole Lives* to the children, and has had a neighboring gay minister come to preach. They'll gladly vote on any resolution that comes their way, expressing indignation at blatant homophobia in the community.

But when this woman suggests that the congregation might undertake the UUA's Welcoming Congregation process, she meets resistance. She is told that the congregation is welcoming. And that's true when you compare it to the rest of the world. However, without words, her suspicions are confirmed. She does not feel good about the conversation.

What she has just experienced is a lack of faith. In many ways, I believe this is the most common form of oppression that bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people face in our movement. When she brings it up, she gets told the oppression is not there.

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The lesbian knows homophobia and heterosexism so well—so well that it becomes instinctive and thus beyond words. She assumes that the straight folks have some reference point that will allow them to understand. The straight folks know privilege so well and assume this person, who looks like them, must have the same privileges too. They think she must be whining.

The experience of the lesbian, probably without her knowing it, has been invalidated by the straight people. They have trusted their experiences over hers and have gotten defensive about it. She gets defensive back and suffers from what feels like a lack of faith.

She gets quiet—perhaps after being angry—but she gets quiet. The silence is interpreted as acquiescence. The silence is the oppression she knows so well. She may be invited to do other things—to teach RE, serve on a committee, do a reading during the service. Anything but force the issue onward.

In this case, conversion will happen when people are able to step outside of themselves and let her experience be hers and, most importantly, let it be real. A lack of faith becomes belief—belief that the human in front of you is sharing her story. Listening to her and honoring her experience allows her humanity. In that moment, both the straight people and the lesbian turn from a lack of faith and toward religious belief.

The converted welcome these conversations because they know how to listen. They know that not everyone sees the world as they do. The converted learn from these experiences, being grateful for seeing the world in a different way.

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