

LGBTQIA2S+ and the Episcopal Church

Everyone is welcome!

Perhaps you feel relieved by this but, more likely, you feel a bit cynical or downright angry. Perhaps in your experience Churches who say things like “you are welcome as you are”, really mean you are welcome to show up like you are but you will be expected to change, or at least remain celibate. Not us! When we say you are welcome, everyone is welcome, we mean everyone in God’s wonderful rainbow of humanity.

That can be hard to believe. Many of you reading this will have been hurt and will be afraid to take the risk on something so important as who you are being disrespected or, worse, openly condemned. We usually get a reaction something along the lines of,

“Really, I didn’t know there was a Church like that.” Well there is, and you are welcome.

This short booklet will go a bit deeper into why we say what we say. It will take a look at how we read the Bible and what we understand God to be doing in its pages. We will also look at how the Bible gets misused to hurt people or to try to make them conform to some imaginary “norm”.

We put our action where our mouths are and you be able to read the historic changes in our rules which have led us to a place of full inclusion. It has been a journey and it took too long to get to where we are. We, as a Church, have to come to terms with this. We repent of our past actions where they have caused unnecessary pain and undertake to dismantle bias and “isms” in our churches and community.

In Shelby, we are outliers. The larger Lutheran Church (ELCA) stands alongside us but individual congregations can choose their stance. The Methodist Church has just undergone a historic split with Churches which are moving towards inclusion and those which are choosing not to moving apart. We are excited that our siblings in Christ are moving towards what we believe is God’s vision for an open and inclusive Christian Church.

If you are still hesitant please reach out. About 50 percent of our active congregation identify as LGBTQIA2S+ of some sort or other and would be happy to talk with you about their experiences.

The Bible

There are a lot of different ways of looking at the Bible. Some people think that God basically dictated every single word and that everything which is says happened exactly like it says. This is literalism.

At the other end of the spectrum are the extremely liberal folk who like the stories in the Bible as giving some good moral and social ideas, like feeding the hungry, but, basically otherwise don’t feel the need to take it to seriously.

The problem with literalism in its purest form is that it simply cannot work. Right at the beginning of the Bible there are two different Creation stories within a few chapters. There are a lot of things throughout the Bible where the same event is reported in different ways and they just cannot all be literally true at once.

The Creation story might be a good place to start with understanding how we might read the Bible.

As we have seen trying to make everything literally true is problematic. We have to dive a bit deeper and ask ourselves what we mean by truth and what the story points us to.

Truth in the Bible is often not about a sequence of events. Ancient historians were not so concerned with getting the timeline right, they were much more concerned with what a thing meant. If you look at things this way it can help to make sense of the first Creation story.

In it God is said to create everything in seven days, you probably know the story, if not you can look it up in Genesis 1, we like a website called oremus.bible.org for reading the Bible as it has the version we use in Church, the New Revised Standard Version.

If we take this literally, well, most of us can't and so we want to push the whole thing to one side. The way we interpret the Bible is called hermeneutics and the hermeneutic of Genesis makes zero sense if we take it literally. We know that there were dinosaurs and some sort of "big bang" - so where are they in this story.

Instead of throwing the story away let's see what we can learn from it. Seven is a perfect number in ancient philosophy and in the story God creates the Earth in a perfect time span. God is the creative energy behind all that lives and breathes. From the story then, we can take the idea that, somehow, God is the life behind all life and that there is something in the way God views creation which is sacred, even perfect.

You may still disagree, there are plenty of other ways of reading it. But stick with it for a moment just to see how this works. The story tells us God loves us and God is the life behind our life. In fact, if you take the essence of the Old Testament in its simplest form the whole story is a love story. God loves God's people and all they do is wander off and do their own thing. This theme is repeated again and again. God's way is to love justice and be merciful and the people of the Old Testament too often spend their time taxing the heck out of everyone to go off and fight wars.

Some people get tangled up in Leviticus which is a law code book in the Old Testament. There is a mention of sexuality in there but pulling a single verse or two is a very strange way of reading the Bible. What else does Leviticus say? All sorts of things which we would never take seriously as ways to live in the 21st Century. Consistency is important when we read the Bible. Our hermeneutic (remember that means the way we read it) should not jump around from verse to verse. If you don't have a mortgage or any other loans, if you are not divorced, if you never eat bacon, if you don't work or do anything on Saturday (this would include watching sports, cutting the grass, driving and eating out) and, if you are a woman, if you stay in for a week each month during menstruation, and even longer after childbirth and then perform purification rituals before you return to being with other people and all the other hundreds of laws in there, you really should not be picking one verse to throw around like a weapon to make yourself feel better than someone else.

Let's apply the same sort of logic to the New Testament. It is a continuation of the love story. There are a lot of ways of explaining why Jesus did what Jesus did, why he died and rose, but, however you interpret it, the motivation has to be love. Jesus got mad with people who spent their time making other people miserable for no apparent reason, other than greed and power. Jesus lifted up those who were downtrodden and outcast. In the Gospels, those four

books about Jesus' life, there is absolutely nothing said about human gender or sexuality. Jesus never comments on it.

Then we get to the next part of the New Testament which is mostly made up from letters from various church leaders to churches they have planted but can't be with. People quote certain verses in these a lot.

We have the same issue with consistency. In fact, if we are being consistent Paul tells the Church in Thessalonica to avoid getting married unless absolutely necessary. Interesting, right? Why? Because he thinks the end of the world will be soon and it is a waste of energy which could be used for telling people the story of Jesus.

Again pulling verses out of context causes a lot of trouble. What is the overall message of the New Testament? It is one of invitation to a new sort of relationship with God. A relationship which is not based on fear and judgement but is based on who we are made to be.

If we want to make the Epistles into a rule book we will very soon run into the same sort of problems which we saw in Leviticus.

There are three more things to bear in mind:

1. The New Testament was written with specific audiences in mind. Not everything in it applies to everyone all the time and for ever. We have to read it prayerfully and ask God what God wants us to learn from each reading.
2. The historical context was completely different.
3. The New Testament was written in Greek and even Greek scholars do not always know what every single verse means without a shadow of a doubt.

The Bible is a living book. If we knew everything about it and understood it completely there would be no need for it to be living. That would mean that we had taken everything we could ever know or would ever need from it. The Bible is something to explore. Sometimes it can be immensely comforting and, at other times, it can be very frustrating.

In the Episcopal Church we read three passages from the Bible in Church every week, one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament and one from the Gospels. We also say or sing a Psalm. We take the Bible very seriously. So seriously, in fact, that we do not claim that we know everything about it or have already heard everything God has to say through it.

We invite you to that journey.

The Episcopal Church and our Journey Towards Inclusion

(This is taken from the national Episcopal Church website <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/>)

Faithful Episcopalians have been working toward a greater understanding and radical inclusion of all of God's children for nearly a half-century. In 1974, Louie Crew founded IntegrityUSA, a non-profit organization with the goal of full-inclusion of LGBT persons in The Episcopal Church. The next General Convention, in 1976, adopted resolutions stating that "homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other

persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church” (1976-A069), and that they “are entitled to equal protection of the laws with all other citizens” (1976-A071).

Over the years, General Convention and Executive Council reaffirmed these resolutions, as well as calling the church to greater understanding, awareness, and inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church. In response to the AIDS crisis, the National Episcopal AIDS Coalition was created in 1988 to provide education and support for HIV and AIDS ministries across The Episcopal Church.

In 1994, General Convention amended the church’s canons to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, providing equal access to the rites and worship of The Episcopal Church, including ordination. Nine years later the Diocese of New Hampshire elected the first openly-gay bishop in The Episcopal Church, the Rt. Rev. V. Gene Robinson. This was, arguably, a turning point for the church.

Despite continued pressure from sister churches of the Anglican Communion, as well as some within The Episcopal Church, General Convention stood with its LGBTQ siblings. In 2009 it acknowledged and affirmed same-sex couples in the life of the church; in 2012 it called for the repeal of discriminatory federal laws, increased legal protections for domestic partners, and recommended a liturgy for blessing the relationships of same-sex couples.

Also in 2009, TransEpiscopal, a group dedicated to fostering the full embrace of trans and nonbinary people in life and worship of The Episcopal Church, sent its first delegation to General Convention. That year, Convention expressed support for laws that prohibit discrimination based on gender identity. In 2012, the canons of The Episcopal Church were amended to prohibit discrimination in the ordination process based on gender identity and gender expression.

Finally, in the summer of 2015, just five days after the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that same-sex couples had the legal right to marry, General Convention voted to amend the canons of The Episcopal Church that regulate marriage, permitting any couple the rite of Holy Matrimony. They also called for a name-change rite to honor an important moment in the lives of anyone claiming their true identity.

The Episcopal Church warmly welcomes our LGBTQ siblings, but it would be disingenuous to say that the entire church is in the same place on this journey. As with all spiritual journeys, everyone walks at their own pace. Some Episcopal congregations are actively involved in LGBTQ ministry and their arms are open wide; others are more reserved, but their doors are still open to all; some are still wrestling with their beliefs and feelings. But we’re on this journey together, and The Episcopal Church is dedicated to full inclusion and equality in the church as well as in society as a whole.

FAQ

Can people who don’t agree with you come to your Church?

Yes. Being inclusive means we welcome people who do not agree with us. However, any behaviour which in any way diminishes the full humanity of anyone else will not be tolerated.

I have tattoos, do I need to cover them up?

Nope. You are free to be you.

How about piercings?

You can come as you are

Jeans? T-Shirts?

Come as you! Some folk wear jeans and sneakers, some wear casual clothes, leggings or more formal clothing. The formal folk are in the vast majority.

More questions?

You can email us at redeemer@redeemershelby.com if you would like to know more. If you would like to speak to someone please send us an email and we will get back to you.