



"Bethlehem UCC Is Already Welcoming"

Why Do We Need to Say We Are Open and Affirming?

The United Church of Christ's General Synod adopted a resolution in 1985 urging UCC congregations to "Declare Themselves Open and Affirming." This designation was developed as a way for churches to declare their welcome to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, people who had been shunned by many churches and who risked ostracism and persecution by some churches. This resolution did not *require* individual churches and congregations to become Open and Affirming, but congregations were encouraged to go through a thoughtful process to determine if this was right for them. What started as 15 churches in 1985 voting to be designated as Open and Affirming (ONA) has grown to over 1300 individual churches across the United States.

Why Would a Congregation Want to Be Open and Affirming?

To communicate who we are

If we are truly a welcoming community, how will people learn this? Being identified as an Open and Affirming church is one way to communicate that hospitality for all people is a value of our congregation.

As an evangelism tool

How can we extend hospitality to people who will not enter our church building? Being an ONA church is one way to invite people to take the risk of joining us for worship. Having an explicit welcome covenant will give visitors an assurance that our welcome is genuine and not a hollow gesture.

Hide it under a bushel? No!

When our church seeks to be skilled at welcoming the stranger, living as the Body of Christ together, that is good news. Why would we want to keep that kind of good news to ourselves?

Because people move around

Open and Affirming churches are listed and searchable online. As people experience the vibrancy of an ONA congregation in one place, they are likely to seek that same type of community elsewhere if they relocate or while traveling. The UCC ONA web site helps them recognize that Bethlehem is welcoming to all people.

To reach and retain young people

Young people especially value inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. They want their faith communities to be models of this same value. Many ONA congregations report that young couples with children are often drawn in by an ONA commitment. Families are seeking communities prepared to help them raise their children in ways consistent with their values. They want their children to grow up surrounded by diversity and to be loved no matter who they grow up to become.

Because people continue to be hurt

Unfortunately, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people continue to experience exclusion and harm from people supposedly acting in the name of Christianity. Even churches that declare “All are welcome” may demonstrate to LGBT individuals and families that the welcome does not include them. For this reason, the invitation to LGBT people *must* be explicit that the welcome is intended to include them.

When *all* doesn’t mean *all*

LGBT people aren’t the only ones who experience pain and exclusion from churches, who have experienced “all are welcome” to mean “all but you.” Many people hesitate to join a church, wondering, “If they *really* knew me, would I still be welcome here?” The ONA process allows those fears to be named so that each person can be assured, “Yes, you too are welcome here.” The specificity of the welcome to LGBT people opens up the conversation about who is welcome in our community in ways that a generic “all are welcome” statement does not.

As a proclamation to the wider church

Other congregations in our conference and state are wondering if they can be a place of welcome to LGBT people and continue in their current mission and ministry. Our public stance of welcome will help them be courageous in broadening the welcome they provide.

To be connected with other congregations

The ONA process would connect our church with a network of other congregations that have made a similar covenant to a ministry of reconciliation and hospitality. Information and resources for worship, education, and ministry are relayed as congregations discover and share best practices with one another through this process.

Because our ministry remains our own

The only requirement to become an Open and Affirming church is to develop, vote, and pass as a congregation an Open and Affirming covenant that includes people of all sexual orientations and gender identities or that lists LGBT people explicitly. This covenant can and should include other people who are welcome at Bethlehem United Church of Christ.

For the health of our community

The process of becoming an Open and Affirming church deepens the faith life of a congregation. By participating in dialogue with one another, we practice putting our faith life into speech and into action. Engaging in a well-designed ONA process will allow our congregation to deal with other potentially conflict-laden issues in healthier, more productive ways.

To remember

Having our ONA covenant printed in our bulletin or read during worship serves to remind us as a congregation who we are and how we have pledged to engage with one another. When visitors join us, the covenant shows them the type of community they have entered.