

PUBLISHED ON JULY 26, 2007:

Inclusive and Accepting

There's The Cool Church, and then there are churches that are actually cool

By [SAXON BURNS](#) 

People expressed a wide range of opinions after I wrote about my experience attending a service at The Cool Church--aka the Tucson Community Church--which recently came under fire for its stance on gays (see "Into the Lion's Den," Currents, July 12).

We got one letter from someone who condemned the *Weekly's* resident homosexuals to an eternity in hell (see this week's Mailbag). An unidentified woman left a puzzling phone message in which she, among other things, took me to task for finding lemonade "demonic." (I made no such claim.)

Another man wrote that I didn't understand the sermon, because I was "too worried about defending (my) lifestyle." I replied that he should feel free to explain the sermon to me; I have yet to hear back one week later. Maybe he's composing his thoughts.

There were also compliments and heartfelt pleas by some to work toward a better understanding between gays and Christian churches.

One pastor sent a thoughtful e-mail asking to hold a forum of sorts among churches and the *Weekly*--something we hope to pursue in the future.

Then there was Sylvia Thorson-Smith, who wrote to see if we would consider doing an article on truly "cool" churches, like St. Mark's Presbyterian, 3809 E. Third St. ([stmarkspresbyterian.org](http://stmarkspresbyterian.org)), where she worships.

"I know there are gay-friendly churches, and I don't want the community to think that we're all like The Cool Church," Thorson-Smith said. She listed St. Francis in the Foothills, Grace St. Paul's and First Congregational United Church of Christ among the gay-friendly congregations.

St. Mark's has long welcomed gays, but last year (on Oct. 11, or National Coming Out Day), it became a More Light church, signing on to a movement among more than 100 Presbyterian congregations to bring LGBT faithful fully into the fold.

"It was just that extra step of saying that we're not only welcoming and inclusive, but we also want to be activists in recognizing the full rights and dignity of LGBT persons," Thorson-Smith said.



Saxon Burns

St. Mark's Presbyterian is making it known that gays are welcome as they are.

All More Light churches oppose the official Presbyterian policy that prohibits noncelibate gays from being ordained as ministers, and they pledge to work toward eradicating homophobia in society.

The Rev. Stuart Taylor, St. Mark's pastor, is vacationing through early August, and was therefore unavailable for comment. However, Thorson-Smith forwarded a bulletin announcing that St. Mark's had become a More Light church, in which Taylor rejoices in their new affiliation.

"St. Mark's considers it a privilege to stand alongside all the other Presbyterian congregations in the More Light network in bearing witness to God's inclusive love," he said. "With hope, we look forward to that day which will surely come when all barriers to the ordination of our LGBT brothers and sisters will be removed."

Thorson-Smith made it clear that this is not a "love the sinner, hate the sin" approach to gay inclusiveness, like the one verbally bandied about at The Cool Church.

"They are welcome in their gayness and in their full sexuality--however God created them to be," she said. "We're just grateful for their presence and however they choose to be a part of our community, with all the rights of membership."

Fran M. Westra is a lesbian who started attending St. Mark's in 2000, after wandering from church to church over the years. She found The Cool Church's notion that homosexuality is a sinful choice--and therefore not an intrinsic part of the person she is--ludicrous.

"That's like saying you don't have to be blue-eyed," she said. "That's like saying you don't have to be left-handed. Yes, you can force yourself to be right-handed, but it tends to make you a little bit strange, because you're really left-handed."

Being gay at St. Mark's "ain't no thing," to borrow a phrase. According to Westra and Thorson-Smith, you can be out and proud, but your sexuality is something you don't need to wear on your sleeve if you don't want to.

"I've been at churches where you suddenly become a token, and every time they need to hold up a gay, you're it," Westra said. "That doesn't feel good. That's not equality."

Her parents brought her up Lutheran in Michigan, but she found gayness and that particular brand of Christianity didn't mix.

"You weren't gay in the Lutheran church, or you weren't *in* the Lutheran Church," she said.

What won her over at St. Mark's is how inclusive it is. Westra lives with a 52-year-old man who has Down syndrome. He joined the church and, as a member, gets to do what everyone else does--including serving Communion. Earlier this month, he did just that.

"He was so joyous," she said. "The people being served the bread felt the joy."

Westra doesn't detect the same sense of inclusiveness emanating from The Cool Church. They claim to be accepting toward people who are addicted to drugs and sex in the same breath as homosexuals, she said.

"I'm sorry, but I lead a good Christian life," Westra said. "I don't like being put in the same class with someone who's breaking the law. People have become educated; the world has become round, and we're moving on.

"Either you're accepting, or you're not, and they've made it very clear that they're not."