

ONA Discernment Process Status as of September 15, 2008

Church members have raised a number of questions individually and in various programs conducted by the Open and Affirming Committee. We are attempting to address those questions through the programs we offer. Listed below is a summary of those questions and our response thus far. The questions that were asked by more than one person are noted with an (M). There are still outstanding questions that we will be addressing in future programs.

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 to borrow 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 our mission statement, on our website, etc.) we can choose to word it any way we 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 gone forward and 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.” The full text of the Lexington Confession may be found by following hyperlinks from the homepage of “Faithful and Welcoming Churches” at <http://faithfulandwelcoming.org/content/show.asp?mne=home>.

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.”

More information is available on 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 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 Sunday, April 6 and Sunday, April 28. 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 with copies of the handouts, available to borrow from the lending library. We plan to offer additional small group discussion opportunities on this topic this fall. Following is a list of specific questions we have received on this theme.

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, with multiple showings of two videos and follow-up discussion. We have also started a collection of personal written stories. These are located on the ONA section of the church website and in the Resources notebook in the lending library outside the church office. Some are from published stories, while others are personal reflections. Other formal presentations are being planned.

Additional questions to address are:

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)

Program planning to address these three questions has begun. Expect to see this in the fall.

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 are currently trying to get that information, if it exists, from the UCC.

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

Although we have not heard of any, we are attempting to get more information from the UCC.

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

The “Faithful and Welcoming” website contains a list of churches 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. We are attempting to confirm these membership changes with the national conference.

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

Anecdotally, we know of about seven congregations in Connecticut that 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 has no way of tracking this, but relies on the individual churches making inquiries. We are aware of some survey done on the ONA process by the CT conference, but have not been able to determine when it was done or what the results were, so we are seeking clarification.

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 are currently several ways for those who want to participate. They are:

- 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 various programs already held and those yet to come.

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

Yes!!! This topic will be addressed in the September 28 service through a dialog sermon.

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. They left the UCC for several reasons, and the decision was made from the top down and not through a broad consensus of the congregation.

The remaining questions below have yet to be addressed, and will thus be part of our remaining programming.

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 is this impacted them? Another person submitted to the suggestion box that this is not relevant to us.

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

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

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?

What do people fear about this process?

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

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

Would we have a gay minister?

Does ONA mean restrictions on those who can hold church office?

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

How would ONA impact youth and Sunday School attendance?

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

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

This is not a question under the committee's purview, and thus no discussion has taken place yet. This issue will thus be addressed by the Diaconate once the Committee has completed its charge. To quote from our charter, the Committee's assignment is *"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"*.