

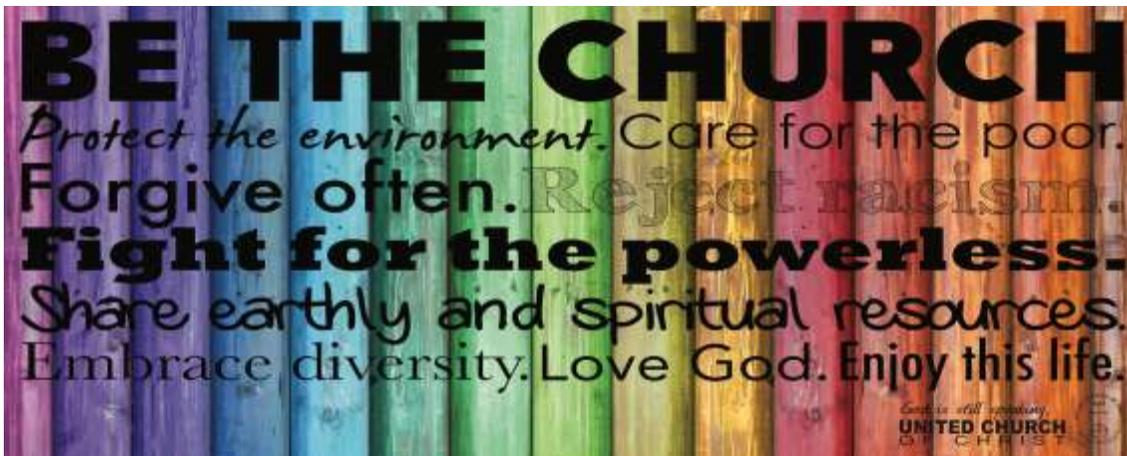


A NOTE FROM THE PASTOR

Dear Friends,

What does it mean to be an Open and Affirming Church? Perhaps a very simple answer to that question can be found in this true story.

I attended Ministry Day in October; an annual seminar sponsored by our Penn Northeast Conference for Pastors. I got into a conversation with another pastor and he told me that the church he serves has one of the U.C.C. *“Be The Church”* banners hanging on an outside wall of the church. We have one too but it isn’t hanging on an outside wall and it has a plain back ground as opposed to a colorful background that his banner has. It doesn’t have a rainbow design on it but I would say that the background does have “rainbow colors.” Take a look ...



And so this pastor told me that a few weeks ago a man whom he had never met before came into his office and wanted to speak

to him. He told me that after introducing himself the man said, "I have been walking by your church more times than I can remember walking my dog and I’ve noticed your banner. Last week my partner of 40 years died and I’m feeling so alone yet seeing your banner told me that this must be a safe place for me to be.”

A Safe Place to Be – That is what it means to be an Open and Affirming Church.

A little over 3 years ago the Consistory formed an Open and Affirming task force. Their challenge was to do an extensive study about the

possibility or feasibility of Faith Church becoming an Open and Affirming (ONA) Congregation of the United Church of Christ.

What does it mean to be an Open and Affirming Congregation? An ONA congregation affirms with a covenant that people of the LGBT community are **welcome in the full life and ministry of the congregation; membership, leadership, and employment.** It's as simple as that. Being an ONA church does not require someone to change their personal convictions or beliefs but more about that later.

You may be wondering why this became an issue at Faith Church? Is this being pushed on us by the Conference or by the U.C.C. General Synod? Basically no. While General Synod and our Conference can make suggestions, every congregation in our denomination is autonomous. Essentially, we make our own decisions but we try and maintain a covenantal relationship with all of our sister churches.

I felt that it was time for us to have a congregational conversation about this topic. Over the last 6 - 8 years as people have approached me about membership at Faith Church they have asked where we stand on the ONA issue. These questions were asked by straight, gay, lesbian individuals and couples. All of them were looking for an ONA church to join. Since we have never had the conversation, I couldn't answer their question other than to share with them my personal feelings. And so, I felt a pastoral need for us to have this conversation recognizing that it may be difficult.

I brought my concern to the Consistory and they agreed to start this conversation by establishing an Open and Affirming Task Force which would use a tool called *Becoming an Inclusive Church* published by the Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ.

The Task Force began a process of discernment which included prayer, Bible Study, listening to each other, sharing our concerns and perspectives, and gathering feedback from the congregation. A total of three surveys were taken during worship and the results of those surveys are published in this edition of Focus on Faith (pgs 7-16) .

Based on the results of the surveys and conversations with church members the Task Force wrote a Welcoming Statement which is also published in this edition of Focus on Faith (pg 17). It has been approved by our Consistory and will be voted upon by the congregation at our November 17, 2019 Congregational Meeting. If it is approved by 75% or more of the quorum present it will become a document of our congregation. It will be submitted to the ONA Coalition of the United Church of Christ and Faith Church will officially become an ONA Congregation.

So, what does this mean?

It means that Faith Church is making an intentional decision to be inclusive of all people. It means that we will do what we can to be a “safe place” to ALL people.

It does not require people to change their convictions on anything.

It does mean we remain committed to love all of our neighbors regardless of any differences.

One Sunday morning I mentioned something about the ONA process. While greeting people at the door that morning a member said to me, “I respectfully agree to disagree with you!” He had a big smile on his face but I knew he was sincere. I responded by saying, “And that’s okay because we love each anyway, right?” We both laughed and exchanged a hug. It is okay for us to have disagreements. We can love and be in community with people even if we don’t always agree.

Becoming an ONA Church will not require anyone to change their personal beliefs or convictions. But it does require each of us to be welcoming and inclusive to all people.

We are a diverse congregation and the Welcoming Statement recognizes this as a strength. It does not single one group of people out over another group. The Statement is very broad and inclusive.

Some who have already seen the Welcoming Statement ask “Why is it so necessary to specifically mention the LGBT community or any”

other group? Can't it just read 'Everyone is welcome?'" Sadly, LGBT Christians have learned from painful experience that a vague welcome often doesn't include them and their families. One intention of the Welcoming Statement is to speak to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adults who have personally experienced silence or condemnation in other churches. It will make a difference to LGBT youth who are at higher risk of suicide when they experience bullying or mistreatment because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. Again, we want people to know that this is a safe place, especially to those who have not felt safe in churches in the past.

Some may be wondering if by becoming an ONA Church will we become known as "The Gay Church" in town. This is highly unlikely. Read the Welcoming Statement. Consider all of the individuals that it includes. If anything, we are likely to become known as the most accepting and inclusive Church in town!

One question that has emerged is "How will the Welcoming Statement be used?" It will be made public, primarily on our Website. Also, in the UCC register of churches Faith Church will have an ONA designation. When people use the UCC Website to find a potential new church home and they will see that we are an ONA Church and can go to our website to read our Statement. Also, the Statement will guide us in how we conduct our church business, who we partner with, etc.

And so I hope this answers your questions. If you have more please feel free to contact me or any member of the ONA Task Force: John Barone, Ron Demkee, Kristin Jellison, Noah Kandt, Deb Orach, Barbara Scattergood, Donna Schoenberger, Chuck Talboo, and Chris Youngs.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pastor [Name]", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."
-St. Augustine

Survey #1 Results:

(A) strongly agree (B) agree (C) disagree (D) strongly disagree (E) no opinion

1. _____ I could support a qualified pastor for our church that identified as LGBT. (A) 53 (B) 16 (C) 5 (D) 3 (E) 4

Agree (A+B) 85% Disagree (C+D) 10%

2. _____ It is our Christian duty to love one another, it is in God's realm to judge (A) 70 (B) 12 (C) 0 (D) 0 (E) 0

Agree (A+B) 100% Disagree (C+D) 0%

3. _____ I consider all LGBT Christians as my brothers and sisters in faith. (A) 63 (B) 14 (C) 1 (D) 0 (E) 4

Agree (A+B) 94% Disagree (C+D) 1%

4. _____ I believe that spiritual growth implies change.

(A) 56 (B) 19 (C) 2 (D) 0 (E) 3

Agree (A+B) 94% Disagree (C+D) 3%

5. _____ For a church to preach "Love Thy Neighbor" and then refuse membership, employment or a leadership position to an LGBT is hypocritical. (A) 61 (B) 13 (C) 4 (D) 1 (E) 2

Agree (A+B) 91% Disagree (C+D) 6%

6. _____ Would you support Faith UCC becoming a church that welcomes our neighbors who identify as LGBT ?

(A) Yes, everyone is welcome at Faith Church.

(B) No, I am not comfortable welcoming anyone who is LGBT.

(C) I am not sure.

(A) 72 (B) 2 (C) 7 Yes 82% No 2%

7. _____ Should Faith UCC change our Mission Statement to include an open and affirming statement for anyone that is LGBT.

(A) Yes, our Mission Statement should reflect Faith Church's responsi-

bility of creating a climate of love, respect and inclusion for all.

(B) No, it is not Faith Church's mission to affirm an LGBT lifestyle.

(C) I am not sure, I am not familiar with Faith Church's Mission Statement.

Here is my opinion _____

(A) 58 (B) 10 (C) 12 Yes 73% No 13%

Question #6 Comments

6. _____ Would you support Faith UCC becoming a church that welcomes our neighbors who identify as LGBT ?

(A) Yes, everyone is welcome at Faith Church.

(B) No, I am not comfortable welcoming anyone who is LGBT.

(C) I am not sure.

- I am not sure if I would continue my worship in a congregation that does not welcome ALL of God's children.

- I believe everyone is welcome at church

- Your business is your business.

- I also have an LGBT in my immediate family which I love dearly.

- We are all God's children.

- I thought we already were.

- They are people as long as they don't push their ideas on us over normal actions.

- I believe LGBT is sinful, but I don't want to exclude them totally from our church. I don't hate them but don't feel it's normal either.

- I do not understand or agree with the lifestyle, but we need to love the person, not their lifestyle.

- Look at 1st Presbyterian in Bethlehem. Divided the church.

- I really am not versed in Bible teachings to know if the lifestyle is supported.

- I would hope that no one emphasizes their alternative lifestyle but rather acts as anyone else.
- Love thy neighbor is a command- to love all people.
- This should not even be a question.
- It is necessary and fundamental for Christians to welcome all.
- Absolutely.
- Why does this need to be discussed?? Why wouldn't this church welcome everyone? Baffles my mind.

Question #7 Comments

7. _____ Should Faith UCC change our Mission Statement to include an open and affirming statement for anyone that is LGBT .

(A) Yes, our Mission Statement should reflect Faith Church's responsibility of creating a climate of love, respect and inclusion for all.

(B) No, it is not Faith Church's mission to affirm an LGBT lifestyle.

(C) I am not sure, I am not familiar with Faith Church's Mission Statement.

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- I thought our mission statement already covered this subject.
 - I don't think our mission statement needs to reflect Opening and Affirming. O&A should be reflected in our actions and attitudes.
 - Church has gone downhill in attendance.
 - We have good friends that are LGBT, who are great people and show love more than some of our other friends do.
 - All are welcome, but do not agree (that) we should reach out to a particular lifestyle.
 - Only God is our judge.
 - No, why focus specifically- not inclusive.
 - Absolutely
 - Absolutely
 - God should be the judge

- To choose option B is to become antipatriotic like the Westboro Baptist Church.
- I feel like we should change our statement, because all are welcome here.

Survey #2 Results:

(A) strongly agree (B) agree (C) disagree (D) strongly disagree (E) no opinion

8. Faith Church's congregational opinion on theological matters is important to me.

(A) 37 (B) 25 (C) 0 (D) 2 (E) 7

Agree (A+B) 87 % Disagree (C+D) 3 %

9. Faith Church should be a sanctuary for anyone identifying as LGBT.

(A) 46 (B) 14 (C) 7 (D) 1 (E) 3

Agree (A+B) 84 % Disagree (C+D) 12%

10. I am willing to be in fellowship with people who disagree with me on the LGBT issue.

(A) 34 (B) 23 (C) 4 (D) 1 (E) 9

Agree (A+B) 80 % Disagree (C+D) 7 %

11. I believe that anyone who lives an LGBT lifestyle can achieve salvation.

(A) 49 (B) 16 (C) 1 (D) 1 (E) 4

Agree (A+B) 92 % Disagree (C+D) 3 %

12. I fear openly accepting LGBT members at Faith Church will cause our church to be at risk of being labeled the "Gay Church" by the community.

(A) 0 (B) 12 (C) 19 (D) 31 (E) 9

Agree (A+B) 17 % Disagree (C+D) 70 %

13._____ Would you support Faith UCC becoming a church that affirms our neighbors who identify as LGBT ?

(A) Yes, I support full inclusion of anyone who is LGBT in the church's life and ministry here at Faith UCC.

(B) No, I am not comfortable with 100% inclusion of anyone who is LGBT here at Faith UCC.

(C) I am not sure.

(A)58 (B) 6 (C) 7 Yes 82 % No 8 %

14._____ All people are unique.

(A) Yes, God created all people to be unique, diversity helps us grow.

(B) No, God created us in His own image and we should not deviate from His plan.

(C) I am not sure.

(A) 66 (B) 5 (C) 0 Yes 93 % No 7 %

Question #13 Comments

13._____ Would you support Faith UCC becoming a church that affirms our neighbors who identify as LGBT ?

- No need to know people's orientation.

-Faith UCC should be open to all people, but not targeting LGBT or any other group.

-not sure

-Let go, let God

-I thought it was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve

- When you talk about this issue, use the term us instead of them!

-not sure

-What's the big deal. Why do we need to focus on this. Really, I welcome anyone. Everyone is invited, no matter what belief.

- I absolutely support full inclusion of anyone who is LGBT in the church's life and ministry, here at Faith
- Why must a gay person enter his (her) personal and private life in church settings. Do you know what I do behind closed doors, work, family, job.
- All are loved by God and me.
- I don't believe that being LGBTQ is necessarily in opposition to being faithful and I don't believe it is up to us to decide who deserves to be saved.
- Let he who is without sin... (not that being gay is a sin)
- They are people too, as long as they are not aggressive with their beliefs.
- I support the LGBT community-I've worked with them for many years.
- This is GOD's CHURCH, not ours. Who are WE to exclude any of HIS children from HIS place of worship. We are commissioned to love everyone and welcome and affirm all of God's children.
- Active LGBT should not be in teaching or leadership positions.
- My supervisor is gay, she is my best friend and the best leader I ever had.
- God loves ALL, end of discussion.

Question #14 Comments

14._____ All people are unique.

- Again- no specific target groups-All are welcome
- not sure what the Bible says
- I lived in gay communities. If you saw what they do in public, you could be offended. They can do what they want sexually, but if they push their agenda it is a problem.

- I am greatly enriched by engaging with others who are different from me.
- Jesus showed that all should be supported and loved.
- Why single them out because they are different?
- You are unique, just like everyone else.
- However, God grants us the ability to choose the path we take.
- This is a terrible form: it has too many open and ambiguous questions.
- I believe God made us to be what he wants us to be. We can choose a course but we can't fundamentally change who we are.
- God bless and God blessed all of us!

Survey #3 Results:

(A) strongly agree (B) agree (C) disagree (D) strongly disagree (E) no opinion

15___ We are all God's children, He loves us and accepts us unconditionally.

(A) 36 (B) 6 (C) 0 (D) 0 (E)

Agree (A+B) 100 % Disagree (C+D) 0 %

16___ Our church should be a safe place that accepts a diversity of views on all issues.

(A) 33 (B) 8 (C) 0 (D) 0 (E) 1

Agree (A+B) 98 % Disagree (C+D) 0 %

17___ We are all sinful. We need God's forgiveness and can only be saved by His grace.

(A) 28 (B) 14 (C) 0 (D) 0 (E)

Agree (A+B) 100 % Disagree (C+D) 0 %

18___ I believe that being an LGB or T is a personal choice.

(A) 10 (B) 11 (C) 5 (D) 11 (E) 5

Agree (A+B) 50 % Disagree (C+D) 38 %

19____ God expects us to love others regardless of whether we agree with their lifestyles.

(A) 33 (B) 6 (C) 0 (D) 1 (E) 2

Agree (A+B) 93 % Disagree (C+D) 3 %

20____ Homophobia is a bigger issue for our congregation than homosexuality.

(A) 10 (B) 9 (C) 7 (D) 3 (E) 13

Agree (A+B) 45 % Disagree (C+D) 24 %

21____ Faith Church has the right to deny anyone membership based on their lifestyle.

(A) 0 (B) 4 (C) 10 (D) 23 (E) 3

Agree (A+B) 10 % Disagree (C+D) 79 %

22. Would you be willing to attend/support a Bible study to examine what Jesus and the Biblical authors have to say about this issue?

YES 13 NO/BLANK 29

23____ My reaction to the open and affirming issue at Faith Church is:

(A) I strongly support being an open and affirming Church.

(B) I support being an open and affirming Church, but I am worried about the reaction of others in the congregation.

(C) I am strongly against being an open and affirming Church.

(D) I am not sure, I have my reservations about what an open and affirming church would mean here at Faith UCC.

(A) 26 (B) 9 (C) 3 (D) 4 (E) 0

Agree (A+B) 83.3 % Disagree (C+D) 16.6 %

Question #23 Comments

- We are all the same inside.
 - I like the church the way it is.
 - I think it is important work towards being welcoming to ALL people.
 - Jesus sacrificed his life for ALL of us... NO EXCEPTIONS!
 - We aren't to judge, we are to love!
 - I always felt we were an open church for all to affirm their faith.
 - We are all God's children and should be allowed our own opinion but not inflect our personal beliefs on others.
 - Jesus never said a word about homosexuality. In all his teachings- about multiple things- he never said gay people should be condemned.
 - I believe we should be open to all people and not target any particular group.
 - To discriminate against anyone, especially an oppressed group, is immoral and against everything Jesus tried to teach us in the Sermon on the Mount.
 - All are welcome, but don't try to influence me (or mine) to join a lifestyle.
 - I am still working on this.
 - I did not chose to be straight, God made me this way and I love him for it. Our gay neighbors should also feel that God made them out of love and they should be able to be welcomed at Faith Church to show God how much they love him.
 - God knows us when we were in the womb. Perhaps he set different people among us to test our love of God.
-

24. What would be your greatest concern if Faith Church became an Open and Affirming Church? How can the Open and Affirming Committee address your concerns?

- none
- Welcome everyone and every lifestyle.
- Let it be left alone.
- Leave it the way it is.
- That other members will reject the O&A idea and leave, or just complain about it.
- I fear becoming a sounding board for lifestyles I don't quite agree with, but can accept.
- Open discussion of honest concerns.
- Again open to everyone not target LGBT. That would be a reverse discrimination. Open to all-not a particular lifestyle.
- I do not have a concern about our church.
- My greatest concern about becoming an O&A church is that nothing will change. We will not embrace unconditional love. We will not grow and be a light upon the hill. We will return either our prejudices or our complacency.
- Some people may leave, but we will gain more.
- It is more concerning that we are not yet Open and Affirming. We are far behind on this issue.

Faith United Church of Christ

Welcoming Statement

Approved by Consistory, June 27, 2019

All people are special to God. We at Faith United Church of Christ welcome you to our Christian Community. We share God's peace, and Christ's grace through loving service to our neighbors both near and far.

We at Faith U.C.C. seek the sacred spirit of God that protects and guides us, as we practice the sincere love that we hold for our neighbors and the extravagant welcome of God.

We believe this welcome includes all of God's creation. We recognize that a community's strength is rooted in harmonious diversity. We welcome, affirm, and embrace all people to fully participate in the life and service of the church, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or political affiliation.

Come as you are and without conditions as we explore the many ways to grow in faith, increase an understanding of Christ's ministry, experience God's grace and transform the world with peace and justice through the power of the Holy Spirit.

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you are welcome at Faith U.C.C. We welcome all because we believe that God welcomes all through Christ.