

S T E P H A N I E S P E L L E R S

Radical Welcome

Embracing God, The Other and
the Spirit of Transformation



Morehouse Publishing
NEW YORK

Copyright © 2006, 2021 by Stephanie Spellers

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.

All rights reserved.

Morehouse Publishing, 19 East 34th Street, New York, NY 10016

Morehouse Publishing is an imprint of Church Publishing Incorporated.

Cover photo by JannHuizenga

Cover design by Jennifer Kopec, 2Pug Design

Typeset by Rose Design

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Spellers, Stephanie, author.

Title: Radical welcome : embracing God, the other, and the spirit of transformation / Stephanie Spellers.

Description: 15th anniversary edition. | New York, NY : Morehouse Publishing, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021040188 (print) | LCCN 2021040189 (ebook) | ISBN 9781640654686 (paperback) | ISBN 9781640654693 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Non-church-affiliated people. | Church work with ex-church members. | Evangelistic work. | Church growth. | Church development, New.

Classification: LCC BV4921.2 .S68 2021 (print) | LCC BV4921.2 (ebook) | DDC 253--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021040188>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021040189>

*For my mother, Phyllis Spellers,
my biggest cheerleader and inspiration,
who says she always knew I'd write a book someday.*

*And for my entire family in Frankfort, Kentucky,
who taught me how to swing open the doors
and invite the whole community to the table.*

Contents

Foreword: The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston	xi
Introduction to the 15th Anniversary Edition	xv
Introduction to Radical Welcome	
The Radical Welcome Journey	3
Defining Radical Welcome	11
Part I: The Theology of Radical Welcome	
The Dream of God	27
Living with Arms Wide Open	37
Be Not Afraid	45
Part II: The Picture of Radical Welcome	
Beyond Inviting and Inclusion	57
Radical Welcome Signs	69
Part III: The Practice of Radical Welcome	
Re-imagine Your Common Life	89
Check Your Reality	111
Reckon with Your Fear	123
Where Do We Go from Here . . . Now?	137
Part IV: Community Reflections on Radical Welcome	
The Way of Radical Welcome	147
<i>by Mark Bozzuti-Jones</i>	
Walking with Radical Welcome	151
<i>by Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows</i>	

Radical Welcome and Training the Church's Future Leaders <i>by W. Mark Richardson</i>	155
A Dream and a Church Big Enough for God <i>by Michael B. Curry</i>	163
Conclusion: The Journey Continues	171
Bread for the Journey: An Online Companion	179
Acknowledgments	181

Foreword

One of my fondest memories is about a parish I served many years ago. It was in the housing projects. It met upstairs over a local café. I described it as a “half-way house” because so many of our folks had either left the church and were now half-way back in, or they were half-way out of the church and were just giving it one more try before they gave up. It was a great community. A porous, challenging, engaged community. A place full of unique and extraordinary people.

After reading Stephanie Speller’s book, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other and the Spirit of Transformation*, I realize that more than a half-way house, my parish was actually a place of radical welcome. We were an experiment in acceptance. I never would have made that connection in quite the same way without the language of radical welcome.

“We will consider the rationale for radical welcome,” Stephanie writes in the opening to her remarkable book, “and then explore the resources people engaged in the movement toward radical welcome told me they found the most essential—and the hardest to find.”

And that’s just what she does. She gives us a framework and she gives us practical tools. In a step-by-step journey of discovery into what radical welcome is and how it can work, Stephanie offers us a blueprint for planned growth, change, and mission. She shows us that there is a great, untapped source of strength for every congregation. It is the presence of The Other within the pastoral neighborhood: that group of persons who stand just beyond the social/cultural threshold of the congregation. Engaging them honestly will not only expand the horizons of the congregation but revitalize it in ways that could never be realized otherwise. In simple language, radical welcome shows us how we need one another, and even more importantly, how we translate that potential into the blessings of a church renewed.

She is also honest about how hard the job will be. This is not a “feel good” book. It is not about how we should all be nice to strangers at coffee hour. This is a book about the very hard challenges that face any of us when we decide to step outside of our isolation for the sake of the gospel.

To make a commitment to explore the depth of what radical welcome means, we are asked to confront how we all “participate in systems of

inclusion and exclusion.” We are asked to deal with the fact that in practicing radical welcome “there is no such place as a neutral space.”

In short, Stephanie is calling us to a much more mature and nuanced understanding of what it means for any congregation to truly open its doors to community. It is not a matter of just accepting difference. It is a matter of creating something new. Her book is a resource because it tells the story of how real congregations achieved remarkable results in allowing the chemistry of human cultures to mix more freely to produce a people of faith. This is not theory but practice. It is an articulation of the basic steps that any community of faith would need to take to experience transformation and renewal.

Consequently, this book is that rare combination of deep spirituality and pragmatism. Much like the Holy Scriptures on which it is firmly grounded, Stephanie’s vision of radical welcome talks about new life for the people of God. The call to take on the challenges of “radical welcome” is for the growth of the community, not only in numbers, but in spirit, imagination and strength. This is a book about the future envisioned by the gospel, a future that extends the love of Christ in all directions.

I believe that at its heart, radical welcome is about the new definition of evangelism for the twenty-first century. In the past, we have consigned evangelism to the simple exercise of duplication: creating more communities in our own image. In response to the cultural changes of the Civil Rights Movement and up to the present day, we have often spoken of evangelism as though it were sensitivity training for cross-cultural special events. What Stephanie is suggesting is something very different.

Radical welcome is not the welcome wagon. Her direction moves us through the mono-cultural dead end of traditional images of evangelism and beyond the boundaries of polite cultural interaction. It takes us directly to the heart of the nature of evangelism: the transformation of human life from the isolated to the integrated.

Radical welcome is a process. It is a process by which isolated parts of a whole community are brought together in creative and compassionate ways to generate a more integrated, balanced, and dynamic mixture. Not a melting pot or a stew of differences, but a community that works well, prays well, and plans well together. These communities are grounded in some of the most basic values we share as God’s people. Radical welcome describes how communities stay hospitable, connected, centered, open to conversion, and intentional. These are fundamental qualities for any meaningful congregational experience. They are, in short, what pastors are looking for. What radical welcome offers are methods and practices that bring the gospel alive in communities that work for everyone, not just for the few.

“Radical welcome is a fundamental spiritual practice,” Stephanie writes, and that is precisely what she offers here. This is a book about renewal. About growth. About intelligent change. I believe that any person who cares for authentic ministry in open and affirming ways will find a home in radical welcome. This is a resource many of us have been waiting for. It is a message whose time has come.

I hope you enjoy reading *Radical Welcome* as much as I did. I hope even more that you will share it with others. And finally, I hope most of all that you will put its lessons to work as you extend God’s radical welcome to every person without whom your community would not be complete.

The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston
Episcopal Divinity School
Cambridge, Massachusetts
August 2006

Introduction to the 15th Anniversary Edition

[Jesus] said . . . “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

MATTHEW 13:52

It has been fifteen years since the publication of *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other and the Spirit of Transformation*. In those years, so much has changed. So much more has not.

Back in 2006, my church was in a fight for its life. Following the consecration of the Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson as bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire in 2003, the Episcopal Church was torn asunder and ostracized from much of the global Anglican Communion. Though we had been on record since 1976 supporting the pastoral care and welcome of same-gender loving people, and though we had (also in 1976) consented to women’s ordination to the priesthood and even episcopacy, still members and leaders struggled, legislated, and prayed over the nature of inclusion. How would the church incorporate and lift homosexual people’s voices, gifts, wisdom, and power? Would the church welcome voices, gifts, wisdom, and power from the margins at all?

At that time, I sensed the limits of inclusion and welcome. As an African American, working-class-identified, young adult woman in a church built around White, male, upper-class culture and norms, I was more than familiar with the church’s push-pull around inclusion. It says it wants certain groups, says it supports and values us, only to undermine, marginalize, or silence us if we do or say that which does not advance the dominant culture and agenda. In other words, mainline churches love young people who play Bach cantatas and Latinx people who have mastered Robert’s Rules, while they tend to hold at bay Afro-Caribbean people who are not “high church” and LGBTQ people who are a bit too “queer.” The institution wants diversity for decoration, to assuage guilt, and, yes, to address the sin

of oppression—but generally on its own terms. It knows how to dominate and assimilate. Mutuality is a dream.

Radical Welcome felt like a cry in the wilderness. As I read today the names of the people and places I visited and chronicled in these pages, I am struck by the spirit of rebellion, deep faithfulness, hovering loneliness, and boundless hope. We had heard about the dream of God. We had pledged as Episcopalians to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being—and now we wanted to be in a church that lived out those radical claims. We were eager to offer our hearts and gifts to serve God’s mission, but we also dreamt of bringing our whole hearts and truly diverse array of gifts, cultures, voices, and power into the mix. We knew it would change us, change our sibling Christians in the dominant culture, and change the church as a whole . . . and we trusted that mutual transformation was an essential element of the Spirit’s wild and wonderful plan for creation.

That’s what inspired me to invite my own Episcopal church and others like it to push beyond mere inclusion and to take on radical welcome. The definition below—which I refined after a few more years of teaching and journeying—continues to resonate and challenge:

Radical welcome is first and foremost a spiritual practice. It combines the Christian ministry of welcome and hospitality with a faithful commitment to doing the theological, spiritual, and systemic work to eliminate historic, systemic barriers that deny the genuine embrace of groups often oppressed and marginalized in mainline churches.

As you practice radical welcome, you join Jesus in stretching your arms and embracing The Other. You share the gifts of your tradition and culture, even as you allow your heart and your congregation’s life—its ministries, its identity, its worship, its relationships, its leadership—to be transformed by The Other’s presence, gifts, and power among you.

As you read those words and the ones that follow, I hope you hear the call as truly radical. Lots of churches use the phrase “radical welcome” only to engage in almost no power analysis and to take very few steps beyond inclusion, acquisition, and diversity. Sometimes I wish the word “welcome” didn’t sound so warm and nice, and thus so easy to domesticate. People can focus on the “Christian ministry of welcome and hospitality” part and glide right past “the theological, spiritual, and systemic work to eliminate historic, systemic barriers that deny the genuine embrace of groups often oppressed and marginalized in mainline churches.”

Please don’t let that happen. Especially now—while the atmosphere swirls with #metoo, racial reckoning, populism, and an ever-broadening

spectrum of gender and sexuality—this is a moment to dig more deeply into the hard work of dismantling the historic and systemic barriers that have made it nearly impossible for mainline churches to fully embrace (not just include but embrace and be changed by) the oppressed. We have clearer language, better tools, and more people than ever ready to invest in transformation and not merely cosmetic change.

Please don't just read and assume we've already mastered this work. Instead, ask God to reveal how you might (re)commit to the spiritual practice of radical welcome. Wonder anew what margins and edges Jesus is leading you toward, whether outside or inside. For instance, many Episcopalians pat the church on the back for fully welcoming lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning peoples. Meanwhile, LGBTQ peoples—especially those who lack the privilege of Whiteness or class—are waving their arms and yelling, “Not so fast! You may feel heard and powerful, but we do not.”

Their voices and witness remind me that the work of inclusion and welcome is not finished. Every person and every institution has an Other on the edge. The edge for you may be a cultural group or behavior that still grates and feels like it's just not appropriate or holy. The edge may be something in yourself that you've tried to shove down and replace with behaviors that the dominant culture affirms and rewards. Where and who is the Spirit calling you to embrace?

As I say this, I know that even radical welcome is not the end of the story. “Welcome” still conjures the dynamics of inside and outside, with different groups on different sides of the threshold. To speak of “welcome” is still to center the one in power, the one who gets to decide who comes in and who does not. Yes, we are both changed, but someone owns the house and the table. Someone decides if The Other is “welcome” or not.

In an age when the church has been decentered (or what I call “cracked open”) as a building and as an institution, the point is not only to make room inside the church but to discover and dwell with Jesus and make a life with him beyond what we've understood as church. By this, I don't just mean leaving the building, though for a time the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to do just that. I actually mean a fundamental reimagining of church as the community of Jesus' followers who align ourselves with his self-giving ways and his love for the crucified, the forgotten, the ultimate Other.

I've engaged these ideas much more fully in a recent book called, *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community*. As I revisit *Radical Welcome*, I can't help but see the two books as companions or two sides of the same coin. *Radical Welcome* focuses more on changing the life and practice of a congregation, ministry, or institution. *The Church Cracked Open* decenters the church and focuses more on the

spiritual yet practical journey away from empire and White supremacy toward discipleship and beloved community.

We still need radical welcome in order to fully embrace the voices, gifts, cultures, and power of nondominant communities. We need it in order fundamentally to transform the ministry, leadership, and worship of our churches, so they become embodiments of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we need more.

What's New?

Since 2006, so much has changed—and so much has not—in our churches and in the world. It makes sense that this new edition should include the core material as well as some new reflections. What will you find in this expanded edition?

1. The essence of the book remains, largely untouched:

- The opening section defines “radical welcome” and introduces the eight churches at the core of the Radical Welcome Project.
- The chapters in Part I explore the theology and practical spirituality of radical welcome—including God’s heart for welcome, community, and transformation—and God’s invitation to radically surrender to the Spirit and to live without fear.
- Part II offers a picture of radical welcome—with critical material that differentiates between “Inviting,” “Inclusion,” and “Radical Welcome,” and points the way toward becoming a multicultural, anti-racist organization (many thanks to Crossroads for permission to use their popular continuum)—along with a framework for identifying the “Radical Welcome Signs” in these five elements of a congregation’s life:
 - Mission and vision
 - Identity
 - Ministries and relationships
 - Leadership and feedback systems
 - Worship
- The rubber hits the road in Part III. This is the longest section, with detailed practical support for not just talking but making real change. For each element of congregational life, you’ll find questions for assessing “Where Are We Now?” and then charting a course for “Where Is God Inviting Us to Go?” This section also

acknowledges major strategic concerns for practicing radical welcome, including how to examine your congregation's deeper narratives, history, and identity; and how to reckon pastorally and practically with fear—and yes, everyone has it to some degree, whether that's fear of The Other or fear of change.

- The section ends with a fully updated chapter on “Where Do We Go from Here . . . Now?” which lays out possible next steps and the essential practices of a radically welcoming community.

2. Other notes on the original edition:

- I struggled over whether to update the biographical details of the people whose voices and wisdom appear throughout this book. In the end, I opted to leave them as written, because it's important to keep their reflections rooted in the actual context where they were offered.
- I confess that I was prepared to rewrite much of Part III on practice, until I found myself genuinely surprised by how much continues to apply. I hope you will agree.
- The resources sprinkled throughout the book hold up surprisingly well. That said, I've supplemented the online resources with newer material and updated web addresses wherever necessary.
- Where you see “congregation,” feel free to insert “ministry” or “institution” or “community.” Though my research focused on congregations, I've since worked with plenty of independent schools, diocesan teams, and other groups that found the theology, principles, and practice of radical welcome speaks to their dreams and challenges quite well.

3. Along with the reimagined chapter on next steps, you'll be blessed by four new essays from noted colleagues reflecting on the practice of radical welcome and how it intersects with their ministries and their understanding of church.

- Mark Bozzuti-Jones, priest and director of Spiritual Formation for Trinity Church—Wall Street in New York City, offers a poetic take on radical welcome.
- Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows notes how radical welcome has been a constant companion, from her years as a priest in a multicultural, multi-generational parish in upstate New York, to her service as a canon in the Diocese of Chicago and now in her role as the bishop of Indianapolis.

- W. Mark Richardson, president and dean of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California, examines radical welcome, mutuality, and community organizing, and their impact on his own ministry, his institution, and theological formation.
 - In 2006, Bishop Michael Curry was a beloved teacher and preacher across the land and the first Black person to lead a southern diocese in the Episcopal Church. Today he is the church's first black presiding bishop and is known around the world. He reflects on the dream of God, radical welcome, and making our ideas and arms stretch as wide as the embrace of our God.
 - Finally, I have written a new concluding chapter about the challenges of radical welcome and some compelling lessons from nearly twenty years engaging churches and leaders in this conversation.
4. And because *Radical Welcome* was never meant to be just a book, the robust web resource titled “Bread for the Journey” features original and updated small group studies, handouts and exercises, sermons, a bible study, annotated bibliography, and more. Find these goods at www.stephaniespellers.com/radical-welcome.

Before we embark, I must say “thank you” to the thousands of people who have walked the road toward radical welcome with me over these many years. You have taught and blessed me and one another, and I feel you at my side now as I revisit and revise. With your help, I hope to be like those kingdom scribes Jesus noticed in Matthew 13, the ones who gather some that is old and some that is new, weaving and discerning and ultimately presenting the final offering with the prayer that it may serve the dream of God. May it be so, in the power of the Spirit.

Stephanie Spellers
Harlem, New York
Pentecost 2021

Introduction to
Radical
Welcome



The Radical Welcome Journey

Come we that love the Lord,
and let our joys be known;
Join in a song of sweet accord,
join in a song of sweet accord,
And thus surround the throne,
and thus surround the throne.
We're marching to Zion,
beautiful, beautiful Zion,
We're marching upward to Zion,
the beautiful city of God.

“MARCHING TO ZION”

A Tale of Two Welcomes

I will never forget that winter's day, sitting in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, a grand Gothic edifice on New York's Upper West Side. Though I had worshiped on the fringe of the congregation while living, working and writing in the city, this time I had come simply to celebrate a friend's ordination.

Seated at the back of the church, distant from the action at the front of the chancel, I was slowly, inexorably tuning out. And then, with a sharp visceral tug, I tuned back in.

“Lord, I will lift mine eyes to the hills, knowing my help, it comes from you . . .”

Was I hearing right?

4 INTRODUCTION TO RADICAL WELCOME

“Your peace you give me in times of the storm. You are the source of my strength . . .”

Could it be?

“You are the strength of my life.”

Oh my God, that was it!

“I lift my hands in total praise.”

Like a giddy child, I turned to my friends on either side, whispering, “Do you hear it? Do you hear it?” They nodded, but they really didn’t have a clue.

On the surface, we all heard a magnificent quartet from a local black church singing Richard Smallwood’s “Total Praise.” What I and perhaps a few others could hear was sweet memory. My mama used to play “Total Praise” on those random Sundays when she would pack me and my brother into the Oldsmobile Omega and cart us to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. Later, I sang in some school-based gospel choirs and cobbled together my own gospel music collection. Even later, once I landed in the Episcopal Church, I played the songs religiously while I dressed for church, my private time to “get my praise on.” But hearing this music—a pop gospel hymn sung by soaring, expressive black voices—in an immense, dignified, European-American identified space? The tears poured, my hands waved, I lifted my voice, and deep inside I heaved a huge sigh of relief and gratitude for the welcome.

Years after my official reception into the Episcopal Church, a part of me that I didn’t even know was sitting outside finally opened the door and came in.

Rewind a decade. It was the early 1990s, toward the end of my first year of divinity school, and I had just arrived at an Episcopal guest house in a major U.S. city. Mind you, I wasn’t Episcopalian. I wasn’t technically even Christian yet (I liked to study it and sing about it, but that was my limit). Still, coming to the door of the lovely building was like coming to a God-filled oasis for this country girl.

The host appeared at the door and asked how much I would be paying before I could step inside. I hopefully mentioned the sliding scale their materials advertised. The host offered to take \$20 off the price *if* I didn’t eat meals with the community. It was still pricey, especially if I had to arrange my own food. The host smiled, suggested I try the nearby youth hostel, and shut the door, leaving a single, petite, young, black woman with limited financial resources and no place to go on the doorstep.

I walked away wondering what kind of religious community, and what kind of church, these Episcopalians had created. Whatever it was, I was sure it was not very Christian. And needless to say, it was radically *unwelcoming*.

I kept my distance from Episcopalians after that encounter. But the God of surprises had a shock tucked away for me. A few years later, I was baptized at a remarkable multicultural Lutheran parish in Boston, and even considered ordination in the Lutheran fold. But something still hadn't clicked. Then I discovered St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a vibrant city congregation filled with people of color and whites; heterosexuals, lesbians, gay men, bisexual people, and transgender people; young adults, some youth, middle-aged people, and seniors; poor and middle-class people rubbing shoulders with the Cambridge elite.

Not only did this mixed-up community feel like home, but the Anglican theology I was voraciously consuming resonated with my own latent sense of what a lived faith ought to be. I needed a comprehensive theology that tolerates ambiguity and acknowledges that no single perspective could ever capture the mind of God. I needed to join a body of people who maintain a reverence for tradition and Scripture alongside a deep respect for reason and context. I wanted the awe, the mess, the beauty, the poetry. I craved the emphasis on justice rooted in an incarnational, resurrection-focused faith. I had found it.

But that experience of welcome did not erase the memory of a door shut in my face years before. Yes, I have witnessed the enthusiastic response when a mostly white congregation sings that rare gospel tune, and I have quietly rejoiced when others remarked, "Why don't we sing this music more often? It's like something in me wakes up and starts to praise God again." But far more often, I have suffered the snide comments about evangelical and gospel music that is not "theologically sophisticated" enough for our churches. I have heard or read leaders of supposedly welcoming churches saying they don't want to "dumb down" their sermons or programs, or to water down their identity, in order to accommodate different races, classes and generations. As a thirtysomething person of color raised in the working-class South, I've had to continually set aside the hope of hearing and seeing the voices, images, stories, and values of my home culture incorporated regularly in any but the most intentionally welcoming mainline churches.

And I am not alone.

We are already here: the strangers, the outcasts, the poor, people of color, gay and lesbian people, young adults, and so many more. We resonate with our church's theology and traditions. We love our congregations and pray and labor for their health, growth and ministry.

That doesn't mean we feel welcome.

This conflicted experience has led me to wonder what it would take to reverse the effect of years, if not generations, of alienation, marginalization and outright rejection. Is it even possible to transform mainline churches

into the multicultural, multigenerational, inclusive body of Christ so many of us yearn to become?

That's where radical welcome comes in.

*Radical welcome*¹ is the spiritual practice of embracing and being changed by the gifts, presence, voices, and power of The Other: the people systemically cast out of or marginalized within a church, a denomination and/or society. Your church may be predominantly white or Latino, wealthy or working-class, gay or straight, middle-aged or fairly young. Regardless of your demographic profile, you still have a margin, a disempowered Other who is in your midst or just outside your door. In fact, you may be The Other. Radical welcome is concerned with the transformation and opening of individual hearts, congregations and systems so that The Other might find in your community a warm place and a mutual embrace *and* so that you are finally free to embrace and be transformed by authentic relationship with the margins.

The Radical Welcome Project

My survival in the church has depended on finding communities devoted to extending radical welcome. I first saw them in relative abundance on a study tour in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. But what if you couldn't get to L.A. or some other oasis? Where were their stories, and how could others learn from their experiences?

I dusted off my reporter's cap that summer and set out to examine eight churches moving toward fully embracing The Other in what I called "The Radical Welcome Project." Those congregations were Grace Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts; St. Philip's and St. Mary's, both in Harlem, New York; St. Bartholomew's in Atlanta, Georgia; St. Paul's in Duluth, Minnesota; All Saints in Pasadena, California; Holy Faith in Inglewood, California; and Church of the Apostles in Seattle, Washington. I consciously chose to focus

1. The term *radical welcome* has cropped up independently in various communities over the past decade or so. I coined the phrase for my own use after colleagues demanded a concise descriptor for the broadly inclusive churches I was beginning to study. My initial project—spending four months conducting intensive, on-site research with eight congregations nationwide—was called the Radical Welcome Project.

Later, I discovered leaders at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in New York City use the same term to characterize their ministry to all God's people, especially seekers and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people. Other groups in the "welcoming congregations" movement—which seeks total inclusion for LGBT people—have expanded the idea of welcoming so that it encompasses an even broader community of outcasts. They landed at radical welcome by a natural evolutionary process.

on the unique hopes and challenges of a selection of Episcopal churches, trusting that ultimately their struggles and insights would also prove useful across denominational contexts.

The sample covers small, medium and corporate-sized churches and draws from the coasts, the heartland and the South, as well as the suburbs, large cities and smaller communities. Most importantly, I wanted to study churches that ran the gamut in terms of community composition and who and how they were welcoming. In particular, I opted to focus on how each dealt with embracing across lines of race and ethnicity, generation, sexual orientation, and class privilege. Some wrestled with one issue, most with a combination. No one had the same margins or the same center, so the lessons are truly broad in their application.

In each congregation, I conducted in-depth research over the course of two weeks, including advance interviews and parish-written histories and other introductory materials, followed by at least ten days spent attending services, programs, meetings, and informal conversations, and concluding with follow-up contacts as necessary. My study of these congregations was less a precise social scientific study than an exploration and exercise in deep listening. Along the way, we talked about where they started, where they are now, and what steps they took along the way. We discussed how they welcome people from the margins, who The Other is for them, why they've taken up this Christian practice, what has proved most challenging on the road to radical welcome, and what barriers remain. They told me of their successes, their hopes and their failures, admitting that they were far from perfect, still met plenty of resistance, and sometimes fell off the path. And so, while these may not be the most radically welcoming churches anywhere, I came to value them for their sheer humanity and humility: they fall short and they keep trying, the momentum has waxed and waned, and that's part of the wisdom they can pass along to the rest of us.

There are lots of radically welcoming Episcopal congregations nationwide and plenty more outside the Episcopal fold, and I've taken care to talk with representatives from a number of these communities. Over the past several years, I've interviewed more than 200 lay leaders, clergy, professors, seminarians, liturgists, change leaders at the local and national levels, and other observers, all of whom shared wise reflections on change, welcome, fear, church history, theology, Scripture, and more.

In the pages that follow, you will hear these voices in a lively conversation with the writings of the faithful, from the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament through centuries of Christian theology leading to contemporary teachers throughout the Christian tradition and beyond our fold. Finally, I've incorporated insights drawn from my experience in faith-based community

organizing and from consulting and sharing this material in communities considering or already committed to transformational growth. All this wisdom is compiled here and offered as bread for your journey.

Your Radical Welcome Journey

Has God whispered in your ear or tugged your sleeve, urging you to step off the curb and onto this road? You're in the right place now, especially if . . .

- your neighborhood has changed—maybe there are more people of color or young people or poor people or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people—and while you want to do the “right” thing, you have no idea where to start.
- you are one of The Others within a congregation, and you hope to spark or nurture your community's commitment to transformation and find nourishment so that you can persevere.
- your church and area are homogeneous (or seem to be), but you still feel called to radical welcome as a spiritual practice—one that trains and stretches your heart to receive more of God, to surrender to the surprising, transforming movement of the Holy Spirit—and you want to find those opportunities to say “yes” to God and to The Other.
- you want to learn the basic language of radical welcome and wrap your mind and tongue around a term that's getting more airplay everyday.
- you hope to move deeper, to get grounded in the biblical and theological issues surrounding and supporting radical welcome and perhaps to share those foundational insights with others in your congregation and community.
- you know you want to see your church become radically welcoming, but you could use some concrete examples and inspiring images of other congregations that have walked this road for a while, to see for yourself how it works.
- you're ready to cast your own radically welcoming vision, to imagine in Technicolor what would happen at your church if you embraced fresh words, voices, songs, and faces, all standing alongside the wise, revered traditions and voices that have grounded your church's identity so far;
- or you've already begun the journey toward radical change, but now you need to reckon with your history, fear (your own and others'), complacency, or a host of other challenges along the way.

This book is far more than a how-to guide for quickly achieving those goals. Rather, in the chapters that follow, I invite you to be part of a journey.

Along the way, we will consider the biblical and theological foundations for radical welcome, explore vivid pictures of the dream come to life in several communities, and the resources people engaged in the work told me they found most essential—and hardest to find. You can take it to the next level using the book's online companion—"Bread for the Journey"—which includes exercises, Bible studies, charts, strategic planning tips, and a workshop for congregations.

As you read, examine and move forward, I hope you will be patient with yourself and your community. Please stay rooted in hope, rather than paralyzing guilt or finger-pointing (at yourself or others). Try to be honest about your story, your privilege and your fears. Don't be afraid to keep asking, "What new thing is God calling me to be and to do?" and "What support, education, training and practices would help me to follow through on what I now imagine for myself and my congregation?" The road into new life is a long one, and this leg of the journey is designed to stretch your imagination, fuel your passion and guide you closer to God's radically welcoming dream for us all.