

CALLED TO WELCOME & AFFIRM

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I walked away from church my junior year of high school after a youth minister proceeded to tell us that God judged us for our every action and then listed all the things that we shouldn't be doing because they were sinful and doing them made us sinful and hated in the eyes of God. This was not the church that I had grown up in but the church my friends belonged to, where the cool hip youth minister was. This church had all these great activities designed to entertain and dazzle the youth. That was one of the reasons I started going there. I was searching for a place to belong. Before that, I had never heard the message that God could hate me, or that God was judging me, or that God would not love me because of my actions. I didn't know how to deal with this, and I ran away from God and that church.

I went off to a college with church ties. I was still feeling the draw to God and worship even though I had just run away. Unfortunately, the messages I heard from the pulpit during services were much the same as those of high school—that of judgment and exclusion. I tried several other local congregations around the college of various denominations and heard very similar messages. It was during this time that I was struggling to figure out my identity. To discern who I loved, and it turned out that I had fallen in love with my best friend, a woman.

I came out and came of age in the Midwest during the peak years of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church. Living in Kanas City, my now wife and I saw and heard protest after protest by this person and the church. Our world and the rest of the community were filled with prolific messages against the LGBTQIA community. We were repeatedly told loud and clear that we were sinful, we were abominations in the eyes of God, and much worse. It should come as no surprise, these messages sunk in and made themselves at home. Not just for me but an entire generation. You know why. We were hearing NOTHING else. No, the other churches were willing to step forward and tell me or anyone in the LGBTQIA community that we were holy, made in the image of God, loved just as we are, and welcome.

It was no wonder that I ran away from God, from the church for a long time. Why go somewhere you aren't wanted. Nobody else was there to counter the messages being plastered across the media.

God didn't go away. I longed to return to worship to a community of believers. I dared to step back into church in the





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late 90's. It was at an ELCA church, which would eventually be my home congregation. It is essential to say that day wasn't perfect. It wasn't that the greeters made me feel welcomed, the coffee hour wasn't fabulous, and the sermon didn't bring me to tears of joy, but I saw and felt hope. No hate was preached from the pulpit; instead, the Gospel of Jesus Christ with its message of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. And in the parking lot, there was a car with a rainbow sticker on it. I felt like I could find a home here.

As I said, this wasn't a magical cure-all day—it took several more years for me to walk back into church for good. Healing takes time. I had to figure out who I was as a person and be confident in that before standing in a congregation of people and expecting them to be welcoming and affirming of me. On the first day of Lent in 2012, I walked back into the same sanctuary.

It also wasn't a perfect day, but I didn't expect it to be. I went in understanding that people in the church, not God, had hurt me. I understood that as a denomination, the ELCA was supposed to be welcoming and affirming of the LGBTQIA community. I was prepared to figure out where we stood and work together, to help them understand my side and to understand and hear their side. To walk together and get to know these broken people because I am just as broken.

We are all broken. We are all sinful. The Church is broken because we create it, not God. The good news is that God gave us some wonderful gifts; grace, hope, and mercy. Suppose we in the LGBTQIA+ community choose to walk away. How do we avoid continually repeating this cycle of hurting the youth and adults in the church by having them hear, "you are wrong for being who you are"? The church's place is to welcome and affirm everyone who walks in that door and work to ensure that their space is truly welcoming and affirming inside those doors.