

OPEN AND AFFIRMING STUDY GROUP

First Church in Windsor, U.C.C. - Windsor, CT
Time Line of Open and Affirming Process before the vote

June 1992 - Outreach Board Chair asked Board members (I was one) to choose a personal project. for the year

I chose working toward openness for gay/lesbian persons

I had first checked to find support from the pastor

Sept. 1992 - I proposed study to Outreach Board. They approve a study group. A few Board members volunteered.

Nov. 1992 - **Proposal approved by Deacons.** Another volunteer.

Dec. 1992 - **Church Cabinet approved proposal** to start a study group.

- I made some calls to church folk who might be interested.

Jan. 1993 - Gay/Lesbian Study Group had its first meeting, a joint meeting with the Outreach Board, so they would be informed of what we were doing.

- CT Conference Committee on Homosexuality offered resource folk:

Charlotte Stacey (E. Windsor) and Bob & Marie Calvin (So Glastonbury)

-Group made plans to have four open sessions in Lent to look at the subject.

Announcements in church: (The first time many heard the word "Homosexuality" during a service of worship)

Articles in church newsletter - "The EDGE"

Personal contacts urged attendance at coming Lenten sessions. Boards and committees and groups were also invited.

All church members invited to belong to study group or to attend as wanted.

Lent 1993 - Four Sessions held during Lent: Theme: "Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?"

1. Panel of 3 homosexual persons and a PFLAG couple. "Being a Gay Christian"

2. Speaker, Rev. Gordon Bates, on "The Bible and Homosexuality"

3. Video: Talk by John Boswell: "History of the Church and Homosexuality"
discussion led by Charlotte Stacey of State Committee on Homosexuality

4. Summary and "What Are Our Next Steps?" Led by Rev Sue Pritchard, chair of
Conference Committee on Homosexuality.

(A careful record was made of conclusions/suggestions of those attending)

Attendance ran from 30 to 63.

A LOT of interest in church. Much support. A few voiced "concern" that topic was being discussed in church.

Conclusions 1. We should continue to study issue

2. We should propose an Open and Affirming Statement, but not yet.
More education was needed first.

Our purpose is to change attitudes...NOT to pass a vote.

Fall 1993 - Second series: "Yes! The Homosexual IS My Neighbor!"

1. "Oh God! My Child Is Gay!"

Bob & Marie Calvin of So. Glastonbury and
John & Becky Glezen of Glastonbury

2.. "As a Child of God,...Gays/Lesbians Reflect" A panel of 2 women & 2 men .

3. "Homosexuality: What Is the Gospel Truth?" Rev Alice O'Donovan of Tolland
Biblical Perspectives

4. "We're Already Inclusive: Why Do We Need A Statement?"

Anne Alvord of So. Glastonbury and Rev. John Hall of Middletown

Both their churches had been open and affirming for 2 years or more.

(They spoke of what happened as a result of their church votes)

Meanwhile the Study Group (now the Open and Affirming Study Group) began to talk about and to discuss various ways of forming an Open and Affirming Statement.

During early 1994: Once a month, 2-minute talks during Sunday worship service

About 8 of them were given.

(Personal testimony in support of our church declaring itself open and affirming.)

Every month: includes an article in "The EDGE"

Committee continued planning for writing a statement and for appropriate time for a vote.

Feb. 1994 - Video presented 2 or 3 times "Open and Affirming: A Journey of Faith"

Story of three California churches. Well done. Gets at "feeling" as well as the "issue"

Attendance only fair, but cumulatively 50 to 70 folk saw it.

Sent letters to pastors of the three California churches and to theologian, Dr. James

Nelson, and to ONA Program Coordinator, Ann Day

Asked for ideas on how to proceed and how to bring into open the negative ideas we were not hearing.

Eventually, we received thoughtful and helpful response from all five.

Mar. 1994 - At Deacons annual retreat, we showed that video and discussed at length the idea of our church declaring itself open and affirming

Mar. 1994 - Speaker presented factual information on Homosexuality and related issues

"Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, and Things In Between."

Speaker: Wayne Pawlowski, Director of Training of Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington, D.C. He also teaches Human Sexuality at Catholic University School of Social Work. **An OUTSTANDING success!!**

New ideas for many including those of Study Group

Summer 1994 - The committee laboriously drafted a proposed O & A Statement.

Sept. 1994 - Statement presented to Church Cabinet. Somewhat changed and they endorsed it.

Change primarily was to expand groups mentioned to include race, etc.

Oct. 1994 - Statement as part of a flyer was mailed out to the church members.

Cover letter from study group and endorsement from Church Cabinet

- A church meeting was called for December 11 to vote on statement.

Sept. & Oct. - A Study Group member went to each church board/committee and group to present the statement briefly.

Some resistance. One change in particular was strongly urged. 2 others suggested.

Some highly charged exchanges, both verbally and in writing.

Nov. 1994 - Invited all, and especially those with questions to meet with Rev. Ann Day, National

Coordinator of the Open and Affirming Program of the United Church Coalition for Gay/Lesbian Concerns

A turning point of reconciliation. Ann was outstanding in working with persons with differing views.

One result was that we invited folk with suggested changes to meet with study group

Four Sundays before vote: Statement available in church for persons to sign, indicating their personal commitment Many signed it, but I don't have number

Nov. 30 1994 - Consensus on wording the statement, with help of Ann Day consultation by phone.

Dec. 4, 1994 - Deacons call meeting to air views and to hear speakers from 2 CT ONA churches discuss changes made in their churches after their votes.

Dec. 11 1994 - Church voted to adopt Revised Statement, 183 to 26 (88%)!

Action Since vote on Dec. 11, 1994

to May 1, 1996

The Open and Affirming Study Group continues to meet monthly to seek ways the church can live out its Open and Affirming statement.

We felt the statement was NOT the goal of our group, but a statement of principal from which we can proceed.

EDGE Articles: (NOT a complete list)

January - Susan Parker on "Coming Home" Story of pastor's daughter's coming out.

May - "How You Can Live out O & A"

Aug. - "Gay Pride Marchers from First Church"

Oct. - Poem: "Everything Possible" by a gay young person in the church

??? Book reviews of books in church library

Dec. 25, 1994 - Christmas Bulletin was the first to carry statement that our church is O & A

February 1995 - Annual Meeting had report from O & A Group

Spring - "How We can Continue O & A" list being compiled in committee

Published in EDGE and as a pamphlet

April - Letters of support to H. S. Principal for having panel on homosexuality in school

May - Asked Outreach Committee to send \$100 Contribution to O & A work in U.C.C

June - Participation in Hartford's Gay Pride Parade

Carried First Church in Windsor's O & A banner

- Letter to Htfd. Courant protesting biased coverage

July - At Gen'l Synod, certificate as an O & A Church was presented to first Church

August - Called and wrote Hartford Courant asking them to carry PFLAG meeting notices

Sept. - Citizens for a United Windsor gives "Bridge Builders Award" to First Church

Community recognition of leadership in supporting diversity!

- PFLAG flyer in church literature rack

Also one listing meeting times and places

Oct. 11 - 6 attend conference on "Gay Youth & Church" in Westfield, MA

Oct. 15 - Presentation in church: (a) Framed O & A Certificate & Flyer to explain it

(b) C.U.W. Bridge Builders Plaque

Dec. 10 - Anniversary of vote: Display of materials in coffee hour

Dec. 17 - 2nd hour video on equal rights for lesbians: "Straight From the Heart"

Jan. 6, 1996 - Dinner of ONA Churches at Middletown. Theme: "We're O & A, Now What?"

February - Annual Report of O & A Group indicates continuing work by committee

- Letter from two respected members to Church Cabinet in protest because we single out one group (i.e. Sexual orientation) for welcome.

Request Cabinet disband Study Group.

- March Cabinet affirms our work and decides to extend more intentional welcome to those who may experience discrimination due to race, physical handicap, marital status, etc. in line with our statement.
- Study Group asked and Outreach Board donated \$100 to National O & A effort.
- Confirmation retreat focus on Sexual Identity. Resource: family with 2 moms.
- April 27 - Workshop for 12 ONA churches of CT in Glastonbury. Seven attended.
- -Committee continues to meet and raise the issue
- Oct. 20 - Program: "Growing Up Gay" with Dan Woog, teacher/coach in Westport (author of "School's Out: Impact of Gay & Lesbian Issues on America's Schools")

NOTE on Action Since October 1996: Updated on September 9, 1999:...

The study Group has continued to meet monthly in various forms ever since the 1994 vote (summer months excepted).

In March 1996, the Cabinet voted to form a group to focus on other groups mentioned in our Open and Affirming Statement (racial groups, the disabled, etc.). Called "The Umbrella Group" at first because we couldn't think of a better name. At that time, the Study Group felt we had enough to do dealing with the issue of sexual orientation, and asked the Cabinet to start another group for those issues. -- In the spring of 1998, the two groups started to meet together, and have now been "transmogrified" into a new group called "The Open and Affirming Action Committee" which is now a standing church committee with new members nominated for three year terms by the church nominating process and elected by the church as are other committees.

In terms of program, the group has continued with articles in the "EDGE", our church newsletter. We have had a delegation in the Gay Pride Parade in Hartford, carrying the church's Open and Affirming banner. We have encouraged keeping the "Open and Affirming" notation on our church letterhead, sign, and our other publications. We have encouraged letters to legislature/congress opposing the so-called "Defense of Marriage Act" (DOMA) and some other issues. We have helped our pastor in observing "Affirmation Sunday", reaffirming the importance of our being open and affirming to all. Our confirmation class includes issues of gender and sexual orientation in its curriculum. We are represented and cooperate with the state Coalition. Two of us are on the Conference Focus Group on Homosexuality. We held a video festival to observe the third anniversary of our church vote (attendance was abysmal). We invited Windsor's new school superintendent to speak on the public schools and diversity education, with a focus on making our schools safe for students who do not fit the norm. (This was very well received.)

When a new Senior Pastor (Rick Huleatt) was called, the Open and Affirming issue was very much included in our discussions with candidates. We don't know of any candidates who were "turned off" by this. (If there were some, then we probably wouldn't be a good fit for them anyway.) Our present senior minister is very much in support of openness, and includes it in sermons, prayers, litanies, etc. fairly regularly.

GENERAL NOTES
ON THE OPEN & AFFIRMING PROCESS
AT FIRST CHURCH IN WINDSOR

1. From the beginning we had the support of the pastor, Rev. F. VanGorder Parker, and his successors
At first it was "not my project", but go ahead. He soon became strong supporter
Later he discovered a real investment in the process. (His daughter told him that since the church was looking into this area, he should know that she was a lesbian.)
This supportive attitude has continued with our new Senior Pastor, Rev. Richard Huleatt.
2. We saw this as an educational process, *not* just an effort to vote a statement.
Actually the decision to go for a statement was not made until we were a year into the process.
3. We made a real effort to have an open process.
All group meetings were open to anyone.
Most meetings were announced in the bulletin or the EDGE.
We made a real effort to keep folk informed.
Frequent (monthly or more) articles in the EDGE
Meeting notes were kept and mailed to study group and anyone else who wanted them
It was *hard* to get folk to air their negative feelings.
4. We found the most effective programs were those that "put a face on the abstract issue".
Conversation with either gay persons or with their families.
People who had personal experience, not just book knowledge.
5. Other churches gave us many ideas... (Especially So Glastonbury and Glastonbury First)
Denominational resources (written, but especially personnel) were very helpful too.
Particularly the Conference Committee on Homosexuality.
We unashamedly borrowed ideas wherever we found them.
6. As we tried to "live into the statement", we found that the church Cabinet was fully committed to the statement and could defend against attacks.
The committee found we did not have to do the whole job, but could rely on others to carry the ball.

Enclosures: - 1994 Flyer with Approved Statement from Windsor
- 1996 Revised flyer Revision done to reflect situation after the vote