

OPEN . . . AND AFFIRMING

When I was a little boy I hated gym class. I hated it because I was the proverbial 98-poun weakling, and when it came to choosing up sides to play touch football or soccer, I was often chosen last. Even after good old Donny. I think I was allowed to play only because the teacher made everyone play.

Church shouldn't be like gym class. It's not supposed to be about choosing sides; it's not supposed to be about who's in and who's out. But over the course of history that's just the way it has often been. Blacks, women, poor folks and others have all been told you don't belong or do don't have the same rights and privileges. And in our generation the inclusion struggle has largely focused around the issue of sexual orientation.

Some denominations have chosen to address the issue head on, including our own, the United Church of Christ. And within the United Church of Christ, the movement to include persons regardless of background is called Open and Affirming.

Open and Affirming churches in our denomination are those who, in one way or another, have publicly declared that all people, regardless of gender, race, ethnic background, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, are welcome to be full participants in the life of the congregation. Often this is accomplished by voting on some particular statement to that effect that is included in church by-laws, and then publicized in various church documents and communications.

In particular, the Open and Affirming movement grew out of a resolution passed at the national level of the United Church of Christ, called General Synod, at its meeting in 1985. The UCC has a long tradition of seeking to include those who have often been shut out. That's reflected in various historical tidbits, including the fact that our denomination was the first to ordain a woman, Antoinette Brown, in the mid nineteenth century, and the leadership provided to the Civil Rights Movement included UCC pastors like Andrew Young, former Mayor of Atlanta. Throughout our history we have sought to be a broadly inclusive church, and the Open and Affirming resolution, which specifically addressed the issue of including gay men, lesbian women and bisexuals in the church, grew out of that same inclusive impulse.

Now, unlike, say, the Roman Catholic Church, or the United Methodist Church, our denomination is both non-hierarchical and congregational in its polity, in its form of church government. Policies and decisions made at the national level by the General Synod are not binding on local congregations. As is noted on the UCC website: "The . . . General Synod 'speaks to but not for' local churches Because

we are in covenant with one another we are called to prayerfully consider all actions taken by General Synods . . . [and] are then free to respond faithfully, according to the leading of God's Spirit." (www.ucc.org/lgbt/ona.htm)

In other words, as a local congregation of the United Church of Christ we are called on to wrestle with the issue ourselves. We are called to consider how God would have us act, or not, on the issue. General Synod does not, and cannot, instruct us to declare ourselves Open and Affirming. But, in covenant, we are invited to consider doing just that.

Back in 1999 the initial effort was entered here at Saugatuck to explore the possibility of becoming an Open and Affirming congregation. But when former co-pastors Martie McMane and Alan Johnson resigned it was decided to shelve the work on Open and Affirming until the church was settled in with new pastors. In the description of the church circulated to potential candidates for the Senior Pastor's position the desire to continue exploring Open and Affirming was clearly identified as a major trend at Saugatuck. And both Susanna and I, along, I'm sure with all other candidates for our positions, were asked if we would be willing to be part of a church going through the Open and Affirming process. The work on Open and Affirming had already started long before either of us arrived on the scene.

After we were both settled, and after a great deal of work by the Board of Deacons and others, a resolution was presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of our congregation. With a unanimous vote the meeting established the Inclusiveness Ministry Team and committed us all to an Open and Affirming Educational Process. We've been engaged in that effort now for a little over two years. The Team has presented a wide array of seminars and courses addressing many of the issues involved in becoming Open and Affirming. Programs have included speakers and panels on such things as the African-American experience, concerns of parents of gay and lesbian children, biblical views of sexuality, methods of biblical interpretation and the new Civil Union legislation.

As courses have been held, as we've heard from guest panelists and speakers, at least two questions or comments seem to have surfaced again and again. The first, one that is fairly common in churches going through this process, is very simple: Why do we need to declare ourselves Open and Affirming when we already welcome anybody who wants to come?

Once, at a conference I attended, I heard the well-known church growth expert Lyle Shallert say that whenever surveys are done of church members, most people, in most congregations, say that their church is a friendly church.

"There's just once problem with that," said Shallert, "anyone who thought their church was unfriendly had probably left and wasn't part of the survey!"

Don't misunderstand. I think we are a friendly church. I got an e-mail this week from Lydia Veliko, our guest preacher last week while I was away. "John," she wrote, "had a great time at your church . . . the congregation was incredibly welcoming." Those are the sort of things that warm a pastor's heart! We are a friendly church. We are open to anyone. Yet I am sure that many on the outside looking in aren't quite sure if that welcome includes folks like themselves. If one reads newspapers, watches television and surfs the internet, once sees over and over again many Christian leaders denouncing gays and lesbians. The church is not generally portrayed in popular culture as being open to homosexual persons. And while many fundamentalist congregations have signs that say something like "All Welcome," there are clear limits to their use of the word "all."

As a gay man or a lesbian woman I might not be willing to take the risk of becoming part of a congregation unless I had some advance assurance that I would be accepted even after folks discovered my sexual orientation.

I have heard stories from more than one gay or lesbian person who was raised in the church (not here, but the church in general) who would love to be part of a congregation. But it just doesn't feel safe. After all, who wants to risk coming to church and hearing from the pulpit that something beyond your control like your sexual orientation is an abomination in the eyes of God?

So why do we need to declare ourselves Open and Affirming when we already welcome anyone who wants to come? Well, I don't know if we *need* to, that will be a decision we make as a congregation. But if we want gay and lesbian people to feel free to join us as they are on the journey, if we want black folks to be with us on the way, if we want poor people and persons with disabilities to know they truly are welcome, we should say so—in so many words. Because just looking in the windows at the like s of us, it won't be readily apparent.

The second question I've heard as we've discussed becoming Open and Affirming runs something like this: "I know what it means to be open, but what's this affirming all about? What is it we are supposed to affirm?"

Joe Ford tells a story about a church struggling with some of these inclusion issues. The pastor came up with a plan to address the problem of people feeling shut out.

"Next Sunday," he announced, "and in the following weeks, we'll pause part way through the service to give you an opportunity to turn around in your pews and greet any strangers you may see."

"After the service," writes Ford, "one parishioner turned around and greeted the woman behind . . . [The woman] looked at him in shocked indignation. 'That,' [she said] 'doesn't start until next Sunday!'"
(Sourcebook of Wit and Wisdom, 163)

You see it takes more than a declaration, it also takes action. The open part of Open and Affirming addresses the question: Who should we welcome into church? Who should we say is allowed to be here? And, essentially, declaring itself “Open and Affirming” means a church says anyone is welcome to show up. The affirming part of Open and Affirming moves to the next level, if you will. For it answers the question “Who should share in all the rights and privileges of membership in our congregation?”

I especially like the way this question of what it means to be affirming was addressed in some materials created by the folks at First Church in Hartford. They write: “Affirming means asserting that all persons are equally children of God. An affirming church declares that all are entitled to the same rights, privileges and responsibilities.”

All, which means everybody regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability, all are welcome to engage in the every aspect of church life. It’s not about affirming a particular lifestyle. It’s about affirming people, all people, as children of God. It’s about affirming each individual’s right to be a full partner in the life and work of the church.

None of this is new. Today, for instance, we don’t think twice about the fact that women serve as deacons in our congregation, and participate in the distribution of the communion elements. But in the mid-sixties it was a major debate here at Saugatuck. In the end, by voting to allow women to be deacons, we affirmed all women.

And this issue of inclusion is even older than that. Our scripture reading from Galatians is really all about whether or not the first century church was going to be open and affirming. The issue then wasn’t sexual orientation; it was primarily about religious background.

The apostles and all the first Christians were Jews who had come to believe Jesus was the Messiah. They continued to keep kosher and follow the Jewish law, even after they started to follow Jesus. But as the gospel spread outside of Jewish territory and those who weren’t Jews decided to become Christians, many said, no, to be a Christian you first have to become Jewish. If you are a man, you must be circumcised. And man or woman, you must keep kosher and follow the Jewish law.

But Paul and others said, that’s wrong, all are welcome to follow Christ. No strings attached. All are welcome, regardless of their background. There aren’t any special entrance requirements for the church beyond a willingness to follow Christ’s way. Those differences no longer divide us in the church. “There is no longer Jew or Greek,” Paul wrote, “there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Declaring ourselves to be an Open and Affirming congregation is not the only way we can follow in Paul's footsteps. It is not the only way we can live out Christ's command to "love our neighbors as ourselves." But it is a way, a very powerful way, that we can live into our desire to be an inclusive church in this day and age. However, whether or not we vote to be formally Open and Affirming, it is incumbent upon us, at least as I read the gospel, to be both.

One of the most powerful dramas to come along in recent years is Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*. The play is based on dozens and dozens of interviews with the people of Laramie, Wyoming who were involved in one way or another in the events surrounding the murder of a gay college student named Matthew Shepherd.

One of those interviewed was a fifty-year –old physician named Dr. Cantway. Cantway was on duty at the local hospital's ER when the badly mangled Shepherd was first brought in. Later that same evening, Aaron McKinney, who was soon discovered to be one of Shepherd's assailants, got in a bar fight and was also treated in the ER. Dr. Cantway worked on both of the young men.

In the play, at the end of Act One, Cantway shares his thoughts: ". . . [T]wo days later I found out the connection and I was . . . very . . . struck!!! They were two kids!!!! They were both my patients and they were two kids. I took care of both of them Of both of their bodies. And for a brief moment I wondered if this is how God feels when he looks down on us. How we are all his kids . . .Our bodies . . .Our souls . . . And I felt a great deal of compassion for both of them . . . "(38)

In my mind, at least, and as always you are free to disagree with me, the question is not whether we are open and affirming of all people, that's not up for grabs. Rather, in voting on declaring ourselves Open and Affirming, the question we are debating is how we do it as a congregation. For in the end, we are indeed, all God's kids. We are all God's children. And God doesn't choose up side. And neither should we. After all, it's church, not gym class.

**Amen
John H. Danner**