

Becoming Radically Welcoming

Rise & Shine, June 23rd

Book of Common Prayer, p.304-305

Celebrant: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People: I will, with God's help.

Celebrant: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People: I will, with God's help.

Questions:

- Can you make an argument when “all persons” isn’t meant to include every individual?
- What does “seek and serve Christ” mean to you in regards to those people who you disagree with on an existential level?
- How have you sought to include someone who you are deeply uncomfortable with?
- How do you use your comfort or discomfort with certain kinds of people to inform how you show up in the world with them?

In the News

Steve Chalke: Churches must 'radically include' transgender people

In 2013, founder of the London church and international charity Oasis, Rev. Steve Chalke, became the world's first prominent evangelical Christian to declare publicly his support for same-sex relationships, to the dismay of some conservatives. And now, he is calling for churches to be the first line of welcoming, supporting, and including transgender people.

His new book, *The Gender Agenda: Towards a Biblical Theology on Gender Identity, Reassignment and Confirmation*, is an attempt to 'heal the hurts' inflicted on people who are transgender and help Christians form an inclusive theology which the author argues is both Christ-like and biblical.

Chalke said: 'There are some within the Church who loudly proclaim their opposition to the "sin" of transgender expression, let alone of transition, whilst other more nuanced responses, which begin with tones of pastoral concern, only later reveal that they too are playing the same "traditional" binary tune.

'The subtle shift from viewing transgender people as "depraved sinners" to "unfortunate victims of psychological pressures and mental illness" camouflages the fact that, in the end, as numbers of trans people have learned to their cost, the environment it creates is just as toxic for them.

'I am convinced that the standard we are called to advocate beyond all others is that of grace; of God's radical inclusion as most clearly demonstrated through Christ. Put simply, our task is to be the indisputable proof that God is love – and that, to the extent in which we fail, we model, quite literally, "dis-grace".'

The book argues that the theme of inclusion is consistent throughout the Bible, most notably in the ministry of Jesus who reached out to people ostracized by the society and religious authorities of the day.

But it also proceeds to illustrate a specific example in the book of Acts in which Philip, a leader of the early Church, baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch even though Jewish theology would not then have deemed him worthy of it due to his status as a foreigner and a eunuch.

Chalke continued: 'For the record, I am not suggesting that a 1st century eunuch is the exact equivalent of a 21st century trans or intersex person. In my experience, some trans people find it a helpful analogy, whilst others don't see it that way because the story doesn't really go to the question of gender identity as such. It is, however, an extraordinary example of the early Church's understanding of the principle of radical inclusion as central to their mission and purpose.

'The point is this. Before the theological questions have even been surfaced – let alone been debated and resolved – Philip goes out on a limb. Why? Finding himself in this unprecedented situation, he can only be guided by his understanding of the teaching and example of Jesus – through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – as he understands it and as the text makes plain.'

The book also provides an overview of what it can mean to be transgender and the hurt, pain and mental health damage that can arise when people feel they have to suppress what they see as their true gender identity.

The Episcopal Church has already been a leader in attempting to heal this divide. In 1976, both the House of Deputies and House of Bishops voted for a fully inclusive Episcopal Church, stating, “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.” Canon law includes “gender identity or expression” in its list of persons who are assured full access to the ministry of the church. The law further specifies that administrative forms must include options for both preferred and legal names, and for gender identity and pronoun preference.

In an intentional move toward diversity, the law adds, “As transgender people and their families increasingly come out within or find their way to congregations, their specific naming in our Canons . . . will encourage congregations to deepen their understanding and widen their welcome.” The Episcopal Church also approved the ordination of transgendered individuals at the 2012 convention.

For his part, presiding bishop Michael Curry has been outspoken on the fact that transgender people deserve equal protection under the law and equal inclusion in the church. In a statement prepared after President Trump moved to ban transgendered individuals from the military, Curry wrote: “I am compelled to oppose these actions and to affirm the moral principle of equal rights for all persons, including the LGBTQ communities. I do so as a follower of Jesus Christ, as Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, and as a citizen who loves this country.”

He continued: As followers of Jesus Christ we believe the inherent sanctity, dignity, and equality of every human being as a child of God is part of the moral foundation of our faith. In the Episcopal Church we promise in Holy

Baptism to “respect the dignity of every person,” and to “seek and serve Christ in all persons.”

Here are some Bible verses and a question outline to guide our discussion:

Acts 8: 38-39

He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

Genesis 1:26

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

Prayer for the Human Family (BCP p.815)

○ God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.