



STAGES OF INCLUSION

Each church's journey is unique, but many follow a general progression along these lines -

Rejection and Exclusion

Some individuals and local churches view LGBTQ+ people as sinful and condemn LGBTQ+ identities and behaviors. Conversion therapy or other forms of "change" efforts may be promoted, though the UMC officially opposes these practices (Book of Resolutions, "Therapy or Ministry to Change Sexual Orientation is Harmful and Ineffective," #3248).

While the UMC has removed mandated discrimination, churches can still choose to discriminate.

Steps Toward Growth:

- Foster conversations focused on grace, hospitality, and Jesus' love for marginalized groups.
- Encourage listening to the personal stories of LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly those with UMC roots.
- Offer Bible studies on inclusion, with an emphasis on texts about justice, love, and human dignity.
- Study Wesleyan theology on social holiness and the evolving role of the church in justice issues.

Growth & Learning Opportunity:

Create regular spaces for people to reflect together on how to dismantle harmful biases and work toward greater empathy and inclusion. This can include ongoing group discussions, retreats, or book studies to deepen understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences.

Tolerance and Silence

The church does not openly condemn LGBTQ+ individuals but avoids discussing LGBTQ+ matters — the approach may be "don't ask, don't tell."

A "love the sinner, hate the sin" mentality may still persist. LGBTQ+ people may be tolerated, but only to a point. There may be expectations for celibacy, and struggles may arise when LGBTQ+ individuals seek to join or be baptized. Inclusion is often conditional and unspoken.

Steps Toward Growth:

- Encourage open dialogue through structured discussion groups and respectful storytelling.
- Address the pastoral needs of LGBTQ+ individuals who are already part of the congregation.
- Use denominational resources (e.g., RMN materials, Social Principles) to emphasize the UMC's evolving stance.
- Suggest small yet meaningful actions, like using inclusive language in prayers and sermons.

Growth & Learning Opportunity:

Offer training or workshops on active listening, inclusivity, and the intersection of faith and LGBTQ+ justice and advocacy. This could also involve creating space for people to share personal experiences, fostering an environment where both learning and vulnerability are valued.

Pose reflective questions:

- Who might be missing from our pews because they don't feel safe here?
- What barriers or fears prevent us from discussing LGBTQ+ inclusion?
- How can we take small steps toward becoming a more welcoming space?





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Welcoming but Not Affirming

LGBTQ+ individuals are welcomed as visitors and members, but may face restrictions regarding leadership, weddings, baptisms, etc. The church expresses a desire to love and include but holds traditional theological views on sexuality and gender. The topic of LGBTQ+ inclusion may be debated but remains unresolved.

Steps Toward Growth:

- Move from passive welcome to active inclusion (e.g., intentionally engaging LGBTQ+ members to serve in leadership).
- Address theological misunderstandings that separate identity from belonging.
- Offer workshops or book studies on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in faith communities.
- Encourage clergy and lay leaders to explore their own evolving perspectives and experiences.
- Consider starting the process of becoming a Reconciling Ministry.

Growth & Learning Opportunity:

Set up "learning circles" or study groups that engage with LGBTQ+ theology, scripture, and inclusive practices, helping individuals explore how to be more supportive allies within the context of their faith.

Affirming Individuals, Limited Structural Change

LGBTQ+ members are fully welcomed, and their identities are respected. Churches may allow LGBTQ+ people to serve in leadership roles, but may not officiate same-sex marriages or advocate publicly. Some church members and leaders affirm LGBTQ+ inclusion, while others do not. If external challenges arise, the church struggles to stand firmly with its vulnerable members.

Steps Toward Growth:

- Adopt clear policies that allow LGBTQ+ individuals to serve in leadership roles and marry.
- Support LGBTQ+ leadership development and encourage participation in decision-making.
- Connect with other affirming UMC churches to build a broader movement.
- Shift from quiet affirmation to public advocacy.

Growth & Learning Opportunity:

Create spaces for ongoing learning through intergenerational mentoring, conferences, or even partnerships with LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations. This will provide opportunities for congregants to better understand the intersection of their faith and the justice work needed to support the LGBTQ+ community.

Pose reflective questions:

- How can our church reflect its affirming values in our policies and practices?
- Are we ready to take a public stand for LGBTQ+ inclusion? Why or why not?
- What concerns remain about making structural changes, and how can we address them?





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Fully Affirming & Inclusive

LGBTQ+ individuals are fully included in all aspects of church life, including marriage, leadership, and ordination. The church actively affirms LGBTQ+ identities as part of God's diverse creation. Policies explicitly ensure full participation and belonging.

Steps Toward Growth:

- Encourage ongoing education to prevent stagnation in inclusion efforts.
- Partner with local LGBTQ+ advocacy groups and participate in social justice initiatives.
- Offer mentorship and support to other churches moving toward inclusion.
- Strengthen intersectional justice work, recognizing how race, gender, and class intersect with LGBTQ+ justice.

Pose reflective questions:

- How can we support other churches on their journey toward inclusion?
- What broader justice issues intersect with LGBTQ+ inclusion, and how can we engage with them?
- How can we sustain our commitment to LGBTQ+ justice over time?

Growth & Learning Opportunity:

Organize regular "learning journeys," including group discussions, training sessions, and volunteer work with LGBTQ+ rights organizations. Create opportunities for church members to grow together by immersing themselves in shared educational experiences that challenge perspectives and deepen commitment to justice.

Advocating for LGBTQ+ Justice

The church moves beyond inclusion to actively advocate for LGBTQ+ rights within the broader community. This involves activism, policy change, and public witness for LGBTQ+ justice. LGBTQ+ voices and leadership are central in shaping the church's mission and theology.

Steps Toward Growth:

- Actively engage in policy change, activism, and public advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights.
- Center LGBTQ+ voices and leadership in shaping the church's mission and theology.
- Support legislative and community-based efforts to protect and advance LGBTQ+ rights.

Growth & Learning Opportunity:

Facilitate ongoing learning by hosting public forums or panel discussions with LGBTQ+ activists and theologians. Create spaces for people to engage in conversations about what it means to advocate for justice and how the church can continue to grow in its understanding of the LGBTQ+ community.

