

What Does it Mean to be an Open and Affirming Church?

Discernment Process as of April 1, 2009

Church members raised a number of questions individually and in various programs conducted by the Open and Affirming Committee. We attempted to address those questions through the programs we offered and other published references. Listed below is a summary of those questions by major theme and our responses. The questions that were asked by more than one person are noted with an (M).

Theme 1: WHAT IS “OPEN AND AFFIRMING” (ONA)?

Many of your questions were answered in our first formal program, held on Sunday, March 9, 2008. Hard copies of the slides are available in the ONA lending library outside the church office.

What is the definition of “Open and Affirming” (ONA)? Is it just one issue?

An “Open and Affirming” setting of the UCC (a local church, campus ministry, etc.) means that it has publicly declared that gay, lesbian, & bisexual (GLB) people (or those of all sexual orientations) are welcome in its full life and ministry (e.g. membership, leadership, employment, etc.). It bespeaks a spirit of hospitality and a willingness to live out that welcome in meaningful ways.

Is there a single definition of ONA or can we tailor it?

There is a single definition of ONA, as described in the previous question, which was put forth by the UCC. In expressing that a church is ONA, however, (in the constitution, in a mission statement, on the website, etc.) a church family can choose to word it any way they like, as long as it still includes the definition of ONA as specified above.

Does ONA include other groups traditionally discriminated against (e.g. different cultures, races or religious beliefs)?

ONA does not specifically include other groups that have been traditionally discriminated against. It focuses only on issues regarding the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered community. Some churches that have gone through the ONA process, however, have also explored issues concerning these groups if they had not in the past, and have included these groups in their ONA statement. But the process of identifying a church as ONA focuses on this one issue.

What is the Lexington Covenant? What is “Faithful and Welcoming”? How is this different from “Open and Affirming”?

The Lexington Confession is a list of four affirmations and one appeal drawn up and agreed to by a group of UCC pastors and laity in July, 2005. Its purpose was, in part, to “dissent with the action of General Synod 25 to support equal marriage rights for same sex couples”.

Affirmation of the Lexington Confession is one of the qualifications for being designated a “Faithful and Welcoming Church”.

“Faithful and Welcoming”(FWC) churches within the UCC are those which affirm three major documents – The UCC’s Basis of Union, The Preamble to the UCC’s Constitution and The Lexington Confession. Individual churches may register themselves as Faithful and Welcoming; there are currently seventy four (74) churches registered on their website, none in Connecticut.

From the website:

“...The primary reason for a church to identify itself as Faithful and Welcoming is to distance the local church from the controversial resolutions and marketing of the national and regional setting of the church. A secondary reason is to preserve unity in the local church by offering a positive but proactive alternative to withdrawal from the UCC. A third reason to declare the church FWC is to connect with likeminded churches for resources, support and encouragement. A fourth reason is to make a greater impact on the regional and national church through a collective voice. A fifth reason is to assist UCC members who travel or relocate to find other UCC churches committed to FWC principles.”

The full text of the Lexington Confession and more information about “Faithful and Welcoming” churches may be found by following hyperlinks from the “Faithful and Welcoming Churches” homepage at <http://faithfulandwelcoming.org/content/show.asp?mne=home>.

Are transgendered people going to be included? It sounded like they were not included in the original statement, but added later. My hope is that they would be included

The original 1985 ONA resolution did not include transgendered persons, but the UCC has since recommended that consideration of this group of people be included in the ONA process, due to a more recent deeper understanding of their experience, and the separateness of the gender identity issue from sexual orientation.

Are churches outside of the UCC going through this process?

The ONA process as defined is strictly a UCC program. Other denominations, however, are going through similar activities. The website <http://www.hrc.org/issues/religion/4955.htm> has an excellent summary of other programs.

Theme 2: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THIS ISSUE?

We believe that all of the questions that you raised, documented below, were addressed in our two programs on April 6 and April 28, 2008. The first program, led by Jonathan and Donna, explored different ways to interpret the Bible. The second program was led by Rev. Dr. Wayne Rollins, a recognized Biblical scholar at Hartford Seminary. Both programs are documented on DVD, and available to borrow from the lending library along with copies of the program handouts. The committee searched for a similarly credentialed outside speaker that could present a different Biblical interpretation, but was unsuccessful. Instead, the website resources section contains a link to http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibl.htm, a website that offers multiple perspectives on Biblical interpretation. We then offered additional small group discussion opportunities on this topic in January and February 2009. In addition, we also provided written references in the lending library and on the ONA section of the church website. The questions we have received on this theme are:

How can we reconcile the writings in Romans to an affirmative ONA statement?

Is this a lifestyle that God would agree with? Why, for what purpose? We are meant to reproduce and how is this possible with same sex partners?

How does affirming homosexuality and allowing same sex marriages in the church honor God?

Is homosexuality a sin? If yes, then how can a church affirm a sin?

Theme 3: WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE GAY? HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE THE OBJECT OF DISCRIMINATION? PERSONAL STORIES FROM ONA CHURCHES AND PEOPLE WE LOVE.

What is it like to grow up feeling discriminated against? Can we hear some personal witness?

We began to address this question during June and July 2008, with multiple showings of two videos and follow-up discussion. These DVDs and a new one entitled *Call Me Malcolm* are available to borrow from the lending library. The website contains a link to a UTube video focused specifically on transgendered individuals. Also available are a collection of personal written stories, some from print media and some from our own members. These stories are located on the website and in the Resources notebook in the lending library. We also offered a program addressing this topic with the Stonewall Speakers.

Can we hear about the medical background information supporting ONA?

It is important to talk about sexual orientation and genetics.

Are homosexuals born this way or do they choose this lifestyle? (M)

To respond to these questions, we have provided a series of articles from the American Psychological Association, available as handouts from the library and on the website. There is no consensus among psychologists on the role that genetics play in either sexual orientation or gender identity, but there is consensus that neither is a personal choice.

Theme 4: HOW WOULD AN ONA RESOLUTION AFFECT US and LIFE AT OUR BELOVED CHURCH?

Have there been studies that show correlation between going through this process and membership growth?

We have searched extensively, and were unable to locate any expansive studies on this subject. An informal survey of 8 CT churches who voted to become Open and Affirming told Jonathan and Donna that they each lost a few members because of the outcome, but gained many more members, both gay and heterosexual. A summary of this research is presented on the website and in the library.

Has anyone chosen to reverse this decision after they went ONA?

We have not been able to locate this information at the Connecticut Conference of the UCC or the UCC at the national level. We approached contacts at each level, as well as the Grumpy Old Pastors for anecdotal information, and did not hear of any cases where a UCC church reversed its decision on becoming Open and Affirming.

Have any churches dropped out of the UCC in a reaction to this process?

The “Faithful and Welcoming” website contains a list of 255 churches nationwide that have “formally withdrawn” their UCC membership since July, 2005. The reason for their withdrawal can only be assumed, and is not necessarily related in every case to this issue. Four (4) Connecticut churches are contained on this list. The 2008 Yearbook of the United Church of Christ shows a net reduction of 373 churches (from 5,750 to 5,377) during the years 2005 through 2007. “Net reduction” is the sum of churches added and churches leaving in any given year, and the reasons are not codified. Data for the year 2008 is not yet available.

These membership numbers should not be interpreted without some historical perspective. According to the 2008 Yearbook mentioned above, there has been a net reduction of member churches every year between 1955 and 2007, except for the years 1960 and 1964.

The numbers of both churches leaving and churches joining by year from 2005 to the present have been requested of the UCC national research department, but that information is not yet available at the time of this writing. When that information, as well as the overall 2008 data, becomes available, it will be added to this report on the website.

Do we know the number of churches who have gone through this process and decided not to become ONA?

Anecdotally, we have heard that 5-10 congregations in Connecticut have undertaken an ONA process but did not complete it for some reason. A few of these did go back later on to finish the process. The CT conference does not track this activity, but contact persons receive feedback from church representatives as they provide support and resources.

What efforts are being made to reach out to those who are not participating in the formal ONA programming?

We have made many options available for people to participate in this discussion, but we realize that not everyone will. There were several ways to participate:

- Suggestion boxes,
- Emailing members of the committee,
- Individual conversations with committee members,
- Private talks with one of our ministers,
- Open participation in any of the formal programs.

Will ONA ever be a topic that will be included in Sunday worship?

This topic was addressed in the September 28, 2008 service through a dialog sermon, and by Jonathan in his sermon on March 8. The September 28 sermon is documented in printed form in the library and on the website. The website also contains the audio version.

Wethersfield Church dropped out of the UCC as a result of this process – are there others who have left?

Clarification – several former members of the Wethersfield church, who are now members of our church, reported that Wethersfield did NOT engage in the ONA process. First Church left the UCC for several reasons, and the decision was driven from the church lay leadership and not through a broad consensus of the congregation.

Can we hear directly from other churches that have done this (M)? How has it impacted them (M)?

For those who have taken up the issue and decided not to adopt Open and Affirming, how has this impacted them? Another person submitted to the suggestion box that this is not relevant to us.

How will the outcome of this process change our worship life? (M)

How would ONA impact youth and Sunday School attendance?

The above set of questions was addressed in our program on March 1, hosted by the Grumpy Old Pastors. Their experiences suggest that a small number of families might leave, but that an ONA decision would attract others. We have also provided the research from other churches as noted earlier. While each church's experience was unique to its own dynamics when the process started, this information is indicative of what might happen at RHCC.

What is the rationale for adopting ONA and how do opponents respond to this? What is the rationale for not adopting ONA and how do opponents respond to this?

From the March 1 program and the research conducted by Donna and Jonathan, the committee believes the following to be an answer to this question. The rationale for adopting ONA is based on a Biblical interpretation of Jesus' ultimate commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Opponents take a literal Biblical interpretation based on Leviticus. Those who choose not to adopt ONA generally cite a concern about potential divisiveness resulting from alternative Biblical interpretations. Opponents site the divisiveness created by fellow Christians feeling unloved and unwelcome.

Why do we have to address this issue at all? (M)

If we do not address it directly, we have concluded that anyone who has traditionally been discriminated against will doubt our commitment from our Statement of Faith to be welcoming to all.

How will the ONA process gather information about how each member of the church feels about the issues being considered?

The committee assessed this during the discernment process via reactions to the programs offered and submissions to our suggestion boxes. The final determination will occur if and when a vote is taken.

Answers to the following questions differ depending on whether an ONA decision is made. The responses below are based on an affirmative ONA statement. Without such a statement, the answers are not clear.

Would we have a gay minister? A ministerial determination would only be based on the qualifications of the candidates.

Does ONA mean restrictions on those who can hold church office? No.

How would an ONA decision impact our ability to attract the best clergy and employees?

The Grumpy Old Pastors saw a larger pool of qualified candidates once an ONA decision was made.

Will the church membership be polled to learn feelings on ONA? (M)

This will be done if and when a vote is taken. A poll prior to the completion of the discernment process would have been irrelevant.

How will the decision be made in our church? Will it be a public or private vote?

This was not a question under the committee's purview. This issue was thus addressed by the Diaconate once the Committee had completed its charge, which was: *"To create and implement an open and unbiased process that engages all in the Rocky Hill Congregational Church Family in a journey of prayer, study, and discussion and to provide all with the information needed to make an informed decision"*.

The final two questions can only be addressed by individual reflection. There is no one definitive answer to either of them.

If we are not Open and Affirming, what are we?

What do people fear about this process?