

Open and Affirming Process

Dinner Meeting – June 4, 2008

Guest Speakers: Laura Janus and Gail Link of Congregational United Church of Christ of Arlington Heights

The AH church started with a vision statement with subordinated value statements. One important value for their church was inclusiveness – welcoming everyone.

Once they developed their values statements, they asked: “What are we doing to live up to these values?” They then developed a visioning implementation group who

- Sponsored “town meetings” on each value the church had defined.
- Asked: “What does this value mean? How near are we to fully expressing this value at our church?”

They left the value of *inclusiveness* for last – they knew it would be the most challenging. That discussion led to the decision to do an exploration of becoming Open and Affirming (ONA).

Many in their congregation assumed they were already ONA by default, because they had a gay interim pastor.

The first ONA vote brought before the congregation: *Should we initiate an educational process?* (Note: They did *not* specify whether there would be a vote at the end of the educational process for the church to become open in affirming. That was left open at the early-stage.) The congregation voted to move forward with the educational process.

The ONA education team invested one year educating themselves before they did anything with the congregation.

- “We needed to get our hands around what ONA means. We did not know ourselves. How could we expect the congregation to know what to do, if we did not know what to say about it ourselves?”

Curriculum for training was obtained from the UCC Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgendered (GLBT) Coalition. “No one needs to follow their educational process, but they provide a useful format, good ideas on things to do.”

- One lesson they learned: don’t “just do it” without first realizing and/figuring out what “it” is!

Topics for ONA educational sessions included:

- How to discuss ONA in a positive way
- Biblical passages related to homosexuality,
- How people form their opinions on this topic, etc.

Other activities: Visited the GLBT center on Halsted in Chicago (See Appendix B), showed movies such as *The Bible Tells Me So*.

“We integrated ONA into everything we do.”

“ONA has impacted all three care ministries of our church.”

At their next annual meeting, the education team reported on their activities for the past year. Then, “People asked, ‘What now?’ They wanted us to write a resolution so we could vote. We wrote a resolution, set a date – June 10, 2007. When we voted, the ONA resolution passed almost unanimously.”

Questions from FCCE members:

Were gay or lesbian members involved in this process?

Not originally. It was all voluntary. People came or not depending on how they felt. At first, gay and lesbian members did not want to be part of the initial process. Some said, “I have been hurt so often, this is too risky” (*this*, being to assume leadership in the process). The message: “Prove it first – Prove that this really means something, then I’ll participate.” Now that the vote has been taken and programming to extend welcome and nurture to GLBT persons is in place, GLBT members have become more active in our implementation team.

How big is your church? What is its membership?

Approximately the same as FCCE (200 or so members, 75 to 100 in worship each Sunday).

Did you notice any change in the church after he became ONA?

Yes, but it is hard to describe. “It feels different.” The feeling is intangible.

Did the church lose members over this decision?

No, the church did not lose any members over the ONA resolution. People had shared their opinions on this topic about an earlier decision to hire a gay interim pastor. Some members left when that decision was made.

Did you make an effort to present opposing points of view? Did anyone opposing ONA actively speak against the proposition?

Exploration team membership was voluntary. All who joined the team were in favor of ONA. “This was a dilemma and a surprise for us. We learned that some did not participate because they were against it. Others who supported the initiative did not feel they needed to be part of the process.”

The vote was taken with a written ballot. Only one opposing vote was cast.

“We had a discussion process in which we learned how to disagree. We listened, discussed, respected, empathized.”

Big issue -- the fears of church members. People wondered, What would happen to the church? One response to that concern: Cite the experiences of other churches.

Some said, “We are already open. Why should we go through this?”

- The way we got the point across was to say, “Being open is a piece of cake. Being affirming is hard.” We defined *affirming* in our resolution. Doing so, we also defined human sexuality as a gift of from God, regardless of what form it takes.

What mistakes were made?

- We think we should have done an educational piece on human sexuality.
- We did not do anything on ONA with our youth. In retrospect, we think we should have.

Did you have a full participation from the congregation?

- No. Not as many came to educational events as we’d have liked, and not as consistently.
- Feedback we got was that we had “done enough.” When we asked people why they didn’t come they told us, “I didn’t need to be educated!”

Appendix A:

Values defined by Congregational UCC of Arlington Heights

OUR VALUES

- **INCLUSIVENESS** We welcome and affirm all persons as precious children of God.
- **DISCIPLESHIP** We encourage and nurture the use of our God-given gifts so that we may become involved, committed and empowered to minister.
- **WORSHIP** We joyfully praise God with biblically centered worship that is spiritually fulfilling and musically alive.
- **SPIRITUAL GROWTH** We nurture individual spiritual development through a variety of Christian experiences.
- **OUTREACH** We are called to continue Christ’s servant ministry by caring and doing for others in the community and the world.
- **TESTAMENT** We will, through our work and our words, spread the message of God’s love to those we encounter.
- **STEWARDSHIP** We ask all to commit their time, talent and treasure in service to God.
- **FELLOWSHIP** We value Christian fellowship within our congregation and with other faith communities.
- **COURAGE** We stand up for what we prayerfully believe to be God’s direction.

<http://www.congucc.org/>

Appendix B:

Center on Halsted

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Overview

Chicago has long had the best of everything, and in mid-2001 a dedicated group of community leaders realized that we deserved the world's finest community center for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons.

Through their vision and dedication, Center on Halsted is becoming a reality. With groundbreaking set for 2005, the Center will be the first of its kind in the Midwest. Our mission is simple: *In a safe and nurturing environment, the Center on Halsted serves as a catalyst for the LGBT community that links and provides community resources and enriches life experiences.*

Center on Halsted will be a focal point for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community of Chicago, serving the community's diverse social, recreational, cultural, and social service needs.

The Center on Halsted will be an exciting, highly visible symbol of LGBT pride and provide a safe, understanding and nurturing environment. The Center will offer support networks and programs that meet the cultural, emotional, spiritual, social, educational, and recreational needs of LGBT persons: youth, adults, seniors, or families. As currently envisioned, Center on Halsted will have office and meeting space for community organizations, drop-in space for youth and for older adults, gallery space, cultural programming, and recreation space—basketball and volleyball courts are planned—along with parking, ground level retail, and a rooftop memorial garden.

Current services include support groups for youth and seniors; psychotherapy services; an info line for LGBT individuals and a hotline for HIV and STD concerns; prevention, treatment, and advocacy related to domestic violence; and a range of life-enrichment programs.

The Center on Halsted will also house a number of organizations serving Chicago's LGBT community. More than 40 have expressed their interest in participating with the center. Chicago has long been the center of the LGBT community for the greater Midwest. While the city has a wide array of LGBT organizations that provide many health, social services, recreational, cultural and advocacy programs and services, there is no one place where these organizations can easily come together to collaborate, extend their reach, or share resources. The Center on Halsted will celebrate and solidify this role. This multipurpose facility will provide organizational support and meeting space for LGBT groups, cultural and recreational programming and counseling services. At the heart and soul of the Center are programs that will be offered by a community of nonprofit organizations. Literally tens of thousands will be served each year through the organizations that become partners in this bold new project. The Center will also strengthen the community by serving as a link among diverse organizations that otherwise might not interact.

The Center's vision is to reflect "An LGBT journey...celebrating, affirming and discovering possibilities". Join us on this journey.

<http://www.centeronhalsted.org/>