

Welcoming vs. Affirming

When congregations or individuals start the journey of becoming affirming, many of them are already open to the idea of having LGBTQ+ people in their church. They often get confused and ask the question “We are already welcoming, so why become affirming?” This is a great question to ask! So what IS the difference between being “welcoming” and “affirming”? First, let's take a look at how LGBTQ+ people see churches that are “welcoming but not affirming.” We often see these spaces as a trap. When we see and hear the phrase “welcoming” it tells us that we are allowed to come to church and sit in the pews but not have any meaningful participation in the life of the church. If we do happen to attend, people might not be outwardly mean to us (although that does happen), some people may still be praying for us to be healed from our queerness. “Welcoming but not affirming” leaves room for people to tell us that our “lifestyles” are contrary to the will of God. These messages are extremely harmful to all LGBTQ+ people who hear it. Being “welcoming” suggests that those on the inside have the power to choose who to accept on the outside. This makes it sound like an act of charity to welcome those who are different or marginalized. Every church is “welcoming” to some degree, the problem lies with the conditions that follow.

Some congregations do their best to be welcoming, but being affirming goes deeper and is public, intentional, and explicit, in their commitment to diversity and inclusion. Being affirming means that congregations use symbols and signs (such as rainbows) which are both outside and inside the church building, in worship, and all other facets of church life. The broader community should also know what it stands for. An Affirming congregation also has to be deliberate in their process of study, education and dialogue with members of their faith community, to ensure that the history of oppression and discrimination by the Church is both understood and acknowledged, and that continued growth, education, and celebration are part of its ministry. This intentional study is the biggest difference between being “welcoming” and “affirming.” Lastly, people who are affirming should explicitly indicate in their Mission and Vision statements – and everywhere else! – that the LGBTQ+ community is a part of and embraced in all facets of church life! Being affirming requires churches to be explicit about their inclusion because so many Christians have been so explicit about their exclusion.

The difference between being “welcoming” and “affirming” is all about whether or not one can regard LGBTQ+ people as fully human or not. The difference is between whether or not those who merely “welcome” can go so far as to acknowledge that we are children of God created equal to them, capable of living into our Christian faith as an LGBTQ+ person. Many churches that say they love or welcome everyone are not at all inclusive or accepting of people of ALL sexual orientations and gender identities. People may have very different understandings

of what “all” or “everyone” really includes. Being affirming acknowledges that God’s love is wider and more inclusive than they can imagine, let alone live out, and they commit themselves to sharing that news with others who may have heard a quite different message about what it means to be a church. Because voices of condemnation, exclusion, and hatred are loud and persistent within the church and in society, affirming congregations and individuals make a public statement about who they are and what they believe. They understand that while it may be risky and challenging to “come out” as an Affirming place, it is often far less dangerous than it is for LGBTQ+ people themselves.

If I were invited to join a church that is “welcoming but not affirming” I simply could not worship alongside people who can only “welcome” me and not affirm my full personhood. Nor could I be alongside those who can not truly affirm my love for my partner or affirm the reality of my future fatherhood. If someone truly believes I have no access to heaven, or that my partner and potential future children are not fully worthy of the sacraments of the church. I would never, or could never, consider subjecting myself or my family to that level of degradation. Although having differences of opinion is normal and dialogue is encouraged, for LGBTQ+ who are in a need of a faith community, we simply can not have a difference of opinion about our full humanity before God. We can not simply have a difference of opinion about whether or not our marriages or love is real. These are not about simple differences of opinion, these are not theoretical issues for us, this is our very lives we are talking about. So to answer the long-winded question “What’s the difference between welcoming and affirming?” The answer is **Equality**.

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