



RIC: 25 YEARS LATER

St. Stephen was the first Lutheran church in Florida that put out a bright welcome mat especially for our LGBTQ+ siblings

St. Stephen Lutheran Church

A Reconciling in Christ Congregation

2198 N. Meridian Road

Tallahassee, FL 32303

Pastor Tom Holdcraft

850-385-2728

<https://ststephenlutherantally.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/ststephentallahassee/>

St. Stephen Lutheran Church (ELCA) is a Reconciling in Christ congregation that explicitly welcomes people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. St. Stephen is equally committed to anti-racism. We welcome people without regard to race, ethnicity, age, family status, economic status, or differing abilities.

This booklet was compiled by Ron Hartung, with valuable assistance from Dave Suhrweir. Many thanks to all of the authors, and to Colin Hackley and the other photographers whose work appears here.

“I owe so much of who I am and what I've been able to accomplish in my life to this congregation.”

“We're not really sure if we would be attending any church in person if we hadn't found this one.”

“I've never been comfortable in churches where everyone isn't welcome, and I don't much think Jesus would be either.”

For many of us, the idea of choosing a church is pretty simple: We visit one or more congregations, we see how well they meet our expectations and, if we're satisfied, we join the one we prefer – the one that we think God has chosen for us. It never occurs to us that the congregation might turn us away.

For some LGBTQ+ Lutherans, however, that is precisely what has happened. For them, one or more congregations have made it abundantly clear that they were not welcome. How heartbreaking that must be. On Nov. 21, 1999, after Pastor Emory Hingst (*pictured here*) and others had heard too many tales of closed doors and closed hearts elsewhere, St. Stephen Lutheran Church in Tallahassee, Florida, took an important step forward. It became a Reconciling in Christ congregation. It crafted a statement that went far beyond “All are welcome.”



That statement goes out of its way to say that LGBTQ+ people are most certainly welcome, despite what their experiences might have been elsewhere. The original Affirmation of Welcome stated: “Gay and lesbian people share

with all others the worth that comes from being unique individuals created by God. Gay and lesbian people are welcome within the membership of this congregation upon making the same affirmation of faith that all other people make. And, as members, gay and lesbian people are expected and encouraged to share in the sacramental and general life of this congregation.”

Over the years, the statement has been updated. This is what it says now on our website and in our Sunday bulletin: “St. Stephen Lutheran Church (ELCA) is a Reconciling in Christ congregation that explicitly welcomes people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. St. Stephen is equally committed to anti-racism. We welcome people without regard to race, ethnicity, age, family status, economic status, or differing abilities.”

When we took our congregational vote in 1999, there were more than 200 RIC congregations across the country. But there were none in the Florida-Bahamas Synod; today there are 30. St. Stephen was the first. We think that’s something to celebrate. This special publication of St. Stephen Lutheran Church pulls together old and new writings and takes a closer look at how that vote came about, who some of the key people were, and what effect our RIC designation has had on our ministries. It’s something we can share with visitors, friends and new members who want to know what makes St. Stephen tick.

WHAT ROBIN WAS AFRAID TO LET US KNOW

Robin Whitley was our intern, or “vicar,” in 1992-93. Six years after she returned to the seminary, she agreed to write our congregation a letter as we discussed whether to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation. In the process, she told us something about herself that she had never let the whole congregation know. It’s such a powerful piece. It clearly describes what’s at stake when a church says, “We’ll open the door for most people, but not for you.” Here is Robin’s letter.

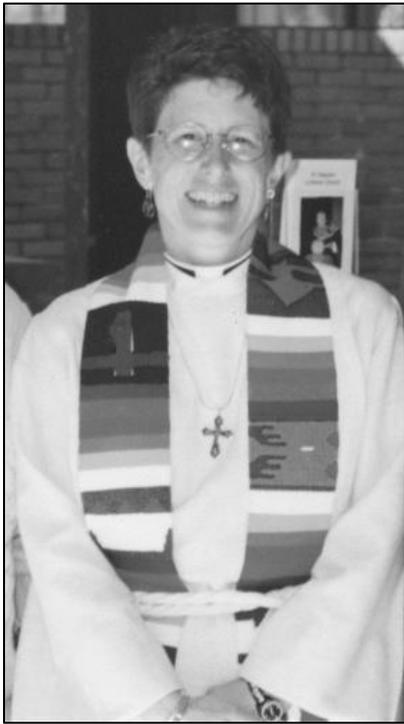
... I fought with my call to go to seminary for four years. I had a degree in Church Music and enjoyed being a church musician. There was more planned for me, however. It started at communion. I remember thinking, “I could do this.” Then it grew to, “I want to do this.” Then I remembered who I was. Who I still am. I was a lesbian, and there was no way I’d be able to be a pastor in the Lutheran Church.... So, I settled down to be a faithful church musician. I knew where I belonged.

As the years passed, doors to the music field began to close, and I was fighting dissatisfaction with being a part-time church musician. I wanted to work fully for God.... I earnestly prayed, “God, tell me what you want me to do. Please. I will listen to you.”

[Everyone started saying, “You should be a pastor.”] So I made a deal with God: “OK, I’ll go to seminary. But since you know the stance of the Lutheran Church, you have to change the church by the time I get out.” Well, you know how it is when you tell God to do something (thank goodness). Instead of the church, I have been the one changed.

Throughout my seminary experience, I fought my calling. Yet, at the same time, I knew it was where I belonged. I thrived in the classes, and I loved worship and the people. I kept asking God to let me out of this deal. I am not brave. I don't like to rock the boat. When I felt safe, I opened up to trusted individuals. To have the wrong person find out could mean expulsion from seminary (my dream since sixth grade), the loss of my family and friends, not to mention public humiliation. To be open about who I was could mean losing everything else that mattered.

Then I came to St. Stephen.... You encouraged me. You loved me. You gave me freedom to try my wings.... You showed me God in merciful, loving actions. My year in Tallahassee was the best year of my life.



[Robin told her secret to Pastor Emory, who encouraged her to tell the Vicar Committee. She couldn't.] I was too afraid.... I never wanted to deceive you. I only wanted to tell you about the great love of God and how life CAN be good, and how active and present God is in every moment, every breath, every atom, every thought. My sexual identity was not important for your well-being. What was and is important is who GOD IS. Who would listen if I told you who I was? And yet, until you know who I am, how can you fully know the goodness of God's working in my life?

... After my ordination, I enjoyed a year and a half as a pastor at Advent Lutheran Church [in Charlotte]. However, the long hours took their toll on my health. When I asked God what to do, it was the clearest message I've ever received. I knew I had to leave Advent, even though I had no other place to go. I had to get my health back. As my health returned, another message started forming in my mind – and I knew it was time. It was time to be honest about my identity ... because it takes extreme amounts of creative energy to hide yourself from people.... I began to feel that I was living a lie.

When I wrote my bishop, I also had to write my family.... The day I mailed the letters, I was sent to the hospital because I could not breathe. God continued working in all of this, however.

My bishop ... said he would work with me as we tried to understand the next step. In all fairness he gave me two and a half months before he demanded my resignation as a pastor.... Some blessed people [including some from St. Stephen] wrote letters to the Synod in support of my ministry, but to no avail.

Not until I could be honest about my identity as a total human being did I begin to realize that I was indeed called to be a pastor. I want to serve God in my entirety. A couple of weeks after that, I received the letter stating that I could no longer wear my stoles or the clergy collar or preside at any of the services of the church. As I read that I could no longer preside at communion, my heart ripped in two....

Now I am struggling. It has been hard to go to church.... [T]he service brings me great pain. I long to serve God.... Most gays and lesbians leave the church altogether. I have lost a lot in the past two years, but God has never left my side. Oh, the stories of grace I could tell.

To consider becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation is a beginning point for conversation. There are no easy solutions or quick fixes.... We all pray for the day when the church will be so loving that there will be no need for statements of welcome. Until that time, however, there are still people being turned away from God and God's house of worship. There are still people being hurt and killed because they are different from the mainstream.

I always keep St. Stephen in my thoughts and prayers. I will pray for your loving consideration of each other as debates arise. I will pray that you will be given discernment. Most of all, I will pray a prayer of thanksgiving for who you are and who you are becoming in God's name. Thank you for hearing my stories.

Love always,
Robin

Finally, in 2009, too late for Robin, delegates to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted 559-451 to allow gays in "life-long, monogamous" relationships to serve as clergy and professional lay leaders in the church. In later years, St. Stephen embraced two LGBT vicars who have gone on to become pastors. The Rev. Edwin Weber serves as pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Spokane, Washington. And the Rev. Cara Knutson serves as pastor of Emanuel Lutheran Church in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

In her beloved North Carolina mountains, even though she's not a pastor, Robin has blossomed. In October 2024 we asked her to provide an update. She wrote: "I've had a wild journey since the larger church turned its back on me as a pastor. I got lost a lot of times and got found. G-d was the ever-present guide and comforter, a prod when needed. I heard in a contemplative moment of discernment G-d's whisper, 'You're an artist,' as an answer to a prayer of 'Who do you [G-d] say that I am?' In the time since, I sought out the meaning of art in spirituality. I play music (mostly mandolin) at the UCC in Boone. I give thanks for my wonderful wife, Heather; we enjoy family, dogs and the mountains. St. Stephen is never far from my mind because of how everyone changed my life with love, prayer, compassion and support." [These days, Robin follows the custom of using "G-d" to refer to the Almighty. It's a sign of reverence, a way of remembering the holy four-letter Name without mentioning it.]

‘A QUICK AND EASY VOTE’? NOT EXACTLY

By Paul Shepherd, former member, former director of education & youth ministries

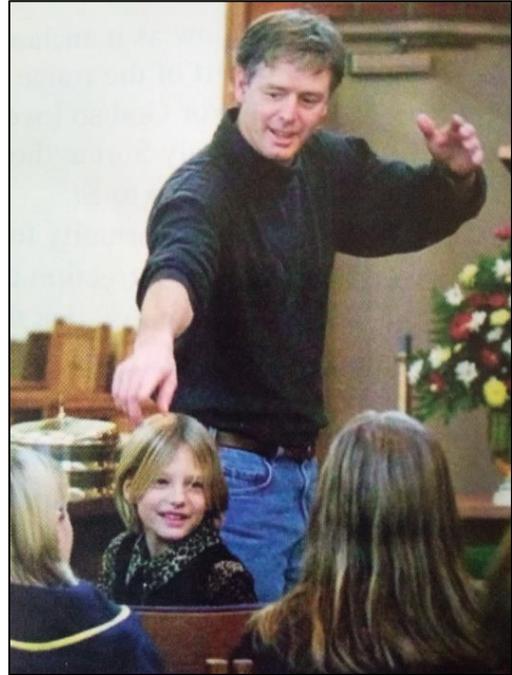
We joined St. Stephen in 1993 because we had an overwhelming sense that this was a community that challenged themselves to find ways to live out the love of Christ. How could such a small congregation give so much of its time, talent and treasure to

helping others with food, shelter and justice? Of course, this had something to do with then-Pastor Emory Hingst's way of nudging us – we could always go one step further.

After some time, he nudged me – was our church welcoming to the LGBTQ community? Could we do more? He mentioned the Reconciling in Christ program; I read the material and prepared a presentation for the Church Council, assuming it would be a quick and easy vote. Within minutes of that meeting I realized that “just voting” would be dismissive of concerns – and divisive.

Thankfully whatever I'd prepared was vague enough that I could switch gears on the spot, and made the request for a series of discussions and information sessions instead. David Suhrweir offered to help lead this, and with his gracious teaching and listening skills, many of the difficult questions about becoming a Reconciling church were heard and answered. Not everyone agreed – I know a few beloved members of our congregation could not remain with our church given this new status – but I do believe that they felt the process was open and considerate.

Interestingly, my wife, Lois, has a new book coming out in 2025 about what it means to live and work asking ourselves, “What does it mean to be a welcoming person?” We're thankful for our St. Stephen community for teaching us as a young family what this might mean – including the challenging and rewarding journey to becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation.



‘GOD HAS CREATED A MARVELOUS DIVERSITY’

These are excerpts from a presentation by Dave Suhrweir during the year of St. Stephen's 50th anniversary as a congregation. That was more than six years after the congregation's Affirmation of Welcome statement was adopted.

In November 1999, St. Stephen Lutheran Church held a special congregational meeting following the 11 o'clock Sunday worship service. It was special because there was only one item on the agenda, a vote on whether we would become a Reconciling in Christ congregation. I recall that I was very impressed (perhaps “amazed” or “awestruck” would be a better description) that there was standing room only in our sanctuary. Typically the attendance at congregational meetings is way, way less than standing room only. The only times that I ever experienced high attendance at a congregational meeting were when there was an issue of great controversy (such as “Should we use the red or the green hymnal?”).

There was a buzz of conversations and an air of excited anticipation. What was I to make of this unexpectedly large attendance? I had not perceived any great opposition during the prior weeks of study and discussion. Did some unanticipated opposition mount a successful get-out-the-vote campaign? My confidence in the outcome was feeling a bit less sure.

After the ballots were collected, there was a series of ad-lib speeches to fill the anxious time while we waited for the ballots to be counted. No one left.

The outcome was nearly unanimous – in favor of adopting the Affirmation of Welcome. I learned later that “no” votes did not come from a desire to exclude but from a view that we were already welcoming and did not need an official document – or that the welcoming statement should explicitly include other groups, such as racial and ethnic. I also came to realize that the reason the meeting had such great attendance was not that the matter was controversial (at least not within our congregation) but that the issue was of significant importance to so many members.

So what does this all mean?

Each Sunday, our church bulletin succinctly states where we stand. The brief but significant statement says, “We welcome and are supportive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people and their families.” *[It has since been expanded.]* And what is the character of our congregation? We believe that we are friendly, welcoming, inclusive and diverse. Our congregation includes singles, couples and families. It includes the very young and the very old. It includes a racial and ethnic diversity. It includes gay, lesbian and bisexual members who were here before that day in November 1999. It includes singles, couples and families who became members because of our vote on



that day. It includes people who have “come out” and, I suppose, it includes others who do not choose to “come out.” Gay

and lesbian couples sit next to each other in worship and in fellowship as do any other couple. They are active members, leaders and valuable contributors to the vibrancy and wellbeing of our congregation.

Certainly, there is no requirement to announce one’s sexual orientation or gender identity. But if you do, be assured that our congregation will continue to be welcoming and supportive.

We also welcome and support heterosexual people and their families. I know of one heterosexual couple who happened to be church-hunting at the time we were considering the Affirmation of Welcome. Their family had been members of another church in Tallahassee. When some in that church learned that their young son was gay,

he was shunned. This couple became members of St. Stephen in time to add their “yes” votes to the majority.

God has created a marvelous diversity. We see this diversity in the wonders of nature. We see this diversity in the children of God. Let us appreciate, respect, honor and glorify this diversity. Let us reflect God’s love by seeking a unity and equality among all who seek the love of God. In this lies God’s blessing for us all.

EVERY YEAR, A NEW PROGRAM

By Ron Hartung

Having a certificate on the wall is nice, and having an Affirmation of Welcome in the Sunday bulletin is meaningful. But an important tradition has been established that keeps the Ministry of Reconciliation theme alive and well for St. Stephen members and visitors. Since 2012, we’ve had an annual celebration built around a special liturgy, a meal and a variety of prominent guest speakers who show us where more advocacy is needed. And every year, longtime member Dave Suhrweir pulls it all together.

Starting when he was quite young, Dave absorbed lessons about serving others. He watched his parents’ devotion and patience in caring for his older brother, born paralyzed below the waist. He noted their inclusive love for others and never heard them disparage any person or group. By contrast, he still clearly remembers a troubling incident in confirmation class when he was about 12. “A student arrived with a Mohawk haircut,” Dave recalled. “The pastor told him to leave and not come back until he looked decent. I was shocked, finding the pastor’s remark offensive and morally wrong. The boy left class. The family left the church.”

When Dave arrived in Tallahassee in 1976 for grad school, he sought a welcoming church – and hit the jackpot. “On my first Sunday in Tallahassee, I decided to attend church at Luther House, the Lutheran Campus Ministry,” he said. “That was a turning point in my life! That very first Sunday, I met Cindy, who became my wife. *[Dave and Cindy are pictured here in 2024.]*



“The congregation was of my peers, many of whom became friends. Some were ‘out’ gay or lesbian. It was also through Luther House that I came to know Pastor Emory Hingst” – who later became pastor of St. Stephen, which the Suhrweirs joined in 1983.

“Through the years, Emory was our gentle mentor and guide toward inclusive love. In 1999, he approached John Albright, Paul Shepherd and me to assist him in having the congregation consider approving the Affirmation of Welcome proposed by Lutherans Concerned/North America. That November, the congregation voted overwhelmingly in favor of the affirmation.”

In the following years, St. Stephen had a special RIC worship service each January, and the church took an active role in encouraging other congregations to adopt the RIC designation. It was in 2012, though, when the annual celebration began to include guest speakers and special meals. Dave and others organized those early events. Then, well, it just sort of fell in Dave’s lap. “I ended up being the central organizer,” he said. “Along the way, I’ve developed relationships with organizations and individuals that enable me to serve our church’s mission of outreach, support, affirmation and inclusion.”

He’s also quick to point out that he gets a lot of help: “I especially appreciate the support by Care & Hospitality, Altar Guild, Church Council, the music director, the pastor and others whose efforts make each year’s event joyfully successful.”

State Rep. Anna Eskamani, the guest speaker this year, said at the beginning of her presentation: “I was literally holding back tears over just how inclusive this space is!” Other speakers have moved Dave and the rest of us with their personal coming-out stories of being condemned and ostracized by parents, family, church, friends or community.

“What impresses me,” Dave said, “is that so many of the speakers, aware of condemnation by many churches, are willing to speak at St. Stephen and become bowled over by our abundance of love and acceptance. Each year’s Ministry of Reconciliation Sunday reinforces my observation that when people open themselves to listen carefully to one another, to respect the dignity of others as children of God, we can feel the love, a bit of heaven on earth.”

GUEST SPEAKERS: 2012-2024

- 2012: Jonathan Appelbaum, FSU College of Medicine, “Introduction to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Health Issues”; Jim VanRiper, Equality Florida, “A Journey to Equality”; Marc Adams, HeartStrong, “Hope Needs Only Hands & Hearts”; Petra Doan, FSU Department of Urban and Regional Planning, “The Tyranny of Gender: Living Beyond the Gender Dichotomy”
- 2013: Edward Marti Kring, Big Bend Homeless Coalition, “LGBT Homeless Youth”
- 2014: Mary Wakeman, attorney, “Marriage Equality: Its Issues and Future”
- 2015: The Rev. Austin Newberry, former St. Stephen member, “Living Into the Promise: Ongoing Challenges for LGBT Pastors and Seminarians in the ELCA”
- 2016: Agnes Furey, author of “Wildflowers in the Median,” restorative-justice advocate, “My Coming-Out Story”

- 2017: Courtney Cahill, FSU College of Law, “A New Era: Legal Issues Concerning the LGBT Community”
- 2018: Scott McCoy, Southern Poverty Law Center, “LGBTQ Rights: The March Continues”
- 2019: Jon Harris Maurer, Equality Florida, “State of the State: LGBTQ Rights in Florida”
- 2020: State Rep. Shevrin Jones, “Living Your Truth: The Life of a Pastor’s Son”
- 2021: *No program because of COVID*
- 2022: Zoe Williams, gender chat facilitator, “One Woman’s Transition to Self-Acceptance”
- 2023: Robert Atkinson, FSU College of Law, “The Legality and Justice of Same-Sex Marriage: Listening to Dr. Martin Luther and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”
- 2024: State Rep. Anna Eskamani, “Leading With Love: Building a Foundation for Equality in Florida” *[pictured here with Pastor Tom]*



THE RIGHT THING TO DO

By Cheryl Stuart, former president of the St. Stephen Church Council, and former vice president of the ELCA’s Florida-Bahamas Synod

“Who else is not at the table?” After years of working for racial justice and equality locally, Pastor Emory Hingst challenged congregational leadership with this question. As I recall, he broached the subject of full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the church.

St. Stephen members had participated in the HIV/AIDS walk before, but this was something different. (Remember that it was first thought that HIV/AIDS was a “gay” disease, which was shown not to be true.) What would it mean to openly welcome and include gay and lesbian worshippers (that was the terminology at the time) at church? Was it even biblical? A small nonprofit, Lutherans Concerned/North America (later renamed Reconciling Works), had been formed to help the ELCA live into the idea of full inclusion and participation of the gay and lesbian community in the life of the denomination. It developed the Reconciling in Christ program to assist congregations in this journey of welcome and inclusion. And so began St. Stephen’s journey.

“What will it mean for our congregation?” That question came up repeatedly. There were so many conversations – small group, large group, Bible study, home visits, Sunday School lessons, private one-on-ones. It was important that there were different ways for people to ask questions and learn. “What will change?” “Will we become a ‘gay’ church?” “What does the Bible really say?” “Who will leave if we take this step of publicly stating we welcome and include gays and lesbians?” And then – “but who might come?”

The late Don Dowd would later say: “What you need to understand about St. Stephen becoming RIC is that the whole effort was led by straight people. While out gay people in the church were a part of it, the conversations and work were done by the straight folks.”

In the end, the congregation voted overwhelmingly to make public its belief that God loves all people, and “all” includes the LGBTQ+ community. A few people left. But people also came. Not just LGBTQ+ people, but people who wanted to be in a community that was working to break down barriers that divided; people who wanted their kids to be raised in an inclusive faith community; people who wanted to learn more about this God that loved so expansively.



Did we do the “right” thing? Seems almost humorous to ask at this point. It feels like it is now so much a part of the congregation’s DNA. But along the way, I’ve looked for affirmations. I’ll share just one — but there have been more.

As a voting member from our synod to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis in 2009, I was getting ready to be heavily involved in the effort to get the Assembly to adopt a statement that would allow for pastors in “publicly accountable, lifelong monogamous relationships” to be pastors in the ELCA. (Remember, same-gender marriage was not yet the law of the land.) Longtime member Ol’ Bill Taylor (may he rest in peace) stopped me one Sunday and said, “You’re going to Minneapolis, right?” “Yes, sir,” I said, looking intently at him. “And you’re going to vote on the gay pastor thing, right?” “Yes, I will,” I said. “Well, here’s how I figure it. I’ve been a part of this denomination for a long time. They said the world would end and the church would collapse if we let women be pastors. And near as I can tell, it didn’t. So I don’t think that will happen if we allow gay pastors to do what God calls them to do. So now you go and do the right thing.” The ELCA adopted that statement at that Assembly.

It is critical, 25 years later, that we continue to publicly live into our proclamation of a loving God who welcomes all people, including the LGBTQ+ community. Because there are still many faith communities taking a different view and trying to “pray the gay away,” often sowing mistrust in the church and God. Following Jesus in the way of love, inclusion and celebration can be hard and scary. Standing up to ignorance and hate usually is. We won’t always know, though, who is watching, listening and thinking, let alone whose faith is being restored and fed by our witness. May we commit ourselves to continuing to trust the Spirit’s guidance as we continue this journey.

EYEWITNESS TO ELCA HISTORY

By Marda Messick, our pastor from 2008 to 2016, published in the September 2009 issue of Second Sunday

The drama was extraordinary. Imagine — more than a thousand people together in a huge hall, each one anxious about the impending vote on the social statement on sexuality, each one strongly committed to a position. Then the presiding bishop announces that there is a tornado *right here*, in downtown Minneapolis, and that we must not leave the meeting hall. He tells us a little later that the tornado has touched down on Central Lutheran Church across the street and snapped the spire.

That was the scene when voting members of the Churchwide Assembly cast their electronic votes on the social statement. We knew that a two-thirds majority was required for the statement to be adopted. Silence fell as we waited for the tabulation....

Breathless shock: The screen displayed *exactly* 66.7% of votes in favor of the social statement. The hairs on the back of my head lifted. In the next moment many, many people jumped up, clapping and whooping with joy....

The next morning the city paper ran an interview with a Baptist minister who declared that the tornado was a warning of God's judgment on the

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Well, I don't worship Ba'al the storm god or read signs of God's wrath in natural phenomena. What I do know is that the Churchwide Assembly was electric with the presence of the Holy Spirit....



TO OUR YOUTH: YOU'RE SAFE HERE

By Cheryl Stuart [From her message to the youth of St. Stephen, reprinted in the Winter 2011 edition of Second Sunday]

... Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people — yes, that means young people, too (maybe especially young people) — and their families, however they may be configured, are welcome here. Those who are wrestling with or are confused about or are questioning their sexuality are welcome here. And more than that, you need to know that this congregation is a “safe place.” Pastor Marda is a “safe person.” It is safe to be who you are here; there are people here you can talk to in confidence.

Because God loves you — whether you're gay or straight. It's really that simple. I know gay kids in this town whose parents cannot accept it. Kids who are told by their peers that being gay is some sort of sickness. Kids who are told that homosexuality is Satan fighting God.

But you are part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. That “evangelical” thing is sometimes uncomfortable or hard to figure out. But I’m going to charge you with an evangelical mission: Listen and watch. Watch and listen for your peers who are confused or depressed because they feel so alone or are being bullied because of their sexual orientation. And tell them that you know a “safe place” where they can get their spirit renewed, maybe some of their confidence back.

That safe place is your church....

‘OUR CHURCH IS DIFFERENT’

By Stephen Barton [Excerpted from a National Merit Scholarship essay that then-member Stephen wrote in 2013; his photo is from 2011]

As a heterosexual male flutist I have heard endless jokes about myself for about seven years regarding my sexuality. Most of the jokes are immature, but many are more biting, and reveal people’s innermost feelings about homosexuality. When I started flute, the jokes followed soon after, and I didn’t understand why I was being called homophobic slurs. As a 12-year-old (the time when everybody is developing an identity, sexual or otherwise), I felt lost when people laughed at me. I feel as though my experience as a male flutist has exposed me in part to the way the general public treats the LGBTQ community. Without this experience, I could not be as caring a person as I have become, and I owe this to the support of my church, my parents and my experiences while performing music.



My parents raised me in a Lutheran church, but our church is different. We are a church that welcomes all people, regardless of their sexuality or gender identification. As I entered middle school I became aware of the ideologies we held in our church. I also began to realize that people whom I loved as parent figures were homosexuals or transgendered. When I found out about this side of my congregation, I began to realize that people are just people. That formative

statement may sound childish and idealistic, but it offered me a sense of comfort at a time when people began to question my sexuality for no other reason besides my playing a particular instrument. Without the support of a congregation that was so inclusive, I would not have continued to play flute.

MARRIAGE EQUALITY — THANKS BE TO GOD

By Marda Messick, our pastor from 2008 to 2016, published in the Jan. 15, 2015, issue of Second Sunday

When a human right becomes protected under the law after ages of denial that the right even exists, then those who struggled against discrimination are people whose

dreams of freedom have become real. “We were like people who dream,” says the psalmist — like people who pinch themselves and marvel out loud, “Is it really true? It is!”

That was the joyous reaction this month among the gay and lesbian community, their friends and allies when marriage equality became law in the state of Florida. At long last, Florida is now the 37th state (including the District of Columbia) to acknowledge the right of same-gender couples to enjoy the obligations and protections of legal marriage....

I am proud that St. Stephen Lutheran Church is a reconciling and rejoicing congregation, and as a pastor, I am delighted that I now have the freedom to marry our LGBT sisters and brothers, both inside and outside our sanctuary....

TO BE AN RIC PASTOR

By Pastor Tom Holdcraft

[Pictured with Bishop Suarez in 2023]



Soon after Pastor Emory retired in 1999, an interim pastor told the Church Council that we had made a big mistake by becoming an RIC congregation. The problem, he said, was that we'd have a nearly impossible time calling a pastor. Not true. In fact, our current pastor says St. Stephen was just what he was looking for. And he has

made our welcome sign shine even brighter.

When I submitted my Ministry Rostered Leader Profile to the bishop early in 2018, I requested to have a call process with a congregation that was already an RIC congregation, or at least one that was very close to voting an approval to become one. After four years of seminary and seven years of preaching God's unconditional love, I could find no reason to not go “all in” on this divine, radical love.

St. Stephen embraces diversity and fosters inclusion for all people regardless of whom they love or how they gender-identify. It not only is a moral imperative but also enriches the Body of Christ at this congregation. It makes Christ's love for humanity have skin and bones. Embracing diversity and inclusion upholds our values of equality and respect for everyone to be the people whom God created.

RIC TESTIMONIALS

“A sketch of my path to St. Stephen probably looks much like the paths of others who, also through God's grace, found their way into the narthex for the first time. Perhaps they didn't feel as much trepidation. I don't know. It had been a very long time since I'd been welcomed in church. I loved Jesus and always had, but Church and I had a much more ambivalent relationship. Still, God wouldn't let me go, and I'd never been able to shake Jesus. Then Jennifer Knapp came out — Google her — and her courage rocked my world. I said to a friend, 'Well, if Jennifer Knapp can come out, maybe I can go back to church. There's a Lutheran church on Meridian where all are supposed to be welcome.' This friend said she had a friend, a retired pastor (Emory Hingst) who would be preaching at that church while the current pastor was in Israel. 'He's great; a lovely man. You should go.' So, I went, and was welcomed. When Pastor Marda returned, I found she delivered butt-kicking sermons with the cadence of a poet. I cried, and I kept coming back. I didn't know what it meant to 'be Church' for and with one another, to be a member of a congregation of believers in the Body of Christ. I'm still learning. Thanks to my brothers and sisters at St. Stephen, I'm reminded every day that the Word of God is for all of us; that 'all of us' includes me; and that we, through grace, are to live out our faith in the world. Still here. Still crying. And, grateful.” *[Jennifer Dritt, published in St. Stephen's history book covering 2006-2016]*



“Val Sullivan and I wanted to return to church. As one would say, we shopped around visiting several churches until we found St. Stephen. We sat near the back in hope of not attracting attention as 'visitors.' During Sharing of the Peace and after church, so many people welcomed us that it was almost overwhelming. But we returned, became members and found a church family who welcomed us as The Vals.” *[Val Kibler]*

“When [I visited and] read in the bulletin that St. Stephen is a Reconciling in Christ congregation, it was as though the Lord had put a little exclamation point at the end of the 'Welcome Home' message. I've never been comfortable in churches where everyone isn't welcome, and I don't much think Jesus would be either. The diversity of our church is one of its strengths.” *[Audrey Post, taken from St. Stephen's history book covering 1956-2006.]*



“When I became a widower, I lost a lot. I felt very lonely and needed a spiritual connection. I tried several churches in town, but only at St. Stephen did I feel ‘connected.’ Many members of the congregation made me feel welcomed. The interim pastor back then was Pastor Mary, and I liked her. After going through confirmation, I found the sense of belonging that I was needing. In the years since, it has only gotten better. I always tell others about my church family and how much I love them. Thanks, St. Stephen!” *[Hector Quinones]*



“When we searched for a church home five years ago, we felt welcome at St. Stephen. Our child is genderqueer, and we knew that they would be welcomed as well. God does not turn people away based on one's gender, or the gender of those they love. Neither should we.” *[Rudy & Susan Hehn]*

“I owe so much of who I am and what I've been able to accomplish in my life to this congregation. The fact of St. Stephen's RIC status offered me a safe space to reclaim and reshape my faith. The welcome and encouragement I found led to my membership in the church and taking on a Lutheran identity. The voices of members called me into leadership on the Church Council and, when such a thing became possible (thanks to the advocacy of St. Stephen and so many other RIC congregations), I was called to ordained ministry. I am not sure at the moment what comes next, but I am very sure of my gratitude to so many at St. Stephen. I am filled with love and appreciation!” *[Austin Newberry. For those who know Austin but haven't kept up with him: “I was serving as an interim pastor in NYC but some health issues brought me back to Columbus, Indiana, where Darrin continues to live. I am officially on leave from call and am currently working as a Student Success Coach at the Indiana University campus here. I am doing much better health-wise and so thinking and praying about what comes next.”]*



“Lawana and I were looking for a church that would welcome us as a couple. We both grew up in the Baptist faith, and we knew that was not going to be the place for us. So we searched online for an ‘open and affirming’ church. One of the churches was St. Stephen. We watched online for a few weeks before coming in person. We also watched other churches, but we were drawn to this one because of Pastor Tom (we liked him the best). Our first time here, we were greeted by so many people, and the authenticity of everyone was very apparent. We were not familiar with the Lutheran faith, but the basic core principles fell in line with our beliefs. We were so happy to finally find a place where we could worship God and be accepted just as we are.



“We thank God every day for Pastor Tom and this great congregation and for this church being an RIC church! We’re not really sure if we would be attending any church in person if we hadn’t found this one. We are truly blessed by God and are glad we have somewhere we feel we belong.” *(Sandy Lamb-Daniels)*

“... While not experiencing the extreme spiritual abuse many did, rejection and shaming was common – and my mother, guided by a church she attended, never accepted my long-term relationship or my partner. After my mother died, I approached her church (which my father’s family also had connection to). Eventually, homophobia was openly preached from the pulpit. It was shared with me pointedly that same-sex relationships are ‘not what God calls Christians to’ and ‘not something we can confirm,’ and that my relationship was sin. Well, knowing that my relationship and my person – Carol Knox – were the best things in my life, I soon left. Carol was a missionary kid in the United Methodist Church and showed an interest in returning to church later in life. She monitored the issue of LGBTQ inclusion in the UMC carefully. After she died, and this time with great care, I looked for a church community. This time, rather than follow family tradition, I used trusted LGBTQ resources, which led to Reconciling Works. When I entered my ZIP code, my heart jumped out of my chest. There was St. Stephen! Pastor Tom Holdcraft soon answered many questions and became a trusted friend on this journey. And then I met all of you! You are an incredibly special bunch, and I hope you know that....” *(Sylvia Smith, excerpted from Sept. 5, 2024, church newsletter)*



St. Stephen Lutheran Church

A Reconciling in Christ Congregation

2198 N. Meridian Road

Tallahassee, FL 32303

Pastor Tom Holdcraft

850-385-2728

<https://ststephenlutherantally.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/ststephentallahassee/>

St. Stephen Lutheran Church (ELCA) is a Reconciling in Christ congregation that explicitly welcomes people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. St. Stephen is equally committed to anti-racism. We welcome people without regard to race, ethnicity, age, family status, economic status, or differing abilities.

“We all pray for the day when the church will be so loving that there will be no need for statements of welcome.”

“Thanks to my brothers and sisters at St. Stephen, I’m reminded every day that the Word of God is for all of us; that ‘all of us’ includes me; and that we, through grace, are to live out our faith in the world.”

“St. Stephen embraces diversity and fosters inclusion for all people regardless of whom they love or how they gender-identify. It not only is a moral imperative but also enriches the Body of Christ at this congregation.”