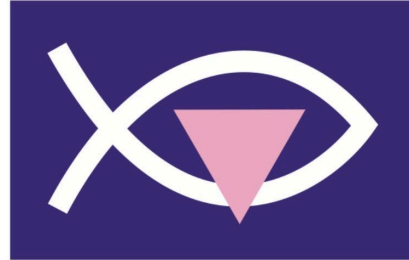


Open & Affirming (ONA)

Why Is It Important & Where Are We on the Journey?

**OPEN AND AFFIRMING
COALITION**
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST



“A congregation becomes Open and Affirming when it affirms a public covenant that “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBT)” (or people of all “sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions”) are welcome in the full life and ministry of the congregation (e.g. membership, leadership, employment). Through its covenant, the congregation promises to live out that welcome in meaningful ways in response to Christ’s teaching of radical hospitality.” -*Open & Affirming Coalition*

- The coalition just celebrated 50 years last year. Over 1,800 of the 3,600 churches in the United Church of Christ.
- The Indiana-Kentucky Conference is currently in the process of becoming an ONA Conference, which calls upon its local churches to look into becoming ONA churches.
- The Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ advocates for the LGBTQ+ community, and equips UCC congregations to become effective witnesses to Christ’s extravagant welcome.

What does becoming Open & Affirming entail?

Though we may know what the coalition is, it is important to highlight the work that ONA is above just having the title. Becoming ONA is a process that leads to voting on affirming a welcoming statement or covenant as a church. In the reformed tradition, a covenant is an act of faith, a solemn promise to God. We have been on this process for about, if not over, 2 years now.

Summary of the Process

- **Graceful Engagement** - forming of a team, reflecting on why we want to do this process, holding one-on-ones with congregant members
- **Mapping the Journey** - assessing one-on-ones, ability to address conflict, the structured & social pillars of power, deciding our process length
- **Education** - provide opportunities for education in the church on required and desired topics (why the process is important, LGBTQ+ terminology, scriptural engagement) that equip congregant members to be radically and intentionally welcoming
- **A Welcoming Statement** - (what is voted on) ONA committee creates a welcoming statement or covenant that is voted on, this statement is a faithful covenant, a poll is held before leading to the vote
- **Holding the Vote** - vote to affirm the welcoming statement, ONA committee submits after vote to coalition for certification
- **What's Next?** - you decide

Why is being an ONA Church Important?

- **Being Intentionally & Radically Welcoming**
 - This process called for being intentional in welcoming all, especially the LGBTQ+ community.
 - This does not mean we will see tons of LGBTQ+ people join or that we are not already a welcoming church, but we are striving for an active commitment of allyship for any person coming into the church
 - This is a call not for tolerance or acceptance, but affirmation and celebration of all of God's children and what makes them them.
- **"All are Welcome"**
 - Being in the UCC, we strive to lean into the message of "All are Welcome Here". While that is true, LGBTQ+ people of faith often experience emotional and spiritual injury in churches that condemn their capacity to love and seek love. Because they've learned that "All Are Welcome" usually doesn't apply to them, they can't assume that any church will be safe for them and their families.
 - A public welcome by an Open and Affirming (ONA) church sends a clear message to LGBTQ+ seekers that they have a home in the United Church of Christ.

- **Feeling ONA does not mean we are ONA**
 - While to many, Immanuel UCC may feel ONA, we are not. Immanuel UCC is not an ONA designated church. It may be assumed due to some LGBTQ+ members and having a lesbian Pastor that we are.
 - If you were looking on the UCC's church finder, it lists 3 things: address/contact info, accessibility, and ONA status.
 - We also are predominately a cis-gender (gender & sex are the same) and heterosexual (straight) congregation meaning we often are looking through our lens on the inside rather than considering those perceptions of LGBTQ+ people.
- **ONA Churches Thrive**
 - While being ONA doesn't mean new members will walk through the door, statistically ONA UCC churches are the ones that are thriving and growing. When ONA congregations attract new members, many of them are young straight couples starting new families: they identify with the values ONA represents, and want their children to learn the faith in a welcoming church.
- **It is What God Calls Us to Do**
 - Lastly, we are rooted in our faith. Being Open & Affirming is a covenant of faith. By adopting an ONA covenant, a congregation is taking seriously St. Paul's admonition to "accept one another, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (Romans 15:7, NIV)

Common Questions about ONA

- **What difference will this make?**
 - It will make a difference 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 for suicide when they experience bullying or mistreatment because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.
 - It will make a difference to parents of LGBT children whose families need the same affirmation and support congregations offer to other families.

- It will make a difference to LGBTQ+ seniors who are often closeted, isolated or abused in retirement communities and nursing homes.
- It will make a difference to all Christians who experience a deep understanding of the Gospel and a stronger commitment to Gospel values when the congregation reaches out in love.
- **Will we become a “gay church”?**
 - Unlikely. Young heterosexual (straight) couples who are looking for a church family with the values an ONA covenant represents are typically part of the growth curve for new ONA churches.
 - When ONA churches publicize their welcome effectively, new members include both LGBTQ+ seekers and straights.. It looks different on how we want it to look! Most work is internal, not external!
- **How will things look different? What will change?**
 - This will only change what the congregation feels a call to change. Nothing will change over night. This process provides 2 main items: a public covenant and education to equip congregants to be more intentional in their welcoming of LGBTQ+ people.
 - Other changes come based on reflection and centering God. Visible changes and advocacy work comes from where we feel called. Some examples of visible changes for ONA churches often include
 - LGBTQ+ leadership in clergy, staff, lay leaders, and training spent towards living out our Welcoming Statement
 - Adult educational opportunities and forums held on LGBTQ+ related topics or advocacy work, and intersectional education opportunities
 - All levels of church children’s education offering curriculum on LGBTQ+ inclusion.
 - Spiritual support towards the LGBTQ+ community in and out of worship. Inclusivity in songs/hymns, wedding ceremonies, and religious rituals offered.
 - Denominational and non-denominational advocacy work and mission outreach.
 - Visibility of our welcoming statement and rainbow logos indicating specific welcoming of LGBTQ+ people. Offering gender inclusive restrooms.

- **If we are already “LGBTQ+-welcoming”, why become ONA?**
 - Why not? Listing on the coalition, UCC, and sites used by LGBT+ Christians looking for church families. Connection & resources in our evangelism, worship, and advocacy. More than anything, it provides covenant to a commitment that one’s sexual orientations, gender identities, and expression should not be left at the door. That God’s children will be welcomed and celebrated fully in our church, both for new members and current members. Along with this, it goes back to our call to be loving all people.



What Should You Do Now?

- **Get Involved**
 - This is not passive work! Showing up can sometimes be the most important thing.
 - Along with educational events, many of our resources we have been highlighting can be found online through our Church website or the ONA website.
- **Use Your Voice**
 - We are not perfect! This includes our own committee! Working to be affirming of all can take work, and even can include unlearning things we have been taught in our lives.
 - Our existence of living is met with so many external impacts that us all starting different place is no one’s fault. We are all at different places and that is okay!