

What Does Welcome Mean?

Doesn't "All Are Welcome at Our Church" cover all the bases? Unfortunately, no. Those of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+), along with our families and allies, experience any number of spoken or nonverbal signals that communicate conditions for welcome. Added to the existing history of exclusion and violence that exists in the religious community as a whole, this ambiguity can make it very risky for LGBTQIA+ Christians or seekers to visit any church; LGBTQIA+ youth and children of same-sex couples are especially vulnerable.

The good news is that more and more RCA churches have prayerfully and intentionally explored expanding their climate of hospitality toward LGBTQIA+ members and visitors, resulting in votes, changes in bylaws, or public statements. Such steps are cause for celebration! These churches want to make their welcome known in their communities and in the RCA, and Room for All is here to help.

When we say, "All are Welcome at Our Church," we want to ensure that this welcome is extended to all groups who experience discrimination and marginalization. Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), and people with disabilities often experience discrimination and conditional welcome. We desire to welcome ALL God's children.

Ahead of a larger conversation, it's important to think about what becoming a Room for All congregation means. This is true both in terms of what it will mean to people looking for an affirming faith home, but also what commitments your community is working towards making.

This list is neither linear nor a comprehensive checklist. Some suggestions will remind us to notice how we disregard BIPOC individuals and people with disabilities as well. If not all of these items are currently a part of your congregational life, consider them as room to grow.

Committing to being inclusive means doing so on all levels. Not only are LGBTQIA+ people welcome to attend, but they are welcome to be a part of every aspect of congregational life. From pulpit to pew, worship planning to social functions, a Room for All congregation is proud to have them share their gifts and fully participate.

Does your congregation:

- educate your greeters not to use gendered greetings, and provide an opportunity for people to share their pronouns on name tags or in fellowship?
- invite LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC people and people with disabilities to read scripture, serve communion, or serve as pulpit supply?
- have LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC people as leaders, staff, or lay members in roles of authority and influence?
- reflect your values and statement of welcome in your children, youth, and family programming?

- make it clear that same-sex couples, gender diverse couples, and gender-diverse children are encouraged to participate by using inclusive language in communications?
- name and refute claims and accusations that anything is “God’s punishment” for LGBTQIA+ people (i.e. HIV/AIDS, COVID 19, the Pulse nightclub shooting) and similar prejudicial statements directed at BIPOC individuals and people with disabilities?

As much as possible, a Room for All congregation does not assume a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity based on their expression, instead reflecting the language a person uses for themselves when they’ve chosen to share it. Using inclusive language and content in worship, i.e., multiple pronouns for God, communicates this value.

Does your congregation:

- pay attention to the language of hymns, prayers, and liturgies that reinforce binary language (i.e., brothers and sisters or men and women)? Try adding siblings, people, etc.
- consider what messages are communicated implicitly?
- pay attention to who is and isn’t represented?
- consistently communicate in your opening words of welcome or introductions that your faith community seeks to be LGBTQIA+ affirming and antiracist?

Official bylaws and policies of a Room for All congregation include affirmation and non-discrimination, especially as related to positions of leadership and hiring, using language that rings true to your congregation’s values.

Does your congregation:

- remain open to calling an LGBTQIA+ and Black, Brown, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC) leader?
- name sexual and romantic orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in official non-discrimination policies?
- have a protocol for addressing instances of bias, including homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, racism, and ableism within all the spaces, programs, and committees of the church?
- use inclusive language in bylaw sections or policies relating to mission, membership, and programming?

Religious education is provided in a safe environment that encourages participants to develop understanding of people of diverse backgrounds, including race, ability, and class as well as LGBTQIA+ identity.

Does your congregation:

- screen educational materials in advance for instances of bias, and name and refute those instances if the material is used?
- allow people to participate in gendered groups and programming based on how they identify?
- determine in advance that events and spaces where groups from your church travel to are affirming and accessible?
- keep private a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, unless they ask you to do otherwise?
- take sleeping arrangements into consideration and talk to individual people to determine the best solution for them?
- communicate welcome in all spaces with visual cues, such as displaying your Welcoming Statement and Pride flags?
- equip leaders of adult and youth programming with information and resources to support people with mental illness, or to connect them to appropriate support?
- include images of same sex couples, BIPOC individuals, and people with disabilities in social media, publications, and curriculum?

Outside of church walls, a Room for All congregation engages with LGBTQIA+ community groups in their towns, counties, states, and countries. This advertising, outreach, and connection-building includes active support in whatever capacity is available, be that volunteering at events or advocating and speaking out.

Does your congregation:

- directly assist or partner with organizations that provide unhoused people with their basic needs, like clothing, food, and shelter?
- offer your space to host meetings of LGBTQIA+ support groups, for instance, PFLAG?
- take part in community action and protests related to racial justice, disability justice, and LGBTQIA+ justice in the capacity you are able?
- seek partnership with local colleges and universities' LGBTQIA+ groups and programming, or offer information about your congregation and welcome in their resource centers?
- work with local hospitals, nursing homes, and hospices to make affirming spiritual care available?

Congregational and ministerial support is offered to LGBTQIA+ people for services such as marriages, unions, memorials, and baptisms.

Does your congregation:

- allow the celebration of same-sex marriages in your building?
- allow your minister to officiate same-sex marriages outside of church property?

- perform memorial or funeral services for LGBTQIA+ people using their chosen name and pronouns?
- fully embrace the children of LGBTQIA+ individuals as children of the church, celebrating the sacrament of baptism with them?
- welcome transgender and nonbinary individuals to partake in a reaffirmation of their baptismal vows (not a re-baptism) using their chosen name and pronouns?
- advertise your openness to hosting such services within local LGBTQIA+ publications, wedding and marriage resources or through other communication?

Every person, child, and couple who interacts with a Room for All congregation is treated with the same level of respect and expectations as any other.

Does your congregation:

- understand they may not out someone as LGBTQIA+ to other people?
- practice non-confrontational correction when someone uses the wrong pronouns for someone else?
- admit and actively work on any shortcomings in understanding or welcome by seeking education?
- have gender neutral or single stall bathrooms? Do you communicate that others may not police who is using which gendered bathroom?

Year round, a Room for All congregation engages in ongoing dialogue, discusses LGBTQIA+ issues and history, and expresses their affirmation.

Does your congregation:

- post the Room for All logo or other rainbow imagery prominently on websites, newsletters, and bulletins?
- share your Welcoming Statement on your website, including a link to RoomforAll.com?
- encourage leadership to vocally represent their Room for All connection at classis meetings, Synod, and other RCA events and gatherings?
- have standing meetings of the group charged with leadership in this work, expanding to others interested and people in ministry?
- connect and support other Room for All and welcoming congregations from other traditions, as well as those anywhere on their journey to becoming affirming?
- make a meaningful contribution to Room for All to help sustain this important work?

Adapted from the Unitarian Universalist Association's *Guidelines and Action Steps for Welcoming Congregations*