

**Minutes**  
**Open and Affirming Committee**  
**March 25, 2008, 7:30 p.m.**

**Present:** Gail Hall (Chair), Michael Bower (acting Secretary), Stephanie Heneghan, Tim Dostie, Wendy Ware, Katie Hoffman-Fulda, Pat Howland, Bob Inderbitzen, Ron Robbins, Laurel Cole, Bill Hoffman, Tom Rolfe, and Mary Dean

**Guests:** Rev. Bob Lane from 1<sup>st</sup> Church of Windsor, Rev. Van Parker from Center Church in Hartford, and Rev. Micki Nunn-Miller from Cornwall UCC

**Absent:** Steve Smith (Secretary)

The meeting began at 7:30 with a prayer written by Bob Inderbitzen, read by Michael Bower, as Bob was joining us late.

“For tonight’s prayer, I’ll begin by offering the closing sentence from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

Please join me in a moment of silence....

Oh God, strengthen our Faith as our steady trust in You, knowing you have a purpose and a plan for us.

Oh God, instill us with Hope as our confidence in the future, allowing our vision to shape our actions.

Oh God, your Love is extravagant. Teach us to be as generous in the sharing of love with our neighbor now.

We ask these things in the confidence of your abundant grace.

Amen”

We followed with introductions, and allowed our guests to tell us a little about their ministries, and how they came to be involved in ONA.

Micki Nunn-Miller told us that she is a minister at the Cornwall UCC, which has been ONA since 1998. She came out as a lesbian minister in her church and found it to be a very good experience. She is now the Chair of the ONA Committee for the Connecticut Conference.

Van Parker came to us from Center Church of Hartford, but explained that he was the minister at 1<sup>st</sup> Church of Windsor when they began the ONA process in 1992. He said, "This is not my issue, but let's see where it goes." Van's daughter came out as a lesbian during that church's ONA process and Van relayed that the experience of going through ONA and his daughter's coming out was an amazing experience for his family. She wrote a letter to the congregation called "Coming Home," of which we have a copy. Center Church of Hartford, where Van is currently worshipping, is ONA.

Bob Lane told us that he once was a member of our church in 1951, and is now a member of 1<sup>st</sup> Church of Windsor. He started the process of ONA through the Missions Board in 1992 and told us it was a 2-year process. Rev. Lane said there was a lot of support from the beginning, and that there were some who were not happy with the idea of becoming ONA. He said that they lost a few families, but that the families that left were families that were "on their way out" anyway.

- They began a Lenten Series, entitled "Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?"
- They also had "2-Minute Talks" from the pulpit from members of the congregation "Why I think we should be ONA."
- They watched videos
- They had a gay gym teacher from Stratford come and speak

After the first year, they knew the vote would be "Yes" for ONA but they worked on it another year to make sure that they had as much support as they could have gotten.

The final vote was 87% affirmative. (183-26) About 1/3 of their congregation voted on the issue. Their statement called out other issues, such as race, gender, economic status, etc. The day of the vote was not controversial. They sang Christmas carols while they waited for the votes to be tallied.

Now their ONA committee has the same standing as other committees, such as Missions, etc. It is still active and has a turn around of members, just like other committees. They work on the extravagant welcome.

They have since had a few civil unions.

They said that not very many new members were gay, but that the new members who have joined since said, "If they are accepting of gays, they'll surely accept me."

Micki said the key to the ONA process is that you have to do it long enough so that you know what the "temperature" of the congregation is. You need to keep checking to see how people are feeling.

Micki told us about a church in Maine that was in the process but saw it would be a close vote, and they were worried about people leaving. So they took a vote on a statement that they knew the church would vote yes on. "Every person is a beloved child of God." All

of a sudden, there were lots of new members, some of which were gay, and one who was transgendered. The congregation soon realized that they had already been open and affirming, so they voted on a complete ONA statement and it passed overwhelmingly.

Van said we should be “As wise as serpents and harmless as doves” when we deal with members of the congregation who push against the ONA process.

Van quoted Luke, “Fear not!”

Bob Lane said that ONA churches in general are growing churches, are doing well, and are better now at talking about difficult things.

Bob Lane reminded us that we are leading the church to do what God is asking us to do, not what we are asking us to do. It’s in God’s hands and God is guiding us through this process.

Micki said that another church that had problems was Goshen UCC. They tried to do ONA in 6 months. They ended up voting yes to ONA, but no to civil unions.

Bob Lane said Enfield tried to introduce ONA, but then dropped it like a hot potato, picked it up, and then dropped it again. Now they are finally in the process.

He said Asylum Hill had a false start, as well, but now are an ONA church. North Guilford started the process, but stopped for reasons unrelated to ONA. West Avon stopped, but is now picking it up again.

Laurel asked if the churches that stopped have stopped for good, and our guests seemed to echo that once a church starts, even if they stop, they seem to eventually get through the process. No one has turned back the other way.

Micki said “times are changing and churches that have stopped are now reconsidering. And now that the Connecticut Conference has become an ONA conference, more churches have become moved to pick it up.”

Van said that he felt that there is a good spirit in our group, and that we seem to be well on our way. He said it was important not to make people feel that we are the righteous ones.

Micki said that we should be prepared to consider that if 3 people are against it and the rest of the congregation is for it, then we need to go with the majority, and not worry so much about those 3 people.

Mary Dean asked our guests, “Where do people get ‘stuck’?”

Scripture was a big sticking point. Van says they only read the one chapter of Leviticus and think they are living the Bible literally. But he says if we look at the entire book, we

realize we can't realistically use this as a guide to how we live our modern lives. He also said that the people who wrote the Bible knew nothing of gay people. Gay people were not out in the open and they assumed everyone was straight. He also says that Jesus says nothing in the Bible about gay people.

The word "affirming" was another sticking point. Bob Lane said we need to spend some time on this one. We need to realize that a lot of people may not be ready to affirm being gay, even if they are fully ready and willing to welcome them. But most people will get there if we keep talking about it and communicating.

Some people in their churches were very annoyed simply because they felt, "why should we do this at all?" We need to help them, and ourselves, see the importance of the issue.

And finally, some people felt that by singling out the gay community that we were neglecting to address the other social justice issues, such as race, gender, etc.

Van said that he likes the phrase, "In the fullness of time." He feels this is the time to grab the moment and do this thing. He says that we as a church are in a place where we can be at the tipping point and that we are really going to make a difference on this issue.

Someone asked, "Should we be giving equal power to the other side of this issue, should we be encouraging that kind of division?"

Our guests seemed to all agree that everyone should have ample chances to make their voice heard on the issue.

Bob Lane said that they brought in Ann Day, who is the national coordinator of ONA. She had a conversation with those who were opposed, and she was masterful at addressing their concerns. He suggests someone like that for dealing with especially conflicted people, as we ourselves would not be as effective.

Van said that we should keep telling our stories, and that is what makes the biggest impression on people. Most people's views, even those against ONA, were really about their stories.

Van also said he views becoming ONA as being personally "born again," in that Jesus healed the blind man and opened his eyes. Van felt that his eyes were opened to this issue. He said to keep focusing on Jesus, who said "of these things, Faith, Hope, and Love."

We asked if they had any suggestions for us.

Bob Lane said we should consider the idea of being a congregation who trusts each other. Micki suggested setting up open sessions for sharing called "our turn," perhaps a two minute talk from the pulpit, or in front of a microphone, or even in small groups.

Van said that Jesus always spoke from the indicative, meaning that people were invited to join him, not forced. We should be like Christ in this.

Van said to **trust the process**. And trust the Spirit to guide us.

We asked if we should bring this issue in to Worship and had any of them preached from the pulpit about it?

Van said he had done a sermon dealing with it.

Bob Lane said that their church came out of the ONA process smelling like a rose. They had achieved a better understanding of who they were as a church.

Stephanie Heneghan asked if maybe we could get our ministers to encourage participation as part of their sermon or message from the pulpit. Our guests agreed that that might be effective.

Bob Lane said in their final process of drafting and approving the ONA statement, they were asked by the Council to add the other groups to the statement (i.e. – race, gender, economic status) but their statement explicitly called out the GLBT issue. They circulated the statement for a while first, and got input and reaction from various people before they submitted it for the vote.

We thanked our guests for joining us, and then agreed to withhold the rest of our agenda until next time, as it was 9:40 p.m.

Our next meeting will be Thursday, April 10. Mary will do opening prayer, Steph will do closing.

There will be another meeting Tuesday, April 22.

Tim Dostie agreed to talk to Jonathan regarding April 6<sup>th</sup> “How we interpret the Bible.”

Tom Rolfe closed the meeting with the Serenity Prayer:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.  
Amen”

Respectfully submitted by Michael Bower  
Acting Secretary