

July 2007

To the RHCC Family from the Diaconate

The following is a set of questions and answers intended to clarify some of the questions various members of our church family might have as we embark on the Open and Affirming (ONA) process. We hope to add new questions to this list as we engage in dialogue and other questions arise.

1. What is the purpose of the July 29th meeting?

The second hour on Sunday, July 29th, is to provide a forum in which the congregation can ask questions and make comments about the letter sent by the Diaconate in June. We are not taking any votes or making any decisions on July 29th. We have not already decided to declare ourselves Open and Affirming. This is a congregational process where everyone's voice will have a chance to be heard; at the end of that process we may decide to vote on an ONA resolution and, when and if we vote, the congregation's decision may be to become ONA. We will attempt to provide as much information as we can to you. We have not yet formally started the process of pursuing Open and Affirming so we may not yet have answers to some of your questions. An ONA committee will start meeting in September. They will be tasked to develop the best process for Rocky Hill Congregational Church as we walk down this path together.

2. What does ONA mean anyway?

To say that a United Church of Christ church is "Open and Affirming" means that it has publicly declared that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) 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. In 1985, the United Church of Christ adopted a resolution calling for churches to become Open and Affirming. Many churches have decided to adopt a covenant of Openness and Affirmation which addresses the inclusion into our church

families people of all sexual orientation and/or a policy of inclusive non-discrimination which states that we do not discriminate against any person, group or organization in hiring, promotion, membership appointment, use of facility, provision of services or funding on the basis of race, gender age, sexual orientation, faith nationality, ethnicity marital status, or physical disability.

3. What is the process of becoming ONA?

Most local churches and many other settings engage in a time of study, prayer, and conversation before adopting an ONA statement. An average process is about 2 years. Each process is different in order to address the interests and concerns of the setting. The United Church of Christ has a wealth of resource materials as well as consultants who can help us guide our way through the best process for us. At each step of the way, we will keep our congregation informed of what we have done and our next steps, share information with you and engage you in the process so we can learn together.

4. Why are we going through this process?

We are going through this process for several reasons:

- a) The desire to engage in an ONA dialogue was raised in our Visioning process almost 5 years ago. Just as other aspects of our vision have come to fruition through the energy and commitment of a “champion”, the Diaconate, after a period of consideration and research, became that champion and recommended to the Council that our church engage in an open dialogue regarding ONA—what it means and whether we wish to openly declare ourselves to be an ONA church.
- b) Accepting and welcoming persons without regard to sexual orientation is a key issue of our time, and one which affects how we welcome, engage and integrate others into the life of our church community. The Diaconate and Council feel that clarity on this issue is one which we are ready to openly discuss and address in a spirit of Christian love and with respect for one another.

5. Why limit ONA to sexual orientation?

The process of becoming an ONA church is not limited to issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. The stereotypes and prejudices which fuel sexism, racism, ageism, etc. are interwoven in our society. However, given the ongoing, often bitter struggles around issues of sexual orientation in society, it remains clear that there is a need in church settings to be specific about our welcome and inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons. This is the primary focus of the ONA movement.

6. We try to be open and affirming of everyone. Aren't we already an ONA church, then?

Many gay and lesbian people and their families live with the pain of having believed that “everyone” meant them, only to discover otherwise. No one should have to guess about the “boundaries of inclusion” of a congregation. A clear welcome matters to gay and lesbian adults, clergy, youth, and families of gay and lesbian children and relatives – all wanting to share their faith and gifts, but fearing the indifference or rejection of their church.

7. Doesn't the Bible say things against homosexuality?

The Bible has both clear and contradictory teachings on this issue, as it does on many issues of human faithfulness. An intentional, thoughtful exploration of the full range of relevant Scriptural passages—and how they inform our faith and actions—will be an important piece of our congregational process.

8. I'm concerned about conflict. Why are we undertaking a controversial process at a time of peace in our church?

For three basic reasons:

- a.) A sizeable number of RHCC members have clearly expressed desire to engage in this process: engaging in an ONA process was named during the congregational Visioning of five years ago; after a period of deliberate research and prayerful consideration, the Diaconate was unanimous in its recommendation to begin such a conversation; and the Church Council was unanimous in its support of that recommendation.

- b.) The fact that we are currently enjoying harmony and very positive momentum in our church means we are *ready* to tackle a hard topic with openness and mutual respect. The Diaconate, the Council and the Ministers have faith in our church family to work through a controversial issue and remain faithful to our covenants with one another.
- c.) Congregational clarity on this important social issue will help us move forward in knowing how we choose to grow, care for one another, and go about declaring our faithfulness to the wider world.

9. How did the Diaconate come to the decision that led to this letter?

In response to its own long-range visioning and a pastoral concern that came before it, the Deacons decided to explore as a Board what it would mean for RHCC to become Open and Affirming. The Board began by educating itself about various understandings, experiences and outcomes of this process within the United Church of Christ. We talked, prayed, and shared personal stories and faith perspectives, and then began to speak to other UCC congregations in our area that have, in one form or another, engaged in an Open and Affirming process. The Deacons concluded that a thoughtful, transparent ONA process would benefit the spiritual life of the church, regardless of outcome. Wanting to initially broaden the discussion, the Deacons brought their recommendation to the Church Council, which offered its support of the Deacons' intentions, which in turn led the Deacons to send out the congregation-wide letter.

10. Why did we decide to authorize civil unions before the process began?

The Diaconate began its own study partly as the result of a pastoral need within the church. A member of RHCC asked the Senior Minister to perform a civil union in the church, and, after consultation with church leadership, it was decided that such a service could not be offered before a clear congregational statement was made. This decision was the correct one, but clearly painful to all involved. To avoid a repetition of this problem while the likely lengthy ONA process is proceeding, the Diaconate affirmed the authority of the Ministers to perform such services in the church building for those who agree to the standard counseling and preparatory procedures. The Diaconate's decision may be affirmed or revisited.