

January 2012

Dear People of Saint Alban's,

Take a moment to locate and read the vision and mission statement at the bottom of this page. A central part of our mission is to be *faithful in welcoming the stranger*.

Biblically speaking, we offer welcome because we know it may well be God masquerading in the guise of a stranger. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews directs, "do not neglect to show hospitality for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). Remember the "angels" sent to Sarah and Abraham to bring them the news they would have a son? In Jesus' final parable the Son of Man tells the sheep, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35). Following his resurrection the disciples on the road to Emmaus discover that the stranger with them is the Lord. In the Hebrew Scriptures the children of Israel are also instructed to remember their own experience as strangers in Egypt and therefore treat the resident alien and stranger in their midst with care (Leviticus 19:34). Finally, our welcome of the stranger is grounded in God's steadfast love and concern for the stranger (Deuteronomy 24:19, 21).

Deep welcome combines the ancient biblical practice of hospitality with a justice concern to include those who have been excluded by society and/or the church. In the last couple years I have had conversations with members of this community sharing concern for various groups of people who are excluded or marginalized in our local community— certainly the homeless and the poor but also immigrants, native American communities and the gay/lesbian/transgender/bisexual community— especially the latter. These concerns were reflected in the survey completed during the Outreach breakfast in early October. Out of these various conversations several members of the congregation are initiating a process to explore becoming a Welcoming Church—a Christian community that fully welcomes gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual people and their participation at all levels in the life of the congregation.

In-depth conversations, akin to the ones we had about Outreach, will take place in the fall. To prepare for those conversations we will provide a number of tools to assist us in our discernment. Early this year, Mary Bockover will offer a series of adult forums on Justice. Later in the spring, I will offer a Bible Study on those passages that refer, or are commonly thought to refer, to homosexuality. There will be another summer book study on welcome. We will draw all our deliberations together with a vote a year from now at the annual meeting in 2013.

The Welcoming Church Team recognizes that there may be members of the congregation who simply want to sit down and talk one on one with someone else about their questions and concerns. The following individuals are available to meet: Mary Bockover, Marylee Bytheriver, Diana Cooper, Robin Hodson (chair), Maureen Johannsen, Colleen Reed Rodes, and Cindy Woods.

For some this may seem like an obvious and logical next step for Saint Alban's. For others these deliberations will be much more difficult. It is my prayer that we will bring great love and forbearance to all of our learning together and in the process know ourselves deeply welcomed by God. I look forward to a year of rich and prayerful conversation.

With blessings,  
Sara+