

What's Brewing | The Road to Welcoming and Affirming

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Harmony, welcoming and affirming, queer community, Enduring Principles, mission, conversation

SPEAKERS

Blake Smith, Linda Stanbridge, Humberto Tinsman, Nancy McClellan, Matt Bryant

Blake Smith 00:27

Hello, and welcome to What's Brewing, a Project Zion Podcast series where we usually ask the questions, what is mission? And why does it matter? Tonight's a little bit different because of this live event, we're specifically talking about the process of becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation with the Harmony training. And we've got some great folks here to talk about that and their experience. I'm Blake Smith, and specifically tonight, I'm here with Linda Stanbridge. And we're going to be your hosts for this event. This is our second live event. And the first live event, in case you didn't get a chance to catch it or join us live, is available as episode 686 on projectzionpodcast.org. Tonight's live event will also be edited, transcribed and posted as part of the What's Brewing series, and should be available within a little bit over a week. We'll probably post it in a week and a half. Since this is still new to us and those of you who follow and support Project Zion Podcast, I want to just give a couple of quick notes as to how this will work. If you were with us again, on the first live event, you'll already know this. But we are broadcasting not only on Zoom, we are also currently on Facebook live through the Project Zion Podcast Facebook page. And we want to be able to take your questions and comments for our panelists to cover as we go through the night, through this time and also at the end. So whichever platform you're using, we just ask that you submit your questions and comments via the chat feature of that platform rather than speaking out into the event. And zoom users if you'll just send your comments and questions by direct private message to Harmony Host Oh, no, she's changed her, she's changed her name to Linda. She so if you'll send them to Linda, she'll be monitoring those questions. And if you are on the Facebook Live platform, if you would send those in, Ashley Pozo, who is our production manager will be sending those to Linda for addition to our list. We'll do our best to have the panelists respond to those questions, again, either as we go along or as we get near the end of our event. So before we get going, however, I want to give a little bit more of a shout out to my co-host, Linda Stanbridge, who has graciously agreed to be here and help out tonight. Linda is an invitation support minister for the Michigan Mission Center, where she focuses on new expressions and church planting and also some training. Linda is a high priest in the church and a two-time alumna of Graceland University. Yeah, all Graceland university graduates are shouting. She has a BS in biology, a Bachelor of Science in Biology and a minor in Chemistry. She also has her Master of Arts in religion from Graceland Seminary. And if that weren't enough, she holds a Doctorate of Ministry from ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, Michigan, where she studied, and hold your breath, ancient Israelite prophecy and social justice. And if you're wondering how those things to go together, we invite you to

find her podcast, What's Brewing, where she talks about her studies, and you can find that at Project Zion Podcast, along with others, because Linda is not a stranger to Project Zion Podcast. She appears before tonight in seven other episodes of Project Zion Podcast, so we're just really glad to have her. She's not only an expert at Project Zion, she is also a former member of the board for Harmony where she served four years as the chaplain. Now you might think she's busy, but she did include in her notes to me that she has things she likes to do in her spare time because obviously she has a lot of it. Oh, I forgot also she's is a mom of two feral children. And this is her description, one for one badly behaved dog and too many cats. And with that, in her free time, she enjoys gardening, hiking, birding, reading, and writing, and co-hosting tonight's event. So welcome, Linda.

Linda Stanbridge 05:19

Thank you so much for that super generous introduction. I dream. Those are the things I dream about doing in my free time. Maybe someday.

Blake Smith 05:27

we probably all have a few of those, I'm sure. Well, our topic for this event is the road to becoming welcoming and affirming, as I mentioned earlier, and we are blessed as a church to have such a top-notch training program available to us through Harmony. And that program is to help our congregations of course become welcoming and affirming. Linda, if you would, could you just take a couple of minutes to tell us a little bit about Harmony and the Welcoming and Affirming program so that everybody knows kind of exactly what we're talking about tonight?

Linda Stanbridge 06:00

Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for that. So, Harmony is a nonprofit that is separate from Community of Christ, but is focused on Community of Christ and creating an environment that supports full participation for the queer community in Community of Christ, and all the ways that it's expressed across the church. You might be familiar with Harmony, because we were previously known as GALA, which has a long history, a 40-year history with the church, of working hard to create a better, more welcoming environment for LGBTQ plus, folks. The Harmony Welcoming and Affirming program is probably the biggest project that Harmony has, although we have some other great things as well. Sacred Pause is a worship experience that we host, typically the last Monday of every month, but in May, it will be the week before in order to accommodate Labor Day. So, if you want to step in and see us for Sacred Pause, it'll be not the last Monday, it'll be the one before. And it's a really great experience. If you hadn't had a chance to check that out, I think you would really enjoy that. And then, as I said, the other main thing that Harmony does is this Welcoming and Affirming Program. That looks like about 10 meetings between an assigned facilitator and the congregation. Usually each of those meetings are about 90 minutes. It depends on how chatty your congregation is. I've had some congregations that and it's a good quality that really have a lot of discussion. And, sometimes we have to remind ourselves to stay on track, because we're having too much fun, but we shoot for about 90 minutes for each session typically meet about 10 times. And usually I say let's meet every other week, or at least twice a month, because we want to get kind of some momentum going as we continue to sort of deepen our understanding and start to think specifically about what welcome could look like in our congregation. So, the first thing you do in the program is kind of brush up on some communication skills, and conflict resolution skills, because hopefully, what we're going to do is have some

conversation that's going to push us at our growing edges. And sometimes growth means a little bit of discomfort. So, we try to work on how we can welcome that discomfort into our experience. We talk about power and privilege also in the beginning of that journey. It's a really important thing to unpack as soon as we want to start talking about how we can be more inclusive and understanding of what's going on with marginalized groups. And these skills will help you when you're ready to talk about what the next marginalized group is that your congregation can specifically welcome and include. And then we go through some of the basics, we unpack that LGBTQIA plus acronym. We talk about LGBTQ plus history and Community of Christ scriptural interpretation. And we run some scenarios to kind of practicing some interactions. And then kind of the peak of the experience is, the congregation writes together their own welcoming statement, specifically welcoming the LGBTQ plus community, into their congregation. And so it's a really cool way to see the congregation's personality and individual experience really kind of come together in a really beautiful statement that specifically welcomes folks in and lets them know, this is a congregation that wants to do the work that recognizes the joy that will come from a more diverse congregation. And then this statement that we all craft together, goes to the congregation for a business meeting. And the congregation approves that statement. And that's kind of how you become an official Harmony welcoming and affirming congregation. And then you get added to a really great map on our website where folks who are curious about Community of Christ and what it's like to be LGBTQ plus can find specific ministries that we know have done some work around the topic and are ready to offer a really authentic welcome. So it's a really, really awesome program that just got a refresh about 18 months ago or so. It's a really awesome program. I think everybody would really enjoy and benefit from that.

Blake Smith 10:11

Thanks, Linda. Well, now it's time for us to meet our panelists. We had four panelists originally, unfortunately, James Clark from the reaching out Center has laryngitis and wasn't able to join us tonight as a panelist. But we have three other great panelists. And we chose our panelists for this particular event based on folks who represent congregations that have either completed the program or are in the midst of the program. It's my sense as Mission Center President, and having congregations that are considering this as well that they might be uncertain as to whether they want to move forward or whether they can handle it and those kinds of things. So, I thought it would be helpful for us to get some folks together and have a conversation so they could share their experience and their story. So, without any further ado, I want to introduce our panelists, and then I'm going to let them give a little bit of an intro for themselves. First of all, we have Matt Bryant from North Little Rock, Arkansas. We also have Nancy McClellan from Waterford, Michigan, and Humberto Tinsman. And I was going to ask him before we started this, so I'm going to say Juan Tabo.

Humberto Tinsman 11:30

Oh, you got it. Juan Tabo.

Blake Smith 11:33

Close. All right, New Mexico. So really, really glad to have them and appreciative of their willingness to come and share their stories. So, let's, let's start with Matthew, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Matt Bryant 11:46

Yeah, my name is Matthew Bryant. My pronouns are he and him. I grew up in Rochester, New York about 30 miles from Palmyra, right where our movement started. I've lived in nine states so far. My work as a toxicologist and chemist, where I focused on new drug discovery development, spent about half the time in the pharma industry itself, and for the last 15 years in the Food and Drug Administration, where I work now. I was born into the church, my grandmother introduced was introduced to the church up in the state of Maine. And I currently serve as Presiding Elder of the North Little Rock, Arkansas branch and have done that for about the last 12 years.

Blake Smith 12:31

Great. Thanks, Matt. Nancy?

Nancy McClellan 12:33

Hi, everybody. I'm Nancy McClellan. I'm from Waterford congregation in Michigan. We've relocated to Michigan about four or five years ago from the Chicago area where we met Blake and our congregation is at the very end, I'm a co-pastor of the congregation, and we've just completed the process that Linda so nicely described, and we've very proudly crafted our statement, and it's been accepted by the congregation. And I'm delighted to say that people in the congregation are saying, hey, what's next? So we're ready to go.

Blake Smith 13:14

Excellent. Thanks, Nancy. And Humberto?

Humberto Tinsman 13:18

Hello everyone. As Blake said, I'm the co-pastor of the Juan Tabo congregation located in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I also serve as a full-time Mission Center minister for the Rio Grande Mission Center, which takes up parts of New Mexico and West Texas. I, with a team of wonderful individuals, helped lead the Juan Tabo congregation through the Harmony Program. And overall, I know we're gonna get into tonight, but overall, it was a wonderful experience. And we really got to ask some great questions, not just of ourselves as a congregation, but also our community. Also in the church, I serve as a 70 with Larry McGuire, and I'm also one of the co-hosts of Ministry for Dummies, which is another Community of Christ podcast of all about ministry, and how sometimes it can throw us for a loop. So Yes.

Blake Smith 14:13

Yeah, so if you haven't had a chance to to hear those, you can hear what last Friday we posted we cross posted. Humberto and his co-host Jacob have been gracious enough to let us cross-post, but we wanted to do that to help introduce some new folks to their podcast. Unfortunately, I don't know Matt well enough, but I can also say about Nancy, that if you need a room painted in your house, she is an excellent indoor interior painter. When we moved to Chicago, she and her... I came close on the house and then went home to Ohio to pack the other house, and while we were gone before we got here, Nancy and her husband came and painted rooms in our house that needed painted before we can move in. So just a little plug there. are as well.

Nancy McClellan 15:00

I paint for pizza.

Blake Smith 15:03

Yeah. And Dairy Queen. I think we went to Dairy Queen too. [Yeah.] Yeah. All right. Well, let's get to the questions. And we'll start back with Humberto. I want you to take a few minutes to tell us what is it that prompted the decision to become a welcoming and affirming congregation through the Harmony Program for you and your people?

Humberto Tinsman 15:29

Yeah, definitely. So for our congregation, we were in the situation where the congregation before had done some work with, with GALA and had done some work and had had some meetings and we had members of the congregation who were part of the LGBT plus community, and we had friends and we had new members who were coming in. But as we looked around, we realized we had never really officially had those conversations. And we wanted to be a true authentic community and wanted to be our true authentic selves. And we saw a lot of red flags by just saying, oh, yeah, we're a welcoming community without doing the work or out without doing the conversations. And I had known Linda, from previous hat of being a Graceland rep. And new some other members of Harmony. And, you know, our congregation met, and we really decided that okay, you know, we're really wanting to say that we are welcoming that we are affirming to our community, both within the congregation and outside the congregation. Well, we don't want to be blindsided by some of these hard questions. And we know that there are some areas there's a, there's blinders that we each have that we want to, you know, do the work and have the hard conversations. So that's what really prompted us. So saying yes, and, and reaching out towards harmony to do the program.

Linda Stanbridge 16:54

And Humberto, I think Juan Tabo was the first congregation that did this program after we refreshed it. So they were really gracious to let us say, Hey, can we try out this new program on you? And so it was a lot of fun. And we learned a lot together in that process?

Humberto Tinsman 17:09

Yeah, honestly, that... it made it very, very special. And I think that added the level of interest and passion because we're like, this is cool, we get to be part of something new. So yeah, I mean, I obviously I'm very biased, but it was it was a very, very positive experience.

Blake Smith 17:26

Right, great. How about you, Matthew?

Matt Bryant 17:28

Well, our congregations may be a little bit different, in the sense that it was sort of the cart before the horse situation. We had already been involved with the local Pride festival for about seven years, as one of the community sponsors before we had signed up for the program. And so we had already done a lot of the early steps that the Harmony Program kind of features, we already had a mission statement, although we revised it quite a bit during the program. We already gauged our level of support, who

could who could count on to help, you know, especially in terms of you know, who could actually go to a Pride event and post an information booth in March and a Pride parade and do those sorts of things that perhaps are necessary. And, you know, we had to be careful, of course, we live in a very anti-queer state in terms of the politics. And so, we want to make sure that everyone involved in the actual events would be comfortable with that. So, I happen to attend a conference in 2019 and was happy to be there for the merger events that created Harmony. I mean, met a few of the individuals that are involved in this work. And it seemed like it'd be a great program for us to supplement our previous experience, and work with the great material that Harmony used. And so, we really benefited from the knowledge that we gained in that training program, which I think we completed at least last year, maybe a year before that. So, you know, I always wondered whether or not if we had done the program before we began our involvement with the Pride movements locally, whether we might have avoided some of the bumps in the road, but anyways, we certainly would recommend congregations to go through the steps that the Harmony Program works with you.

Blake Smith 19:13

Great. Thanks, Matt. And I will just say I apologize. I keep switching back from Matthew to Matt, and I'm going to try to stay with Matt. I asked Matt, before we started, which one he preferred. I had Matthew in my notes. So if I do that I'm referring to the same person. Nancy?

Nancy McClellan 19:31

Well, you know, I'm listening to the stories of Humberto and Matt about their congregation's journey, and I wish that there was some trigger. But I think our congregation simply had a critical mass of people, where we looked at our Enduring Principles now and the Worth of Persons and how foundationally that Worth of Persons emphasis has been part of our history. And we realized that we had a lot of people that were on the periphery of our congregation that didn't feel welcomed. And as we talked more, we realized that doing something about it, preparing ourselves to be welcoming, even though we think we're welcoming to begin with, was just the next right step. It felt like the right thing to do as a congregation in this day and age, recognizing the worth of all persons, because we realize we weren't getting it right. We know we're not getting it, right, because they're not coming through our doors. The ones that have come through our doors have walked away and said, You know, it's just still not a welcoming, safe feeling environment. And we realized that about ourselves when we said, let's do something about it. And we were so grateful for Harmony and for Linda, who has shepherded us through this journey that's been wonderful that really, our experience has been more of an experiment than anything else saying, This feels like the right thing to do. Let's give it a try. And walking very thoughtfully, and very methodically through it has made all the difference in the world. And I think that's the claim to fame that the harmony curriculum really has.

Blake Smith 21:29

Well, those answers are really helpful. For me, I hear a little bit about what sounds to me like there's, there's a mix of some who knew exactly, this is where we needed to be, we were kind of already on that road. And then Nancy, your congregation is more like we need to do something, we think this is the right thing. And willing to step out in faith even though you weren't quite sure yet. But ready, ready to move. So it's good for folks to hear that it's okay not to be fully okay, we know this is the right thing. But to be willing to take the step. So thanks.

Linda Stanbridge 22:03

I think sometimes people get tripped up by feeling like everybody in the congregation has to be all the way on board before we can get started. But sometimes you will have resistance in the congregation from a couple of people. And that can be really normal and something that we work through. And that's part of why we do conflict resolution stuff. But I will start with Nancy, but would you share if you did experience any resistance, you know, in your congregation or for from some folks and how you were able to handle that to get to the point of starting and kind of following that idea?

Nancy McClellan 22:35

Oh, yeah, we were met with resistance. And I think that was one of the really helpful things that Linda did is she said, It's okay to be uncomfortable. And I think to embrace that, and say, not everything needs to be comfortable. And second of all, everybody's on a journey. And it's at a different pace and at a different rate. And that's okay. And you don't want to create a new marginalized group, trying to accept a new marginalized group. So in meeting resistance, what we did about that was over communicate. Over communicate the fact that we're on a journey, we're on a path, and it's okay, where you're at. Communicate that it's going to be bumpy. And that you can feel the way you want to feel just like Linda would take a kind of a reading of the group at the end of every session. Are you feeling green, yellow, or red? Just like those colors mean? And giving people an opportunity to say, You know what, I don't like this. And then it became the job of the four of us that are forming the pastorate to touch base with those people and say, you know, we can tell you're uncomfortable, do you want to talk about it. And so while we were met with resistance, over communication, making it really clear that whatever you're feeling is acceptable, also engaging as many people as possible in that process, especially hitting them at the high points where we would make announcements during worship service when the most people were there, and having the class during snack time because everybody shows up when you have food. It's just kind of a tradition in our in our organized religion is that if you feed them, they will come. And, that way by engaging as many people as we could and constantly communicating what we're doing where we're at, so that no one felt left behind or excluded, I think really addressed the resistance as best you can. And then also accepting that some people are going to refuse to evolve. And that's the reality of it, some people are, are just not going to be able to turn the corner no matter what you do. And you have to accept that that's going to happen in a very small number. But it still may happen. Yeah.

Linda Stanbridge 25:14

And I think what you did, as you're describing it is do such a good job of not letting it be the elephant in the room, that we continue to talk about it and make it okay, that we're coming from different places, and we're going to end up different places, but we don't let it be the thing that only gets talked about in secret. Right. Thanks for that. Nancy, what about you Humberto? What did you run into?

Humberto Tinsman 25:34

Yeah, so for our group, we experienced resistance kind of on both sides of the coin, because we had some who didn't want to talk about this issue, felt uncomfortable, or felt that they were being pushed.

And then we had others who felt we did all this work in the early 2000s. And then and in the 2000's and the 90s. Like, what do you mean, we're already here, we don't need to have another meeting. We're just going to reopen old wounds and, and restart some bad thing. So like Nancy said, it was it was the desire to not make this oh, this, this is a big thing, or this is elephant of the room. But this is another step on our journey and our process. And really what I found as a co-pastor was an exciting time to have more of those one-to-one conversations and to hear and to listen, where some people are and what why were they there? And what were those factors and causes? And, you know, what we experienced and what we learned was, the more and more we met and the more and more that we gathered together in that conversation. That middle ground became a lot larger every single time. And it wasn't because we were trying to force them and said, Hey, we want this clean statement. And dang it, Linda's counting on us. Come on, we're the guinea pigs. But it truly was okay, you know, we're just going to continue to meet we, we don't need any grand conclusions. We're just going to explore and share open and authentically where we are right now, with a complete understanding that that's going to change tomorrow. And that's okay.

Linda Stanbridge 27:07

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Thanks for that. Humberto. Matt, what about from your perspective?

Matt Bryant 27:14

Well, for us, the resistance was mostly perceived by myself, in terms of not wanting to embark on an outreach effort to the queer community until I kind of felt comfortable enough within the branch and knew that I'd have enough support locally, to participate. I have been involved with local peace and justice issues my whole life. And when I moved to Arkansas, I suddenly found myself elected to the board of a coalition for peace and justice. And so I, I was involved personally with these sorts of things. And then as things happen in our church, I suddenly found myself, pastor of the congregation. So I decided to get our branch involved in, you know, a very non-controversial topics such as peace and injustice. And so we began participating in something called Arkansas Peace Week, where we, you know, had a booth. We handed out literature. We had kids come by and do peace related artwork, drying up drawing, lion and the lamb and stuff, and handing out ice cream. And this was kind of a first step for me to determine just, you know, who in our group could actually participate in these sorts of events. And so, but I did want the whole congregation to be involved and take ownership of that activity. And so during one of the 11 o'clock worship times, we had the whole branch putting together the information packets, that we would hand out at this Peace Festival. And so even those people who didn't attend the actual event would feel a part of that approach. And so when a few years later, when we ventured, you're really thinking, we need to get involved in LGBTQ issues, you know, because we had already previously done a little bit of work with Latter-day Seekers and things. And one of the one of the things that approached him to that ministry was to LGBTQ issues in other denominations. And so I wanted to do the same thing. So I proposed that a branch business meeting of all things, that we should become a sponsor, one of the local sponsors of the event and that involved an expense. And so after that, discussion and approval, we actually put together those same sort of packets. So that everyone involved, even the more traditional people in the branch that maybe were a little bit less inclined to put too much effort into this, would feel an ownership. And when we came back from the Pride festival, you know, that first year, we had, you know, we had good results and people enjoyed it, that they would feel, you know, a part of that it's that success. And so I think that that was something

that I learned, you know, and obviously, you know, since we have been involved, I think we've been involved with nine Pride festivals in our history. Hurray. You know, we've also been involved in the more politically oriented protests and counter protests and things of all these bills that keep coming out of our Arkansas legislature. And so I wanted to make sure that the whole congregation could, could participate. So I think the most events were, I mean, the relative resistance was somewhat more related to my willingness to venture into something. Not exactly knowing if we had all the support that we need. I think in general, we, you know, we have,

Linda Stanbridge 30:31

I think you're talking about something really great, though, this kind of resistance that we have to, we don't want to hurt someone, you know, we have to really know that we're gonna work hard, because we don't want to create harm, right? We want to make sure we're ready. Are we ready enough to do this? And that really shows how important that is to you. Yeah. Such a good point.

Blake Smith 30:49

Yeah, I really appreciate that too. Because sometimes we do hurt unintentionally. So to be just to be mindful of it, the fact that that you're thinking about that, as is so helpful in any of the justice areas that we that we've worked on. So thanks. And Matt, you've really begun to talk about the lessons learned as you're talking about resistance. But I'm wondering if if you can think of a particular, maybe a most difficult hurdle that you've had to overcome, maybe it's something you've already mentioned. And then also, have there been any "aha" moments that have just really presented themselves?

Matt Bryant 31:34

Well, one thing I guess I've learned along the way, it is really, really difficult for queer people to venture into a church building, especially in a very conservative, anti-queer state, like Arkansas, many people have experienced nothing but trauma, and rejection their whole lives. And the last place they want to be as a church. We have, we did some work in our basement a couple of years ago. And a technician who comes once a year is a person born with sexual characteristics of both sexes. And so, this person, as you can imagine, really faces trauma. Anytime he/ she/they enter into a church building. And what in my discussions with the person I showed them all the materials that happened to be around. And the person said that after, after coming a few times, really felt comfortable coming into our church. And so, that was a really aha moment that, you know, we can overcome years of lifetime of trauma, you just have to be persistent. And so each time, it's not that I look forward to paying \$120 service fee to have them check out our system in the basement, but I do look forward to a chance to talk more with the person. And maybe one of these years, they'll come back and attend to worship service. But, before that, they really didn't want to go into any church sanctuary. They didn't like actually walking through the sanctuary down into the basement. And I used to have to bring the person through to the basement directly without going through the worship, but now, they're comfortable doing that. So I think that's we're making progress. I think that it's important to be there, participating in the rallies, protests, events, talking with people in your booth, making sure that they see your banner marching in the parades, doing all the things before, they are going to recognize that walking into our church on a Sunday morning is going to be a safe place for them. And you know, all the Pride flags that you put up, and all that sort of thing isn't necessarily going to convince them of that. And so you really have to spend the time working on those things. And so I guess it's, it's somewhat, it's a challenge. And you know, I think,

but you know, having enough people who've maybe had some similar experiences, you know, if they come from a background where they might have been ostracized a bit themselves, does give enough empathy so that they, they can help you with that effort. And I think that's kind of maybe the few things I've learned along the way.

Blake Smith 34:25

That's great, and very helpful. I think we forget that because we're so comfortable in our churches. And even when we talk about being able to just walk into any Community of Christ, I can't tell how many times I've heard that, oh, doesn't matter where you go, you're always welcome. And to walk into the shoes of someone who does not experience that, as a matter of fact, has probably experienced the exact opposite. So, so thanks for that, Matt. Nancy, how about you?

Nancy McClellan 34:55

We experienced the same thing. biggest lesson learned was is that we only thought we were a welcoming congregation. And, you know, I think that it is hallmark of our church that we feel like a warm people, very accepting people. But until we went through the Harmony curriculum, and walked through what welcoming really means to a marginalized population, especially the queer community, until we actually did the work. We didn't realize what welcoming really is, what it really ought to be in terms of acceptance, in unconditional love, and having the knowledge to interact in an appropriate way. You know, my journey started back in Chicago Mission Center with Kylei Davenport, who's one of our elders in the church, who, kudos to Kylei, she was so patient with me, and helping me understand what it meant to be accepting, and use right terminology. And she always forgave me when I screw up. And, you know, she still is my hallmark, huge example of why it's important that we're doing what we're doing. And being able to relay that to the congregation, as Linda guided us through the curriculum has been really helpful to me. And Kylei, if you ever watch this podcast, you go girl, because you're my hero for understanding why this is so important in so learning, you know, what does welcoming really mean is what it's all about. And I'm really proud of the work that our congregation has done, because it's been nothing short of miraculous. We have so much good news that has come out of this for individuals, and for us collectively in going through this process and doing the work.

Blake Smith 37:12

Thanks, Nancy. Yes, being in Chicago myself, still, I can say certainly that Kylei is a blessing. It does raise a question that that is not in our not in our lineup, but I think would be appropriate at this time. And maybe Linda, you might also haven't have an answer for this. I think one of the things that is, as Nancy has mentioned that one of the things that's wonderful about Kylei, Kylie, is in a particular place in her own life journey, where she is very comfortable with who she is, and has been able to find place in in her life and her occupation and all of that. And she is very willing to have hard conversations and allow people to ask really dumb questions without getting offended. How do you, how do you know when somebody's ready to do that? Because I think it's it she has been a gift to me even before I moved to Chicago, she helped me with some things in Cleveland. But I think that probably there are others that that might not be the case for, so, I don't know if that question makes sense. But is there a way of how

do you find folks like that who can help you through the journey and maybe even be an accountability partner to be honest with you and do it without being hurt?

Linda Stanbridge 38:40

You want to take that Nancy, or you want me to?

Nancy McClellan 38:42

Well, Kylei, I've reached out to Kylei through our journey, and she's offered to come to our congregation and preach. Because, what I love about Kylei is when she preaches, she's preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. Not, not according to her sexual identity, or her pronouns. She's preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. And that's, that's what she is all about. But understanding her journey, and hearing it firsthand from her for what she has had to walk through in order to be her authentic self, is just really inspiring. And it is by the grace of God that she is where she is. And so having those people that are willing to say, you know, what, the fact that your congregation has gone through this journey, and it's meaning something to them, in their journey, I think is what it's all about. And, we're kind of still at the front end of this, but people in our congregation as individuals have started speaking up saying, you know, I have this family member or I have this friend where for the first time I feel like I could invite them to church, and they would be okay. That's huge. And I know a number of people that are in that situation, you know, I have a nephew, that's a state representative. And he found his place in our church because of the welcoming atmosphere that is offered as a gay man. And he, you know, he is openly gay. And I did talk to Kylei even before this podcast in order to have permission to mention her name. And she, her response was, Well, of course. And so finding those people that are willing to speak up and provide that example is great, but I don't think every person is. And that was another advantage of the Harmony curriculum. It was to teach us that when people walk through our door, it shouldn't be quiz time of, you know, you can ask them what their pronouns are. If, if it appears that that would make them more comfortable, you might want to give them a tour of the church so that they can see that we have facilities appropriately marked, to make them comfortable. But then they're, they're just another person that's walked through the doors of the church. Welcome them, help them find a seat, feed them a snack. Because they simply want to be spiritually nourished. That's why they're there. And that's why we exist.

Linda Stanbridge 41:26

Yeah, and you make a good point in there, Nancy, too, that, I think the last numbers I saw were something like 20% of the population is LGBTQ. So we have these people in our lives, whether we realize it or not. And I think the truth is that when you are genuine in your desire to do better, and to learn more, that is very evident, then you will receive an incredible amount of grace. But learn how to apologize. And we do work on that in the program. It's really important, and it makes a big difference. And understand, like Nancy said, not every person that we meet is going to want to be an educator for straight folks. And that's not their job. There are wonderful people who are willing to do that, who are all around us. And that's one of the great things about being connected to this group is that we can meet so many amazing folks who are willing to do that work. But I think just being really authentic and your desire to do better, makes all the difference in the world.

Blake Smith 42:25

Thanks, that's helpful. I want to give Humberto a chance to answer the question about hurdles and aha moments.

Humberto Tinsman 42:32

Oh, do we have to I think Nancy just ended it so great. No, okay. So, so to share my own authentic self, I'll share the most difficult hurdle that I had starting this program. And that was as a young pastor, someone very new to the congregation of rocking the boat. As a leader, you're trying to bring people together, you're trying to you know, make sure everything's okay. You don't want to be too, you know, you don't want to mess things up, you know, especially as our congregation we were just in the beginning stages of our growth. And so that was a fear of mine of man, is this going to be something that is going to cause division into a new group of people or a new group that's trying to form together? And what really, what came down to my own personal reflection and prayer, were the last two words of our mission prayer, have grant me the courage to do something new, and become a blessing of your love and peace, that it takes courage to do the work that we're talking about. It takes courage, not just from the congregation, it takes courage from local leaders, having faith in the congregation, that they can have these conversations, because I hope the listeners have heard, this is not something that's easy. Well, this is not something that we're walking in lightly away from. It has been something that has been challenging personally as a group. But when we set aside that fear, when we focus on the mission of Jesus Christ, which is to bring people together, to create bridges, not barriers to Christ's love, I can't see any other pathway forward but doing something like this and doing it courageously knowing that you're doing it amongst people who understand what it's like to be Community of Christ, who understand what each of our congregations and mission centers are going through, and how it is sometimes a scary time. But the moment we let our fear cripple us from the potential and from the ministry that is in front of us, that is when we start to lose that sacred call that we've all been given. So my biggest reflection is to not let the fear of the "what is" prevent you from the "what could be." Yeah,

Linda Stanbridge 44:48

I thought Humberto was gonna start preaching there for a second.

Humberto Tinsman 44:52

It's always a danger. It's always

Linda Stanbridge 44:54

I was ready for it. I was ready. I was ready with a big Amen. I think there's a section in Doctrine and Covenants that talks about that. And I can not one of those people who can pull scripture, but it does talk about our fear getting in the way of being willing to move forward. And I think that's a really natural part of the human condition that we have to kind of learn and, and accept that we have to be uncomfortable. I will start with Humberto again, since he's already in the hot seat, here with our next question. But I think one of the things that that we hear a lot when we're starting with a new congregation is, and we touched on this a little bit, you know, what we already are welcoming. We welcome everybody. And that's one of the mindsets that we have to work through. But you know, even

the even the congregation's who think well, we're already there. We don't need to do this, you know, what are some of this specific things that you think they might get from going through this program?

Humberto Tinsman 44:59

Okay, good. You know, the biggest thing that I think our group walked away from especially those who were, you know, very much, yes, this is great. I love it, or, well, we've already done this, but I guess I'll put up with another Zoom meeting was, wow. It's hard, having difficult conversations. And this is something that gave us case studies and gave us practices to reach out to members of our congregation and friends of the community of, hey, we're gonna have a hard conversation. And this is faithful disagreement in action, not a faithful disagreement, where we all leave, and we still hate each other. And we're mad, and one faction is going to Denny's and other ones going to Waffle House to complain about the other. But like, No, hey, we're going to talk about this, we're going to be okay, we're still a family. We still love each other. But this is the growing pains that we're experiencing. And that's natural. And, and what I walked away from and what I continue to preach on is growing pains are good, because that means we're growing folks that we're moving. And if we just do the same old, same old, and we're just saying Oh, yeah, another job well done. And we're really risking anything. And we're really doing anything that's worthwhile to do so. Yeah. From our experience. It was the practice of how to have difficult conversations, but still love each other afterwards.

Linda Stanbridge 47:11

Oh, my gosh, yeah. What a great point. And so in a way, you just have such an opportunity to practice becoming even a more authentic and a deeper community. Yeah, really good point. Let's go to Nancy, what do you think? What would congregation's benefit?

Nancy McClellan 47:27

Oh, what I've seen is a lot like Humberto described where the it was the mission prayer in action, where praying becomes a very dangerous thing. Because you're going to start seeing things happen. And as we went through the curriculum, individuals and groups started talking about stuff that happened to them, where opportunities became apparent, God brought them those opportunities in order to provide ministry in a way that they wouldn't have been prepared to provide. Had they not gone through the Harmony curriculum. And it happened to me on a number of occasions where I was sitting in a board meeting, I help with my profession's board on a national level. And I was in the board room, and we were talking about Dei. And they were talking about ideas on addressing DEI and I said, Well, have you heard about this, and I never would have had something helpful to bring to that conversation, had it not been the harmony curriculum. And then personal things would happen where I would encounter people in everyday life, where I could tell that they were on the struggle bus with a queer discussion. And because I had learned how to approach it from an intelligent perspective, I was actually able to provide them something that was helpful. And I wouldn't have been prepared in any way shape or form had we not gone that down that journey. And there's so many other people in our congregation that have also shared how the mission prayer became very real for them in this journey.

Linda Stanbridge 49:17

Oh, that's amazing. I love hearing that. And I think one of the most wonderful things about this is that it's not something that just stays at church. It positively impacts your family, your community, your

workplace that Yeah, awesome. I love hearing that. What about you, Matt? Oh, Did I or did I already make you go?

Matt Bryant 49:36

Nope. Okay. Talking about welcoming, welcoming congregations. Are we on to blessings?

Linda Stanbridge 49:43

Yeah, just thinking about you know, how we all kind of have this idea because we think we think we are welcoming, and sometimes we are right, we're doing a pretty good job. But even those of us who think well we're kind of already there. What are things that they might gain from going through this process?

Matt Bryant 49:59

Well, that I've moved to the same congregation twice in my life wants to do my postdoctoral training and then 20 years later, exactly 20 years later to join the same agency as a full-time scientist. So, they accepted this New Yorker, right in the Central Arkansas. So I, you know, in general this congregation is quite welcoming. But on the other hand, I probably look and, except for my accent, talk very similar to everyone else here. So we may think we're welcoming because we see people that look and act very similar to us. And I think the challenge is, you know, when people are just a little bit different than then then you have to have a little bit more knowledge, to be able to welcome them. One of the members, who's very active in our pride activities and things, you know, came to us through some discussions, you know, with the Latter-day Seeker program, and but the thing and you can, we had a bunch of emails back and forth between him and myself. But the thing that really convinced him and made him feel welcome was the fact that he was served communion, that first Sunday by a woman in her 80s. And this really showed him right away, that this was a different sort of church. And he was so shocked when we had our branch business meeting and showed all our finances out there for everyone to openly discuss. And so there are different things that one can do to really welcome new people. Small congregations love to have someone new come in, because we, within two weeks, we assign them to be a Sunday school teacher or something else. And that's the other thing is get people involved. And I, both people that came into our group through Latter-day Seekers found themselves outreach coordinator or Sunday School teacher within less than a month. So making people feel welcome by getting them involved in French activities is another thing that we can do to make them feel at home.

Linda Stanbridge 51:56

Yeah, thanks for that, Matt, I love that. Great point.

Blake Smith 52:02

As our listeners can tell, and if you're seeing the faces ... those who will be listening to this later on, you won't get to see the faces of our panelists ... But, as they share their stories, they just kind of light up. And that is evidence of the response to the next question, which would be what's one blessing if you ... and you're, there are probably more than we have time to cover in any number of episodes. But, what's one blessing that your congregation has experienced as a result of having taken this step and being a part of this program? And Nancy, we'll start with you.

Nancy McClellan 52:43

For me, not only is it living the mission prayer, but I think that the other blessing is a sense of competence. We're prepared, and we're equipped as a result of going through the harmony curriculum and completing it and doing that hard work. There's a sense within the congregation that we're ready to handle what the next steps are, where we actually engage in a more tangible way in our community and find out what could be the next steps, what are we going to engage in to the point where, especially within the pastorate, we're making that a priority? So most congregations have lots of opportunities coming at them for community outreach, but we've decided to make this a priority, because we don't want it to stall. We don't want that competence to fade, or become just a dormant thing that's in the background saying, Yeah, we got the badge. There's a sense within the congregation that we want to use this and we want to grow, we want to evolve in in what we actually do.

Blake Smith 53:56

That's, that's great to hear that, in the midst of this already, you're feeling that increased competence and confidence to be able to engage this and know that you can do it. That's, that's great and helpful. So Humberto, how about you?

Humberto Tinsman 54:12

You know, you know, for us. Specifically, it was like, like Nancy said, living the mission prayer, but also the beginning stages of the realization that we've always had, but putting it into action that the church is not just worship. If we're just meeting on Sunday morning for one hour. We are not doing church, but this is the building blocks to start opening our eyes and looking around our community and figuring out where does Albuquerque need Juan Tabo? Where do we need to go? Who are the people that we need to serve, who are on the margins, who need the message that they are loved? That they are accepted they are supported by complete strangers just because of who they are. And that, I think, has been a amazing blessing that has led to growth of our congregation has led to growth in our mission and to friends of the congregation. And our friend Matt has talked about it has definitely grown the Latter-day Seekers program in our congregation. And it's a sense of, of newness, it's a sense of rebirth. It's a sense of excitement, that is palpable when you walk through the door. And so, you know, you can people share, like, Hey, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. I'm taking the lessons that I have learned at church, and I'm going out into my community and trying to make a difference. And if we walk away from anything else, if that's what we have gotten, I'm happy, I don't know about you, I'm a happy camper. If we do that. I think that is a huge success, that we have inspired people into courageous action. And I think that's the biggest blessing we've gotten from this program.

Blake Smith 55:58

That's, that's great. You know, you know, Humberto, I think you really need to work on your energy level, you're a little kind of low key, and

Humberto Tinsman 56:07

I'm an I'm an audio editors worst nightmare. So I've gotten a good microphone, they'll hopefully make it better. But yeah.

Blake Smith 56:13

That's awesome. It's really encouraging to hear the energy and the excitement. So, Matt, how about you?

Matt Bryant 56:23

Well, I can give Humberto some tips on being low key. So anyways, the one thing I'll have to say is that, you know, living in a state that has so many, in the last several years as one bill after another, the first state to pass a ban on gender-affirming health care, it's in the courts, but it's we were the first state teachers cannot call the students by their preferred pronouns. They could lose their jobs. We have several teachers in the branch that have to make that decision, should they call the trans girl by her preferred pronoun or not? Even just this last month, you can no longer check male, female or other on your license. It has to be male or female, and it has to match your birth, your birth certificate. So being surrounded by all this anti-LGBTQ environment, it has given our branch, a sense of purpose, a wave of dealing with sort of feeling like you're outnumbered, and facing so many challenges. We are living out the Enduring Principles of our church, especially a few of those that we're all familiar with. When we created some colorful wristbands for hanging out at Pride events, we have one that says God, God loves you. And we had the first one that said, all are called and worthy, because this is what our church teaches. And we wanted to be able to really give that out to people that may need to hear that. And so it's it's really given our small branch of feeling like we, we can have a mission to work on. You know, and that's, that's really important, you know, the energy that we have the feeling that we're actually doing something, rather than just sort of giving up. And I think that's important for our group to have that mission and that, that perspective in mind, whether it's, you know, outreach to the queer community or other peace and justice activities that we've been involved with. And I think that's important, especially for small, small branches, where, you know, it's not the number of people you have in the pews, but it's the excitement, and the involvement of those that you have.

Blake Smith 58:34

Yeah, that is really important. And I don't want to diminish any congregation that is engaging in this effort to be welcoming and affirming. But I just want to say how much I deeply appreciate the hard work of being in such an adversarial location. And where there is so much anti-queer work being done to be a courageous force in the midst of that, so thank you.

Linda Stanbridge 59:06

Well, you guys have given so much advice already, as we've been chatting for the last hour or so. And it's been really awesome to hear from your perspective, but I wonder if you might have one piece of advice, or maybe your most important piece of advice for our congregation that's kind of exploring this or considering this? What piece of advice would you offer to a congregation? And we'll we'll start with Nancy first.

Nancy McClellan 59:34

Probably my best advice is to at every opportunity, testify of the blessings, of taking that risk, of doing the hard work, of reaching out, of bravely praying the mission prayer, which we all know is a dangerous prayer, but testify of the blessings that come because I think other congregations need to know that it's worth it. And, that you're going to be blessed as a result of those efforts, because it's not by our own human means. Like everything else, we don't do anything on our own. You know, we're just little real

humans. And we do our little feeble things. And it's God who amplifies all that and makes it all worth it 10 times over. So just keep telling of the blessing, so that it will spread, so that this will propagate throughout our church and be a meaningful impact. And poor Linda will get a break, because she's working her patooties off to, you know, make sure congregations get these resources, and we need to propagate it with her.

Linda Stanbridge 1:00:43

I love that, Nancy to keep pointing to the blessings and just noticing where God is meeting us on our journey. Or maybe where we're meeting God, probably God was already there. And then we looked around and realized how blessed we were. I love that. I love that advice. Oh, what about you, Humberto.

Humberto Tinsman 1:01:01

So I'll give the same advice that I give to many people who are in a liminal space. And that is, where you are now is not how you should be defining yourself or assigning defining your community is how you change along the journey that will define who you are. And knowing that this is a journey, that one of the parts that we didn't really talk about a lot of the Harmony Program is that it is designed for the level of where your congregation might be. So if your congregation isn't a place where they've talked a lot about it, there's a specific line and program where you can do if you know, this is going to be a hard conversation in many different ways, either because of your area or because of your congregational makeup. Harmony has a program that's built for that group. So wherever you are right now, don't make that be the barrier of why Oh, okay. I don't want to do this. take that leap of faith, like, like we've said multiple times that mission prayer, use that as that's constant source of inspiration that will lead you into something new.

Linda Stanbridge 1:02:07

I love that. Thank you. What do you think Matt? Your best piece of advice?

Matt Bryant 1:02:15

Well, I think one thing, we haven't used the word too much here. But there's a there's a great little book that's still available through Herald house called Hospitality: Sharing Welcome. And that, you know, that's a general book, but I think it has a lot of applications to what one might do to make LGBTQ folks, you know, welcome in the branch. I think another thing I'd recommend is, you know, it's good for a few key members of the branch to really educate themselves on the issues, you know, and that helps during the training programs, you know, the facilitator can't answer all the questions in the 90-minute session. And I think it's important to have a few key team members that know a little bit about and there's so much material out there that, you know, it's not, it's not that difficult, especially with regard to how to deal with those people who have these incorrect missing, you know, interpretations of biblical scriptures and things that that have been used to show hatred of the queer community for centuries. And so I think it's important to have that base of information local, as well, as you know, of course, the facilitators are very knowledgeable about that information as well.

Linda Stanbridge 1:03:28

Yeah. And Matt, you're highlighting a really important thing that we kind of glazed over because we're, there's so much to say in such a short amount of time. But one of the things that goes with the program is before your congregation dives in as a whole group, we have a group of three people, the support team, that gets some additional training before the congregation starts, because Matt's absolutely right. We need these anchor folks who have at least kind of a leg up on this education, who are prepared to walk together because the whole congregation is going to take this on and support each other. And so you get kind of a diet version of what's in the congregation course. So that we do have these anchor folks that really can kind of keep us all connected and have some extra information. Thanks for that. You guys. I came with such awesome advice. I really appreciate that. Thank you.

Blake Smith 1:04:19

Well, Linda, do we have any questions that have come in from our listeners? No? You guys have done such an excellent job.

Linda Stanbridge 1:04:27

Oh, we just got one. We just got one. So here. All right. This is from my friend Beth. She's asking, can you tell us more about the sessions. And so it looks like these are some logistic questions as far as whether it's on Zoom or weeknights, or Sunday school, and the level of participation from the congregation that we would expect. It sort of depends. Typically, you would meet on Zoom because the facilitator, and I'll put it in a plug here that we need more facilitators. So if your list and you're watching and you're a person whose congregation has been through this, we need more facilitators. It's a good problem that we have a demand for this program. So we need some more folks. But it depends a bit where you are. If your facilitator is located local to you, they might come and do presentations in Michigan or in Michigan, I do that come in person and do that. But you could also have, you know, someone who's assigned to you from five or six states away. So, it sort of depends on who you're assigned to. And I would say that most often congregations do it during the Sunday School hour or right after potluck after worship, that sort of thing. Because the best time to do it is really when most of your congregation folks are gathered together. As far as the congregation you have, I stopped calling it homework because I realized it was making some people nervous. It's individual work, some things that you need to do in between sessions, like watch a YouTube video or read an article. I wonder if maybe Nancy, you would share just a bit about what your congregation did, and how that sort of the logistics aspect of it how that worked.

Nancy McClellan 1:06:07

I think most of us love the homework, because you you're watching a movie or a video, which I found, enrich what we were learning during the sessions it amplified, it added another dimension to what we were doing in the sessions. But I think our congregation, we never felt like it was overwhelming. Or that it was too much. So the format you can tell has been piloted, and beta test and you know, whatever, because it felt comfortable for the amount of material how it's broken up. subject matters. Now some people went into it saying gender bread, what's gender bread man. it piqued their curiosity is what it did for you know, the way a lot of it was labeled, but I didn't. I personally didn't get any negative feedback from anyone in the congregation about what was expected. So like I said, [That's great.] Yeah, homework was just plain entertaining.

Linda Stanbridge 1:07:08

Good. I'm glad to hear that. And your congregation did it in sort of a hybrid way. So you had some folks who joined on Zoom, and then also a group that joined at the congregation so and then sometimes I would come in person, and sometimes I would join you on Zoom. So it was really nice to have kind of those flexible options. Yeah, Matt, I'm thinking that when your congregation did this, you did this during the Sunday School hour from the church building is that where am I remembering? Right?

Matt Bryant 1:07:34

Yeah, and, you know, our facilitator was Zilphia from Michigan, and she was great to work with. And a few other people joined on occasion. So, and we actually had that as our sole meeting purpose that Sunday. So we at the time, we were, we wouldn't have hold held a worship service that day. So we would we could kind of run over which, you know, there's a tendency to, to, you know, once you start talking a little bit, and then you get into the material, you're already halfway through the time. So, we would actually not have any other service. And so everyone participated by that time, you know, we'd already been, you know, going through, you know, a lot of this work already in terms of being involved in Pride. So, we kind of did a little baby a little bit unorthodox, but it worked out wonderful. And actually, the following year, Zilphia, traveled to, to Little Rock so she could participate with us and one of the Pride festivals and had a great time was great. Good to see her in person.

Linda Stanbridge 1:08:33

I think Sofia spends about half of her life in an airplane. So she always has these points. And so I was so happy when she came to your Pride festival. That was just awesome. And I think she brought your celebration box with her right, because that was not too long after you finished.

Matt Bryant 1:08:46

We shared that later. And so you know, we we have a good time. And we keep asking other branches in our mission center. We'd love to come up and help you with your first Pride festival. If that's what you want to do.

Linda Stanbridge 1:08:57

Oh, I love that. What a wonderful thing to offer. Yeah. And then, Humberto, I'm really challenging my memory. Now. I think we did like a Tuesday or Thursday night. Right? And it was pretty exclusively on Zoom, because I was in Michigan, and you're in New Mexico. So I think we exclusively met on Zoom. Does that sound right to you?

Humberto Tinsman 1:09:16

Yeah, no, we did. And that was actually really good for us. Because we also added, to help support and then to help talk to other congregations, our Mission Center President, and she joined as well. So she was part of the conversation. And so zoom works great for us based on schedules, and we were still tiptoeing out of the pandemic at that point. So yeah,

Linda Stanbridge 1:09:38

Yeah, yeah. Thanks. Awesome. So yeah, great question, Beth. I think it depends a bit. But a lot of different times and platforms have been tested and worked pretty well. So there's a lot of flexibility with making it work, depending on your congregation's kind of unique experience. Great question.

Blake Smith 1:09:56

I'm not seeing any others. But I have a couple that I want to ask just because I I've had people ask me as I've traveled around the field. So the first one would be, if a congregation has not yet decided or they're in the process, would you recommend, Are there things that you might recommend that they do just to 'increase their welcoming and affirming nature that they can do without having been in the training, not in placement of, not as a replacement for the training, but something that they might do as an immediate action?

Linda Stanbridge 1:10:35

Yeah, I'm curious to hear from the panelists. If there's something that you did during your journey that you think, oh, man, this could have even been a good a good prep thing.

Nancy McClellan 1:10:47

I would wonder, is there a survey, Linda, the congregation could take that would test their welcoming, because the big aha for our congregation was, Oh, we're not really as welcoming as we thought we were. And so maybe to take a survey, to realize that you should consider seriously the curriculum. And you know, there obviously, are some minor things that you can do change the signage on your bathrooms, okay, to be welcoming. And some signage on your unisex bathrooms are more welcoming than others. But really, I don't see how you can bypass the curriculum, it made all the difference in the world, and how you look at this. And it's because our society is ignorant about the queer community. We are. And I say that from, you know, I have graduate degrees, I sit on boards for lots of different things through my profession. And, and I can say, honestly, that we are still an ignorant society about the queer community. I know I was.

Linda Stanbridge 1:12:08

I think that's true. And there are some implicit bias tests that you can take online that are free. My congregation recently did one about disability. And it is really eye-opening. Yeah. Yeah. So and that's, I think that's a really great point to kind of have an opportunity to be honest with ourselves about where we're at. Thanks for that. What about you, Humberto,

Humberto Tinsman 1:12:29

I was just gonna say, one of the things that we talked about a lot before we did the Harmony Program was, okay, a guest has walked through the door. What happens next? And it's kind of that blank stare of, we welcomed that, like, no, like, talk about it. So who goes up to them? Like, do we make sure that we sit by them? Do we invite them to lunch afterwards? And just having that open conversation of, hey, we need to pretend like we've had guests before, it might have been a couple years since we've had one. But we need to pretend like we know what we're doing. So when that does happen, it's not this awkward of like, Oh, who's that person? Why did they walk in through the door? Like, are they related to someone? Or, you know, is there a special service that's going on that no one told me about so, you know, act like you've been there before, talk about, hey, this is how we're going to react when a guest

comes in. These are what we're not going to say because there are some things that you shouldn't do when a guest comes for the first time to put them on a spotlight. But practice being welcoming. Practice, you know, asking people to launch in in trying to have some, you know, very surface level questions. And then if you want, what are some more medium questions of how you get to know someone to build a relationship, and then this is the crucial part. What's the follow through? Okay, the worship service has happened. What are we doing afterwards? How are we engaging to this guest who has decided to come?

Blake Smith 1:13:54

You know, Humberto, I thought it was obvious what you're supposed to do when a guest comes in. You ask them if they want to do the prayer for peace next week, or if they want to teach a Sunday school class.

Humberto Tinsman 1:14:02

Exactly. Exactly where they want me Pastor. Got anything going on? Yeah.

Nancy McClellan 1:14:08

No, we had someone walk through our door and I witnessed this and somebody asked them, are you sure you belong here this Sunday morning? The Alcoholics Anonymous group actually meets on such and such a night.

Matt Bryant 1:14:23

I think the hospitality book I mentioned earlier has some pretty specific ideas about what to do. Yes, come so you might want to refer to that book. But the one thing I would recommend if you're trying to figure out whether or not this is the right thing for your branch, you can do some classes and worship services that actually discuss the church's Enduring Principles. And during the discussion of those especially in particular, you know, all are called worth of all persons. You can really introduce what the Church teaches with regard to LGBTQ issues and depending on the opinion In the feelings that come up during that discussion, that would be a pretty good gauge of you know how ready your branch is, for some of that, you know, especially if people start quoting some of those Old Testament Scriptures, and you want to talk about that. I mean, there's a lot of great material on the Enduring Principles. A number of groups in the church have done some services, a series on that, you know, Beyond the Walls, Toronto did a great series on that. Our own mission center, South Central States is in the middle of doing that. A series of worship services at their Sunday evening worship service. And I think that sort of discussion will be a really good indication of how suited your branch might be, to becoming, you know, a really a welcoming and affirming branch. And I think that's a really good set of material. I gave a talk through my peace and justice group, I got invited to talk at a Unitarian Universalist Church. And I listed our Enduring Principles versus their eight basic principles that they operate on. And they were amazed at, you know, the similarities, and how you know, how welcoming, you know. they're known for being you know, maybe very general and accepting to many people. And, you know, our Enduring Principles are such a great selling point, if you want to call it that. And, you know, we have a one-page brochure that we've created for our Pride events, when the brochure is not no longer available from Herald House. Occasionally, people like to read those and know that this is a place that believes those simple things.

Linda Stanbridge 1:16:36

I really love that, Matt, it's kind of us just realizing how this work is so deeply already a part of who we are and who we're invited to be. The other tool, I think that can be really helpful. And I don't know that we get into this, Nancy, when we went through with your congregation, it's put up by a university, and I can't remember which now it is. But if you just Google it, it's Unpacking the invisible knapsack. Unpacking the invisible knapsack. And, it's a way of examining kind of power and privilege, which is the conversation we have before we really start digging into the, the meat of the program, because we really can't have an authentic conversation about this topic without doing a little bit of work on ourselves and kind of preparing. So that can be a great place to start too.

Blake Smith 1:17:25

Well, I cannot thank you all enough. I'm sure there are a million more questions that will come up. But the great thing is that we have some resources for that, of course, I lift up first Harmony.lgbt, and that is the Harmony website where you can make contact with them and ask questions and find out more about the welcoming and affirming program. Again, thank you all for being here. I want to give special thanks to Linda, who not only agreed to be the co-host, but on relatively short notice and what a blessing it has been to have you here. Thank you for all you're doing and continuing to do. And I hope you get some free time soon. But I may be calling you to fill up some of that free time myself. So anyway, but thank you, thank you so much for being here. And special thanks, also to our panelists, to Nancy and the Waterford Michigan congregation too for all that you're doing and participating in this program and leading the way. To Matt Bryant to the North Little Rock Arkansas congregation. So to Matt and to your congregation, Matt. Thank you again, especially in a state where it's very difficult to do that work. And last but not least, Humberto Tinsman, from the Juan Tabo, New Mexico congregation, thank you for what you're doing. And of course, as we mentioned earlier, you can hear more from Humberto and his pal Jacob at the Ministry for Dummies podcast and probably here on Project Zion a few more times in the near future. I want to also thank Ashley Pozo, our production manager for doing all of the advertising for this event and for the work that she has done during the event. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, thanks to all of our listeners here at Project Zion Podcast, we wouldn't have reason to do this if it weren't for you. If you have any topics that you'd like us to consider for future episodes or live events for Project Zion Podcast, please send those ideas to projectzionpodcast@gmail.com. To hear more from Project Zion Podcast, go to projectzionpodcast.org, or find us on your favorite podcast platform. Have a great rest of your day.