



First United Methodist Church

Points to Ponder

It's the Same, But It's Different...

It's the same...

This past Sunday, I attended an open and affirming church. I found it online through a news article that described this church as a "haven for the LGBT community." When I clicked on their website, the home page declared that they are welcoming to "persons of all sexual orientation and gender identification." I was always curious to see what a church like this would be like, so I decided to check it out.

To my surprise, the Sunday service was fairly normal. Contrary to what our parents and pastors may have warned us about, there were no rainbow flags being paraded round or sexual orgies taking place at the altar. Instead, this church had an old-fashioned, liturgical worship. Call to Worship. Opening Prayer. Praise. Sermon. Benediction. Very typical Sunday.

There were a couple of things though that surprised me. First was the age of the congregation. For some reason, I thought that the LGBT movement was a millennial thing. However most of the people here were between ages 40-60. I was also surprised that most of the church seemed straight. I thought a church like this would primarily consist of members from the LGBT community. And while I did notice a few same-sex couples holding hands, most of the congregation were husbands and wives.

When it came to the sermon, I admit that I was expecting them to use the Bible to promote a "gay agenda." However, this wasn't the case. The preacher read from the Bible and taught a simple message about Palm Sunday. To be honest, it was a bit shallow and quite boring - but no different than any other mediocre sermon I've heard.

Edited from: <http://www.tom-talks.org/blog/2017/4/9/i-visited-a-lgbt-affirming-church>

But it's not like this...

The church service was exactly how I remembered it as a child. I raised my hands in praise as the worship team sang songs I had heard on the radio every day of my childhood. I swayed and closed my eyes as the feelings of love and community and honor to God filled every part of my body. This was home. Or so I thought.

I am a proud bisexual Christian. So I walked into that Easter Sunday church service with prayer and longing to find a home. I had scoured the website of this church, as I am seeking a new church home, looking for any clues if it was welcoming and affirming. "Welcoming and affirming" is the common language to demonstrate that a church not only recognizes that LGBTQ people deserve respect, but also the affirmation that they are equally loved by God regardless of who they love or how they identify with their gender.

And so I worshipped. I listened intently to the sermon. I prayed. I was welcomed by the congregants beside me during the fellowship time. I can't describe how much I was certain God wanted me in this room. It was palpable.

I smiled as I asked the lovely church lady if she could tell me if the church was welcoming and affirming. She paused. She looked me in the eyes and told me that although all are welcome, it was in the hope that they would leave "that life." She had no idea how painful that would be for me to hear.

Leaving “that life.” Praying the gay away. “Ex-gay” ministries. “Reparative” therapy. “Conversion” therapy. She had used a dog whistle without knowing it. I know exactly what that means. You see, I am a survivor of the dangerous and discredited idea that a therapist or a pastor can change an LGBTQ young person into a straight or cisgender young person. I started to cry.

She grabbed my hands and begged me not to walk away. “I was wrong,” she wept. “Let me have a pastor explain it better.” Again she begged me not to just walk away. The pastor told me, “You should always feel welcome, but I can’t say we are affirming.” I thanked him for the clarity and tried to get out of the church before I started to cry again.

There is a world of difference between toleration and acceptance. The religious equivalent is accepting but not affirming.

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