Church Together

RECONCILING MINISTRY

God...reconciled us to Godself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation... So we are ambassadors for Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:18-20)

It often happens that one person’s life experience and vision initiates a ministry that ultimately involves many others in the congregation, and is embraced by the whole congregation. This is such a story.

Chavaleh (pronounced HAH-vuh-leh) Forgey, is a 17 year member of Christ Lutheran Church (CLC), Visalia, and now a distance learning student at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. Her recent Christian Public Leader class required students to spend 5 hours per week at their church developing a new ministry. Over the years Chavaleh has been friend and co-worker with several LGBTQ+ people, many of whom have been deeply hurt by Christians and churches. Some of those live in or near Visalia. After a time of prayer it became clear what she wanted and needed to do: a reconciliation ministry. With encouragement from Pr. Brian Malison, Chavaleh went to work.

Chavaleh’s plan was to gather LGBTQ+ people and CLC hosts together for four sessions (originally one per week) of conversation and healing. Her first step was to enlist the help of a “community ally;” she invited a friend, Seth, a leader in the local LGBTQ+ community who years ago had left the church, to join her from the beginning to plan the program. Seth also helped prepare the CLC hosts, including inviting them to ask him any questions they had about LGBTQ+ people and life.

Over four weeks the CLC hosts and LGBTQ+ guests met in the “Youth House,” purposefully not in the church itself. Each session followed the same basic pattern.

1. Reading of CLC’s Welcome Statement.
2. Together reciting the group Covenant
   - All agree to confidentiality
   - All agree to a culture of welcome
   - All agree to be non-defensive and non-offensive
3. Brief presentation by Chavaleh, affirming that CLC, the Sierra Pacific Synod, and the ELCA value LGBTQ+ people as unique and beloved children of God, and value their participation in all levels of leadership. She also mentions that our basic Lutheran view of sin is not about sexual purity, but about what harms others. In week 4 only this becomes a longer presentation on Lutheran theology of sin and grace, which many guests find new and amazing! A display of books is offered to clarify that these assertions are not just Chavaleh’s belief, but the agreed stance of our church.

4. Meal
   - Including options for those with dietary restrictions
   - Abundant food! (LGBTQ+ persons in Visalia are often food insecure, so enough is prepared so leftovers can be sent home with guests.)

5. Art project (music, visual) to stimulate conversation and build trust
   - In week #3 (the KEY session), with the community ally/partner leading, LGBTQ+ guests are invited to share their “church” story. Lots of Kleenex is provided. CLC hosts do not try to “fix,” but simply say, “I’m sorry.”

6. Dessert

7. Finish (again purposefully, there is no prayer, though the CLC Prayer Team prays for Reconciling Ministry the entire four weeks AND during the time of each session.)

I must share some more details. At the first session Chavaleh, on the spur of the moment, chose to present an icebreaker question: What is your favorite ice cream? As each LGBTQ+ guest shared their favorite, one host, unbeknownst to Chavaleh, thoughtfully took notes, making a list. In the key third session, after each guest had shared their painful story of rejection by church and, sometimes, family, after hurt and anger had been expressed with abundant tears, and the hosts had simply said, “I am sorry this happened to you,” each guest was served a surprise bowl of their favorite ice cream! This thoughtful gift on that particular evening was sacramental and powerful. The words of welcome and apology from CLC hosts “took flesh” in those thoughtful bowls of ice cream. Guests were profoundly moved. It wasn’t Chavaleh’s idea, but her vision and initiative had created an opportunity for the Body of Christ to be the Holy Spirit’s instrument of healing.

Though this Reconciling Ministry was initiated for personal healing and not church growth, CLC’s sincere welcome certainly includes the possibility that guests will choose to explore connecting with Christ Lutheran, and several have. CLC has now offered Reconciling Ministry several times in several iterations: 4 weeks, one weekend, even one day. CLC invited the Rev. Teresita Valeriano, Director of Evangelical Mission for our Sierra Pacific Synod, to share some of her story with a group of CLC hosts and LGBTQ+ “veterans” of Reconciling Ministry. Pr. Tita, her spouse Jennifer and their son, have experienced the challenges of being a bi-national queer couple in our denomination that, even 11 years after the decision to ordain LGBTQ+ candidates, continues to learn how to live out our vision of being an inclusive church. The visit centered on affirmation of this bold Reconciling Ministry, affirmation of our Reconciling in Christ synod, and listening to each other’s stories – including the joys, hurts, and challenges of being Christian and queer. It was powerful for the group to hear from and share with Pr. Tita!

For any who are interested, Chavaleh has written up and is willing to share a complete, detailed “recipe” for Reconciling Ministry. Simply contact her at cforgey001@luthersem.edu, or by text message at (559) 305-0308.

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