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7 Things Churches Can Do to Make Queer People Feel Welcome

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7 Things Churches Can Do to Make Queer People Feel Welcome

Abstract

For as long as I can remember, the church, for me, has been a place characterized by shame and hurt. I remember Christian high school friends telling me that I would go to hell for being Queer. I remember hearing sermons from televangelists about the evils of homosexuality, and church leaders pressuring youth leaders to cast out their Queer members. I've heard more talk of "love the sinner, hate the sin," and "God didn't make gay," than anyone should, and I've even received personalized hate mail declaring that "God hates dykes." [excerpt]

Keywords

LGBTQA, Queer people, Homosexuality, Church response to homosexuality, Open and Affirming

Disciplines

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7 Things Churches Can Do to Make Queer People Feel Welcome

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For as long as I can remember, the church, for me, has been a place characterized by shame and hurt. I remember Christian high school friends telling me that I would go to hell for being Queer. I remember hearing sermons from televangelists about the evils of homosexuality, and church leaders pressuring youth leaders to cast out their Queer members. I've heard more talk of "love the sinner, hate the sin," and "God didn't make gay," than anyone should, and I've even received personalized hate mail declaring that "God hates dykes."

While I've never believed being Queer automatically counted me out, I've been unable to find a church community that I, as a Trans person, could really call home -- a place I could engage in conversations around faith and sexuality, faith and gender.

Last fall, a co-worker invited me to meet with a group of leaders from her church who were working to make their community more open and affirming. As the Director of LGBTQA Advocacy and Education at the local college, I suppose I was a logical choice, though this colleague knew nothing of my lifelong struggles with faith.

Through talking with these people about their desires to be inclusive and their belief in God's love extending to all people, I found my mind re-opening to faith, to God. Because of these conversations, I realized that it is possible for Queer people to feel welcome and safe at church. Ultimately, it begins with education and relationships.

Here are 7 things all churches can do to help make Queer people feel welcome.

1. Understand the History

There are real reasons why members of the Queer community feel unsafe in church. Some of these reasons have to do with a contentious history of mistrust, violence and pain between the church and Queer communities. As a result of this history, Queer people may struggle to give faith communities the benefit of the doubt.

Churches should research how their particular denomination has treated Queer people in the past in order to better understand the context of these interactions.

2. Educate the Congregation About the Queer Experience in Society

In order to support LGBTQA folks, churches need to know what Queer people deal with on a daily basis. Someone sitting in the pews could be dealing with discrimination at work or school. They could be wanting to take the next step in their relationship, but grieving the fact that they cannot legally marry. For youth, they may be facing exile from their homes because of their sexuality, or they could sincerely be considering taking their lives.

Here are some organizations that can help churches understand the lived experiences of LGBTQA people: National LGBTQA Taskforce, National Center for Transgender Equality and GLSEN.

3. Drop Language That Insinuates Queer People Are Projects to Be "Fixed" or "Changed."

Phrases like, "Speak the truth in love," and "Love the sinner, hate the sin" are commonly heard in churches today and can be jarring to LGBTQA-identified people. Unlike other behaviors that might be considered sinful (lying, cheating, etc.), being Queer is not a singular act to be corrected or avoided. It is an identity in which many people, myself included, have found freedom and community. So when a LGBTQA person hears something like "Love the sinner, hate the sin," all they hear is that a central part of who they are is something to be hated.

Churches should focus on inviting Queer people to church to meet Jesus, rather than inviting them to church to "fix" their sexuality or gender identity.

4. Make a Public Statement

The next step churches can take, is to make a clear and public statement of their openness to Queer people. To put it simply, we won't believe we are welcome until you say it publicly.

Some options are to put a statement on the website, host programs or even put up a rainbow flag.

5. Tailor Sermons to a More Diverse Congregation

Once churches make a public statement and Queer people start showing up, pastors should intentionally craft sermons that speak to the entire congregation, not just those whose identities align most closely with the majority. The messages coming from the pulpit should be in-line with the values that the church has now publicly stated.

6. Make Sure Childcare Is Inclusive too

With Queer people joining the church, Queer families are inevitable. In light of this, childcare and family programming should be prepared to welcome them. Childcare providers should feel comfortable interacting with same-sex couples and allowing children to share freely about their family lives and identities. Transgender kids are coming out at younger ages, so churches would do well to avoid separating children by gender or limiting activities like dress up to one group over the other.

7. Invite Queer People to the Table

Finally, with Queer individuals and families joining the church, it makes sense to invite them into leadership. When

Queer people see themselves reflected in the body of the church, they will know they are welcomed and valued. They will know that the acceptance offered goes much deeper than words. The barriers that once stood between them and faith will no longer feel insurmountable, and they may be more willing to take that first step through the church doors.

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