Sierra Pacific Synod
committed to being re-formed

May 2018, Number 13

Church Together

Faith, Chico: A Welcoming Congregation

Faith Lutheran Church was formed in Chico in 1950 because some Lutheran Christians yearned for a more welcoming witness to their community. The town's only Lutheran congregation at the time had many barriers (lodge membership, for instance) to keep people away from participation in Holy Communion and the life of the congregation. When the former Evangelical Lutheran Church offered to help these Christ-followers form a new church, a core group seized the opportunity. A spirit of generous welcome has been in the church's DNA ever since.

So in the early 1990s when a retired gay couple applied to be the church's housekeepers, the congregation said, "Welcome! The job is yours!" Years later, when the city's plans for emergency winter shelter for homeless persons suddenly fell through, the congregation (along with several others) said to homeless guests, "Welcome! Our house is your house!" Still later, when the local meals ministry itself became homeless due to a fire, the congregation said, "Welcome! We offer our fancy new kitchen and parish hall and will help you serve breakfast to people In need every Saturday." And over many years, when college students came to Faith bringing more questions than money, but lots of energy for learning and serving, the congregation said, "Welcome! We will explore and grow with you!"

It is not a surprise, then, that in the first years of this century more and more LGBTQ+ people found

welcome at Faith, becoming members and leaders in the church. On Sept. 14, 2014, after a time of discernment that included information meetings, videos, conversations and prayer, the congregation voted (91% yes) to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation, and take a very public posture of welcome to LGBTQ+ persons. The aftermath has been encouraging. Many young adults and young families, also yearning for a clearly welcoming expression of Christian faith and discipleship, have become part of the congregation. Several LGBTQ+ people have also found welcome at Faith. One lesbian woman said, "I could never trust I'd be welcome at any church, but I can now."

Chico's Stonewall Alliance, the community's largest LGBTQ+ advocacy group, asked if Faith Church could be the site of last year's Trans Remembrance Day observance on Nov. 20. The congregation said, "Welcome!" For several days before and after 11/20 the church lawn (on one of Chico's busiest streets) served as home for over 2,300 small, white flags, each commemorating a transgender person killed in the U.S. since 2008 by others or by their own hand. In the evening of Nov. 20 a Memorial Service was held in Faith's parish hall, honoring by name and some stories the transgender U.S. citizens (about 300) killed in the last year due to a tragic lack of welcome.

On Dec. 1, 2017, also in partnership with the Stonewall Alliance and other congregations and groups, Faith Church was the site of the local service observing World AIDS Day. Pr. Ben Colahan, who shows up at Interfaith Council meetings and gets to know and be known by other church and community leaders, was asked to M.C. the event. Some city officials attended, and the speaker was Pr. Kathryn Gulbranson, who shared her own story of welcoming love; her beloved brother, some years ago, died of AIDS. Pr. Kathryn is Assistant to the Bishop in this Sierra Pacific Synod, and one of those college students welcomed at Faith Lutheran many years ago.

What is your congregation's "nativity story?" Is it still celebrated, still part of your church DNA? How might you lift up and celebrate that story, that it might be a source of guidance and encouragement now?

Do you have a story that you would like to share? Send any Church Together story requests to mic@spselca.org.

STAY CONNECTED: