

Growing into Diversity - Past, Present, Future

Noel Nickle, Member

First Congregational UCC, Asheville, NC

First Congregational United Church of Christ of Asheville is located in the mountains of Western North Carolina. In the last six years, the church has experienced transforming growth with membership nearly doubling to more than two hundred members. Having outgrown the current church facility, the congregation has purchased twelve and a half acres of land and plans to build a new church home in the next five years. With the congregation in the midst of such transition, some might have questioned the wisdom of engaging in an Open and Affirming (ONA) process. However, on January 27, 2002 the church completed a year of ONA study and with an 86% majority vote brought the count of ONA churches to 400.

It is now clear that the completion of the ONA process helped to clarify some aspects of the church's identity. Through the process, the church renewed its commitment to social justice, particularly with regard to welcoming all people. The congregation also turned to the Bible as a source for guidance and grappled with the issue of biblical interpretation. And perhaps most importantly, the congregation realized and appreciated the challenge of listening to diverging views in times of disagreement. How the congregation dealt with each of these issues during the ONA process not only shaped the current identity of First Congregational but will also inform the identity and mission of the church in the future.

First Congregational, a nearly all white congregation, has a long-standing reputation as an advocate for racial justice in the community. When discussing welcoming individuals whom the Church has made to feel unwelcome, some long-time members recollected the role First Congregational played in the civil rights movement in Asheville. These members were proud of the fact that African Americans were welcomed and, in fact, participated in worship at First Congregational while other congregations struggled with desegregation. In drafting the ONA statement, it became important to acknowledge this history of welcoming African Americans as a foundation to embracing people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. By becoming an Open and Affirming congregation, the church re-affirmed its identity as an advocate for social justice. No doubt as plans are made for mission and outreach in the new church facility, this aspect of the congregation's past and present identity will influence future decisions.

At the heart of most religious debates regarding sexual orientation is the issue of biblical interpretation. What does the Bible really say, and how are we as Christians in the twenty-first century to interpret it? Twice during the ONA process, our pastor, the Rev. Joe Hoffman, offered a Bible study series focusing on texts often used when discussing sexual orientation. He did not simply teach a particular interpretation of the biblical passages, but instead helped the participants examine their individual life experiences, which influence their own interpretations of the Bible. By considering the context in which the scripture was written as well as the context in which it is being read, we found passages applicable to both participants and our ONA process in general. While a few

in the congregation found their interpretation of the Bible led them to oppose the ONA covenant, many more discovered that it was a biblical imperative that called them to support the covenant. Throughout the ONA process the theological reasons for engaging in this issue were raised, and a renewed energy for biblical study emerged. With the Bible as a primary resource for church decisions and this methodology as a way of interpretation, the congregation was and will be able to chart its course on a uniquely personal and yet scripture-based path.

The ability to listen to divergent opinions in times of disagreement was, perhaps, the greatest lesson learned during the ONA process and has likely had the greatest influence in shaping the church's identity. Through the simple (though not always easy) act of listening to one another, individual members came to know one another's stories of fear, pain, and healing. As the year of ONA study progressed it became increasingly essential that all voices be heard, to the point that some people sought out dialogue with others even knowing that they did not agree. Through this listening some minds and hearts changed and some did not, but in all cases relationships grew. And regardless of how a person may have voted on January 27, everyone attempted to respond with a sense of grace and awe for how far the congregation had come in respecting each member.

With the Spirit's guidance, the congregation has enhanced its commitment to respecting diversity, not only by welcoming and affirming gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, but also by striving to hear various beliefs. As the church grows into the diversity of the future this aspect of the congregation's identity will surely be challenged. For whether the congregation is choosing the color for the walls of the new sanctuary or allocating funds for local mission outreach, difference of opinion will continue. How diversity is embraced and respected will determine the future of First Congregational UCC in Asheville. In this regard, becoming an ONA church has already set a strong direction for the congregation's future.