

# Affirmation of Welcome

## Survey Results

### Executive Summary

---

First Lutheran Community Church entered into a “period of discernment” in January 2009 regarding a proposed *Affirmation of Welcome*. As part of its discernment process, a survey of the congregation was conducted March 1-11, 2009 to get a sense of where the congregation members stood on various issues raised by the Affirmation.

The survey presented in this report provides a sense of how several members currently view these issues (especially for the members who are more active and likely to be among the congregation’s “opinion leaders”). The relatively large turnout of 111 individuals in 11 days suggests that this is likely a fairly accurate reflection of the congregation as a whole. Without this sort of robust survey, getting a “sense of the group” is highly subjective and prone to large bias (“spin” and error) on the part of the observer. Views may change through time with dialog and reflection, but the results of this survey provide a good foundation for understanding the congregation’s current thoughts on these issues.

The survey found that members who responded generally felt strongly about these issues (60% of the time people chose 1’s and 5’s—either *Strongly Disagreeing* or *Strongly Agreeing*). Examples:

- 71% *Strongly Agreed* that they had thought about these issues and were at ease with their views.
- 70% *Strongly Agreed* that homosexuals and heterosexuals are equal in God’s sight.

Among the survey’s 15 statements, eight elicited a majority response:

- I’ve thought about this and am at ease with my views. (85%)
- Homosexuals and heterosexuals are equal in God’s sight. (79%)
- All are welcome in leadership positions and to participate in sacraments. (69%)
- The Affirmation should just say “All.” (68%)
- We already do what the Affirmation calls for; it’s pointless. (56%)
- Homosexuality is *not* a sin” (54%)
- Now is a good time to study and discuss this. (50%)
- Gays would be equally likely to find us with or without being listed on the web. (50%)

The survey found that the congregation appears to be closely split on five statements:

- The Affirmation should be specific (6% difference; 41% agreed, 47% disagreed).
- The Affirmation should be approved (7% difference; 46% agreed, 39% disagreed).
- That they would like to discuss this (8% difference; 32% agreed, 40% disagreed).
- That gays would be more comfortable if the Affirmation passed (9% difference; 40% agreed, 31% disagreed)

- That they would support the pastor participating in the blessing of a same-sex union; (12% difference; 47% agreed, 35% disagreed).

“I don’t know” and neutral responses were frequently recorded for four statements:

- Sexual orientation is determined at birth. (38%)
- Homosexuality is a choice. (31%)
- Gays would feel more comfortable if the Affirmation passes. (29%)
- Gays would be equally likely to find us with or without being listed on the web. (28%)

The survey results suggest that the congregation feels strongly about these issues and for the most part members report that their minds are made up. Two-fifths of the congregation does not want to discuss it. (“I know what I think; I feel strongly about it; and I don’t want to talk about it!”) This could lead to alienation if a member chooses to not discuss and think about the issues, and then the congregation votes to proceed on a path contrary to the member’s strongly-felt position.

To avoid/minimize alienation, follow-on discussions should seek to broaden our common ground—and those who do not share this common ground should be provided every opportunity and encouragement to share their views and listen to others.

Additional congregational dialog is clearly appropriate, given that the congregation is split on key issues including whether the proposed Affirmation should be passed, whether it should be specific, and whether there’s support for pastors participating in the blessing of same-sex unions. With the strongly felt views prevalent on these issues, the dialog should be conducted with an abundance of compassion, empathy, and concern for the feelings of others. The dialog should not be rushed, but, given the importance of the matter and the majority’s view that now is a good time to discuss this, neither should it be allowed to be put off.

Areas where there is a significant amount of uncertainty may be issues to explore in greater depth for those who are interested. Those issues include the nature of sexual orientation (determined at birth or personal choice?) and how passage of this Affirmation would impact people who are gay/lesbian (would it help them find us and/or be more comfortable in our midst?). Likewise, a closely-related area which harbored confusion should be explored: the pros/cons of the Affirmation being generic (“all”) vs. specific. Conducting a Bible study on the topic of homosexuality seems warranted.

This survey’s primary intent was to give the congregation and its leaders a sense of how the congregation feels on issues raised by the proposed Affirmation of Welcome. The survey is capable of achieving this intent if, and only if, its results are widely made known to the members. It will achieve its secondary purposes only to the extent that it fosters awareness and understanding and makes its way into follow-on public and private discussions and individual meditation.

The Congregational Council, pastoral staff, and leaders of groups within the congregation should use the survey results to frame and conduct discussions as the congregation discerns how we, as a collective group, are called by God to respond to the proposed Affirmation. We, as individual members, should use the results as one point of reference as we discern how we are being called by God to respond. Additional resources in this process of discernment should also be brought to bear: the example of Jesus, an understanding of Scripture, prayer, reason, and the nudges of the Spirit.