

Welcoming Disciples

By [Lee Hull Moses](#)

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On Tuesday, the general assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) approved [a resolution](#) calling on the church in all its expressions to affirm the faith, baptism, and spiritual gifts of everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. This was timely, given the Defense of Marriage Act decision, though the resolution doesn't specifically mention same-sex marriage. Nor does it mention ordination—the other hot-button issue around sexuality in the church—though it does affirm that neither sexual orientation nor gender identity is “grounds for exclusion from fellowship or service within the church.”

This was a “sense-of-the-assembly” resolution, representing a majority of those gathered. Such resolutions are nonbinding on regions and local congregations—no policies were changed—and simply constitute a recommendation to the church. Each congregation is free to reject, adopt or ignore this as it sees fit.

I sometimes envy my ecumenical colleagues whose denominations have already fought this out, voted and moved on. They may have lost members, divided their ranks, but at least now they know where they stand. They ordain gay and lesbian people; they preside at gay weddings. Their denomination said it was okay.

We Disciples don't work that way. We have always been resistant to hierarchy, born as we were on the American frontier a generation after independence. We don't make top-down declarations; we wrestle things out in our local congregations, with the very people we meet at the communion table each week.

And we are not of one mind on this (or any) question. In my own congregation, reactions to this resolution range from *It's about time* to *Well, we'll probably lose some more churches now*. As Disciples, we have declared ourselves to be a “people of grace and welcome to all”—but some will find themselves left out by this.

One pastor told me he would feel better about the resolution if it stated clearly that the people who disagree are welcome, too. It's a good point. Does passing a resolution like this actually marginalize those who are against it? What about the

woman who has given her life to the church, as faithful as can be, but just can't get her head around the possibility of two men loving each other? Will she feel welcome now that this resolution has passed?

So I understand the urge to back away from declarative statements. Votes divide us. Congregations and denominations that have put this question to a vote have almost invariably lost people in the process. If we're going to say we welcome all people, then we had better be sure we actually do—as our president Sharon Watkins said in her sermon to the assembly Sunday night, “whether you're LGBTIQ or not even sure what that means.”

But I also think we need to be particularly intentional about stating our welcome for those who have been most often left out or discriminated against. After all, that seems to be the way Jesus operated most of the time.

One Facebook friend—part of a same-sex couple—posted this just before the business session: “Feeling vulnerable this afternoon. We're talking about real, beloved children of God.” Gay and lesbian Christians have been excluded and alienated by the church for too long, often causing real and lasting pain. Maybe an explicit welcome is the least we can do.

I think of the teenager who stood up during the discussion and said that most of his friends don't know any Christians who support LGBT folks. I think of the woman who doesn't mention her new girlfriend because she doesn't know what her church friends will say. I think of the families who could be loved by the church if only they knew they would be welcomed.

I'm all for individual expression of faith. I'm not going to tell my Disciples friends what to believe. I want to have tough conversations with the people who sit next to me in the pews, even though that's much harder work than following a hierarchical decree. We're bound by our faith and our baptism, and we meet at the table even when we disagree.

But sometimes the church is called to be a voice of justice. Our general assembly shared a convention center with the NAACP, and their mere presence—especially following the Voting Rights Act decision and the George Zimmerman verdict—was a reminder that injustice is only overcome when people raise their voices together.

The resolution passed overwhelmingly but not unanimously; there will be more tough conversations ahead. When it was unclear whether the ayes had the necessary majority, the moderator called for a standing vote. So we stood up, and wordlessly affirmed the good news that everyone is welcome.

This post was corrected on July 19 to clarify, in the last paragraph, that a simple majority—not a two-thirds majority—was needed to pass the resolution.