



Welcome Statement Frequently Asked Questions

Throughout the past year, the SOTP Council has actively studied how welcoming we are as a faith community. After listening to stories and recommendations from people of many backgrounds and life experiences, our Council learned that we needed to be more explicit in proclaiming our inclusiveness. We want everyone to know they are safe and valued in our church family. Our Welcome Statement is not only a declaration of who we are, it is intended to be a guide for living out our wide welcome.

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Shepherd of the Prairie Lutheran Church

A Place to Belong Even Before You Believe

1. Why does SOTP need a Welcome Statement?

Our Welcome Statement simply puts into words what we believe the Gospel already teaches—that God's grace is for everyone and that every person deserves to be treated with dignity, compassion, and respect. While our congregation has long sought to be welcoming, this statement clearly expresses who we aspire to be and the values that shape our ministry together.

Many people today wonder whether church is a place where they will be accepted, heard, and valued. Our hope is that Shepherd of the Prairie will be known as a congregation where people encounter the love of Jesus through genuine relationships, faithful worship, and compassionate service. Many people who are looking for a church home, today, will search the internet for potential churches. Featuring the Welcome Statement on the church website shares our mission and values and creates a welcoming that may otherwise be missed. We believe the Gospel is too good to keep hidden behind uncertainty.

2. How does this statement align with the Bible and our Lutheran faith?

Throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, God encourages us to welcome everyone, especially those who may be very different from ourselves.

God also invites us to remember that we always begin as strangers until relationships are formed. We rely on the welcome of strangers and are invited to extend the same courtesy. Leviticus 19:33-34 says, "Don't mistreat any foreigners who live in your land. Instead, treat them as well as you treat your own people and love them as much as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

Jesus stood up for people who were excluded. Matthew 19:13-14 says, "Some people brought their children to Jesus, so he could place his hands on them and pray for them. His disciples told the people to stop bothering him. But Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and don't try to stop them! People who are like these children belong to God's kingdom.'"

Martin Luther looked to Abraham as a great example of Christian hospitality. In his lecture on Genesis 18, Luther commends Abraham's welcoming of strangers saying that those who want to be true members of the church are encouraged to practice hospitality. The church is called to be like Abraham with members caring for each other "by showing kindness and giving assistance. The church must be a place of refreshment for the weary."

Our larger church body, the ELCA, strives to live this out in every way. "We strive to be a welcoming church. We recognize that there are groups and communities of people who have been hurt by their experiences with churches. They have been made to feel that they cannot be their God-given selves in church settings. The ELCA is continually working toward reconciliation and to share our fundamental belief that God's love and grace are limitless and for everyone."

(elca.org "About the ELCA" / "Who We Are" / "Beliefs")

3. Does this mean our beliefs or Lutheran theology are changing?

No.

Our beliefs remain rooted in Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and our identity as an ELCA congregation. The Welcome Statement does not replace or change our theology. Instead, it describes how we seek to live out Christ's command to love God and love our neighbors.

4. Does welcoming everyone mean we agree with everyone?

No.

Christian community has never required complete agreement on every issue. Our congregation includes people with different experiences, opinions, and perspectives. We believe we can learn from one another while remaining united in Christ. Welcome means every person deserves love and respect—not that every opinion is the same.

5. What does "hospitality without judgment" mean?

It means that people should encounter kindness before criticism. Just as Jesus welcomed people before their lives were transformed, we seek to meet people with compassion, listen to their stories, and walk alongside them as fellow disciples. We leave judgment to God while encouraging one another toward faithful living.

6. Why does the statement specifically mention race, gender identity, sexual orientation, political perspective, and other differences?

Everyone wonders whether there is a place for them. By naming groups that have sometimes wondered whether they belong in church, we hope to communicate clearly that every person is welcome to worship, grow, and experience God's love. The purpose is not to elevate one group over another but to ensure that no one feels forgotten.

7. Does this statement make Shepherd of the Prairie a "political church"?

No.

Our Welcome Statement is rooted in Scripture, not politics. Every commitment within the statement is grounded in a biblical passage because our goal is to reflect the welcome of Jesus Christ rather than any political ideology. People from across the political spectrum are welcome here.

8. Will people still be encouraged to grow spiritually?

Absolutely.

Welcome is only the beginning. Our mission is to help people deepen their relationship with Jesus through worship, Scripture, prayer, service, generosity, and Christian community. We believe discipleship is a lifelong journey for every one of us.

9. What does this statement ask of members?

It asks us to live more intentionally as followers of Christ.

That means:

- Greeting newcomers.
- Listening before assuming.
- Serving our neighbors.
- Walking with people through life's joys and struggles.
- Extending grace even when we disagree.

The Welcome Statement is not just for visitors—it is a commitment for every member.

10. How does this Welcome Statement relate to our mission of making disciples?

Welcoming people is not the end of our mission—it is the beginning. Jesus invited people into relationship before He called them into deeper discipleship. Throughout the Gospels, people first encountered His grace and then were transformed by His teaching, love, and presence. Our Welcome Statement reflects that same pattern. We seek to welcome every person, help them experience an authentic Christian community, and encourage one another to grow as followers of Jesus. Hospitality and discipleship are not competing priorities; they belong together.

11. Is Shepherd of the Prairie becoming a "different kind of church"?

No.

Shepherd of the Prairie remains committed to the same mission it has always embraced: proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, worshiping faithfully, growing in God's Word, serving our neighbors, and making disciples. The Welcome Statement does not change who we are—it helps us say more clearly who we aspire to be. It reflects the example of Jesus, who consistently welcomed people with grace while inviting them into a life of faith and transformation. Our hope is that every person who walks through our doors will encounter both the love of Christ and the truth of Christ. We believe these are never in competition. As followers of Jesus, we seek to extend grace freely, grow together in faith, and trust the Holy Spirit to shape each of our lives over time. As our congregation has often said, everyone is welcome, everyone is loved, and everyone is invited to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

12. Who can I talk to if I have questions or feel uncertain or uncomfortable?

If you have any questions or concerns, we encourage you to reach out to Pastor Mark or Pastor Ryan.

Our Hope

SOTP's Welcome Statement is not about lowering the importance of faith or avoiding difficult conversations. It is about making sure every person knows they are invited into a community centered in Jesus. We believe lives are transformed, not by exclusion, but by encountering the grace, truth, and love of Christ, together. This statement is our commitment to become the kind of church where that transformation can happen.

8/17/26

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