

“Deepening Our Welcome”

I Corinthians 3:1-9; Ephesians 2:11-22 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – July 19, 2026
Open & Affirming Commitment Sunday (Pride Sunday)

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might welcome your
Spirit of wisdom and understanding into our hearts and our minds, that we might better
share the love of Christ with all. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

What a blessed image – “a dwelling place for God”! I don’t know that we often phrase it that way, but I think we do think about church that way. We talk about welcoming people in, and we’re not just talking about the building; we’re talking about the community. What an ironic description – that a “dwelling place” becomes possible only because walls have been broken down. The authenticity and faithfulness of our spiritual abode is measured not just by who is within it, but also by whether or not others are kept from entering it.

Our congregation, Vista La Mesa Christian Church, has declared that we are an Open & Affirming Congregation – proclaiming, in part: “As an Open & Affirming congregation, we humbly acknowledge that many have known the pain of exclusion and discrimination by the church and society. Our community is formed by God’s life-giving, life-changing grace. In turn, we work to become a living expression of God’s unconditional love. We joyously welcome the LGBTQIA+ community –

created by God and equal in worth and dignity.”¹ The opening sentence of our Open & Affirming Statement says that we “strive to follow Christ’s example of unconditional love and inclusion of all God’s children.” After we approved this statement, we also inaugurated this day – our annual Open & Affirming Commitment Sunday, when we receive this Special Offering to support San Diego Pride and Disciples Alliance Q+. It is held on this third weekend of July to coincide with the primary San Diego Pride celebration.

As we do all of this for the second time, I want to encourage us to think about how we can deepen our commitment to being truly open and affirming. It doesn’t take much to say “all are welcome” and “we love everybody.” Plenty of churches that aren’t open and affirming say those things. It was another step forward to clarify that we include LGBTQ+ folks when we say it. But saying it and making it a felt reality are not the same thing. It’s possible we are like those Christians still merely being fed on milk, without having moved up to solid food that Paul was writing about to the Corinthians

Is it possible to really love someone if you don’t really know them? In an abstract way, perhaps. But not in a personal, incarnation way. We are best loved by those who know us most deeply. Is it possible to know someone without having listened to their burdens and trials? If we haven’t engaged in the mutual vulnerability

¹ <https://vlmcc.org/about-us/open-affirming-congregation/>

of carrying the weight of each other's difficulties, are we truly connected in a way that deserves the word "love"?

If this congregation is to move up to solid food, from the infant's milk of reciting "all are welcome," we are going to need to spend some time learning more about the people we are hoping to welcome. It is true that when we went through the discernment process, that we discovered we have many people here who have gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer loved ones. But do those people feel comfortable sharing their loved ones' stories? The truth is that, as a congregation, we are in many different places on these questions – with different levels of experience and exposure, and different levels of comfort with asking questions. Those who do have LGBTQ+ family members have probably already discovered that asking their loved one to educate them is not helpful; it places an undue burden on someone who already has a relationship with us that they might not be willing to risk. So regardless of our level of exposure, we can all benefit from seeking out multiple sources of information and insight.

If we want to be a truly welcoming, loving, accepting community of faith, we need to open our hearts and our minds and learn about the full spectrum of experiences that LGBTQ+ folks go through. And heaven knows, the LGBTQ+ community needs that welcome, and they need it to be authentic and true and solid. The world is still not a safe place: studies from the Human Rights Campaign showed

that over half of LGBTQ+ youth screened positive for depression and 2/3rds screened positive for anxiety.² These rates were much higher than non-LGBTQ+ youth, and they were even higher among trans youth in particular. One quarter wish they were not LGBTQ+, and four in ten felt critical of themselves when they think about being LGBTQ+.

San Diego is celebrating Pride this month, and most of the country celebrated it last month. But have you also noticed how many “holidays” connected to the LGBTQ+ community are connected to death? March 31 is International Day of Trans Visibility. November 20 is Trans Day of Remembrance. December 1 is World AIDS Day.³ Many studies show that level of suicidality among LGBTQ+ youth and adults are much higher than among the general population. This is a slow-motion crisis that simply need not exist – if only people would reject the hateful, discriminatory attitudes and ideologies that create such traumatic conditions.

We need to be able to listen to stories of extreme body dysmorphia – that is, the feeling that the way your body is on the outside doesn’t match how it feels like it should be from the inside – without wincing. If we can read scriptures in worship about circumcision, I believe we can handle these other kinds of stories; we don’t have to fully understand someone’s experience to believe them and offer them our support.

² <https://reports.hrc.org/2023-lgbtq-youth-report#depression-anxiety-and-stress>

³ <https://glaad.org/reference/calendar/>

We need to develop the resilience to commit to the long haul when it comes to fighting for basic protections and rights that are constantly under attack; the ACLU tracked 616 anti-LGBTQ+ laws in 2025, including 6 in California.⁴ We need to be willing to offer our support and understanding to those who are estranged from the families who rejected them, with trying to “fix” the problem or encourage them toward reconciliation they are not ready for. We tend to assume that people shouldn’t stop speaking to their families, no matter what. But if the situation in someone’s family is killing them, we cannot demand they maintain those connections and still insist we love them. I read through a lot of statistics to prepare for this, but I need to tell you about the thing that broke me open. When you first visit the website for The Trevor Project – a organization working to reduce LGBTQ+ youth suicide rates – the first thing you see is a little pop-up window.⁵ It explains that if you need to close the site quickly, there is a “Quick Exit” feature, where you can just press the escape button three times to make the website go away. That feature exists so that youth who are seeking help can protect themselves if a parent who is hostile to their needs interrupts them. Can you imagine? Having to listen for steps in the hallway while you’re trying to find someone on the internet who can help convince you not to take your own life?

⁴ <https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2025>

⁵ <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/accepting-adults-reduce-suicide-attempts-among-lgbtq-youth/>

Friends, the LGBTQ+ community needs us to step up our game. They need us to move up to solid foods, rather than simply continuing to drink the infant's milk of "all are welcome." We don't all have to do this the same way; in fact, it's probably better if we follow a few different paths of inquiry. But we each need to commit to learning more. The other thing The Trevor Project tells us is a sign of hope: their study showed that LGBTQ+ youth who reported having at least one accepting adult in their lives were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the last year. We can be those accepting adults. We can make that difference. If we commit ourselves to learning more, to sharing the stories that have helped us come to deeper understanding, to building up our tolerance for embracing things we don't fully understand. We can "become a living expression of God's unconditional love," but we have to be willing to put in the work. May we follow Christ Jesus forward, as the walls come tumbling down! Hallelujah and Amen!