

Recently, I have been asked about Pastor Kelli's and my use of our pronouns at the beginning of the worship service. So, I thought I would take the opportunity to give a little background about why we are doing that.

I first encountered pronoun usage when we took our daughter to her college orientation back in 2018. The students were each asked to write down their names and their pronouns on a nametag. That was the first time I had ever heard of doing that. So, it seemed a little strange because I didn't understand the purpose behind it. But, before long, I began noticing that some of my colleagues were doing the same thing (both younger and older than I am).

Likewise, when I attended webinars or some kind of presentation, the presenters would likewise have pronouns on their nametags or would use them when they introduced themselves. For instance, "My name is Joe Smith, and my pronouns are he/him. Or "My name is Jane Smith, and my pronouns are she/they."

When I got to Catalina, I wondered if, as a reconciling congregation, maybe we should be doing the same. Then, at the end of my first year, at the Annual Conference in 2023, we had a training about using pronouns as part of the presentations there. I mentioned that in my article about the Annual Conference back in July 2023. Part of the presentation was to encourage us to begin using pronouns in the church. At the Annual Conference 2024, we had presentations about pronouns again and were, again, encouraged to begin using them in our churches.

I won't pretend to be an expert in why pronoun usage has become more common or even claim to be conversant, in a deep way, of why pronoun usage is important. But I can tell you why I thought it was time to begin doing so in worship.

The first, and most basic reason for me, is that I am aware of the lack of safety that LGBTQ+ people have experienced and continue to experience in churches and in many places in society. I know that suicide is the second leading cause of death in young LGBTQ+ people. According to the Trevor Project, that is because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society. So, using pronouns is a strong signal that Catalina is a safe place for LGBTQ+ people. But, not just them, it shows that Catalina is a safe place for people who love and care for them as well (parents, siblings, teachers, doctors, etc.). By using them, we are communicating that Catalina is safe for a number of different groups and people.

Another reason, in talking to someone about this, is that when we share them, we normalize the practice. For instance, when Pastor Kelli and I do that at the beginning of worship (and in our email signatures, or in conversation), we begin, and only begin, to make pronoun usage something that we are all used to so that when someone chooses to do so, it helps them not be alone in doing so. In other words, it doesn't make them stand out. So, by normalizing we already are creating a sense of hospitality.

Lastly, to me it shows respect for other people and who they are as a person—their identity. We already do this with other groups who have a history of being marginalized in society. We use the phrase Native American, or perhaps better, Indigenous American, or even better, I am told, by the Indigenous person's tribe name

(i.e. Navajo, Tohono O'odham). When we do that, we are respecting the person's identity and how *they* see their identity and respecting them by using their understanding of their identity.

So, when we use pronouns regularly and open up the way for others to use them, we are giving them the opportunity to share their identity with us—if they choose to. That is another thing I have learned. We cannot always assume we know someone else's preferred pronouns by their outward appearance. By sharing them regularly we create the opportunity for others to share, when *they* are ready.

This is a small step in living to our own identity as a Reconciling Congregation. Even though we became one in 2019, the pandemic started about 8-9 months after the vote and the implementation team's work got sidelined along with the rest of the committees. It wasn't until 2022-23 that we finally reestablished the team and began working on what it means to be a reconciling community again.

Hopefully this short discussion at least helps you understand where I am coming from. Like I said, much of this is new to me and I am still learning myself. My biggest call of Jesus is to love others as he loved us and when I look at the gospels, I see Jesus embracing all kinds of people that society has turned their backs on. So, at the very least, Jesus' love command calls me to follow the same path in my own time and place.

May God encourage all of us to love like Jesus in our slice of the world. And do so, to share the joy of the good news that Jesus loves all of us.