

Church of the Foothills ONA FAQ Sheet

Did You Know?

In 1972, the UCC was the first mainline Protestant denomination to ordain an openly-gay minister, the Rev. William R. Johnson, and was the first denomination to affirm marriage equality for all people, regardless of gender, at its General Synod in 2005. Read the Affirmation [here](#).

More than 1,600 UCC churches – or about one third of all UCC congregations – are listed as officially Open and Affirming.

To be an Open and Affirming (ONA) congregation, we must explicitly state and demonstrate that we welcome the participation of all people into the life of our church. In particular we need to be clear that welcoming all people includes those with different sexual orientation and gender identities, that is gay men, lesbian women, bisexual people and those who are transgender.

The Church of the Foothills Covenant does not include an explicit statement of welcome and inclusion to LGBTQ persons. It states that *"we pledge ourselves to love each other in our differences of belief, to recognize our kinship with all people, and to respond with compassion to the needs of others"*. Read the complete Covenant [here](#).

Church of the Foothills behaves largely as an ONA church is expected to, but without declaring our intention to do so.

- We have called openly LGBTQ persons to serve as our pastors and interim ministers
- We have gladly welcomed LGBTQ persons into our church family as new members
- LGBTQ persons have chosen to be active in the life of our church, serving on many committees and boards.
- We have elected LGBTQ persons to serve in positions of leadership in our church, including the position of Moderator
- We have baptized the children of gay and lesbian couples
- We have performed weddings of same-sex couples

Becoming an ONA congregation could actually help to save lives. LGBT persons suffer significantly higher rates of suicide and attempted suicide than the population at large, due primarily to cultural and social prejudice and institutional discrimination. Providing a safe, loving place for LGBTQ persons to worship can help to diminish these stresses. While precise statistics are not available, studies have shown that LGBTQ youth may attempt suicide at a rate up to three times the rate of other youth, that gay/bisexual men may have a four times higher rate; gay and bisexual women a two times higher rate. And a 2009 National Transgender Discrimination Survey showed that 41% of adult respondents reported suicide attempts. Source: [2012 NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION](#)

[According to a recent study](#) from **Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago**, LGBTQ young people are 120% more likely to experience homelessness than non-LGBTQ youth.

UCC statistics show that the health of their churches is closely associated with their status as ONA congregations (Source: [https://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/Report-Public-Release-\(Updated-1.27\).pdf](https://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/Report-Public-Release-(Updated-1.27).pdf)):

- ONA churches tend to be larger than non-ONA churches
- ONA churches close or merge with other churches at about half the rate of other UCC churches.
- ONA churches tend to have much larger budgets than other UCC churches.

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FAQs

What does ONA mean?

ONA is the United Church of Christ's shorthand for Open and Affirming, a designation that means that the congregation welcomes persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities and works to include them into all aspects of the life and leadership of the church. In order to officially become an Open and Affirming congregation, the congregation must draft and approve a covenant that explicitly states this.

We welcome everybody. Why should we single out LGBTQ persons to communicate our welcome?

We should absolutely be open to everyone. The reason the focus of ONA is primarily on LGBTQ persons is that they are the primary group that is still actively stigmatized and shunned by many in the church. This is not the case for most other groups of people.

There is no reason, however, that we can't broaden our church's ONA statement to include people in other groups that have, at one time or another in the church's history, been stigmatized or excluded. These groups include people having a physical or mental disability, those who suffer from a mental illness, people who did not have Western European progenitors, people living in single-parent households, etc. Indeed many churches who have drawn up ONA statements have explicitly listed as many groups as possible in their statements.

If we become an Open and Affirming congregation, Won't we be taken over by gays?

Such has not been the experience of the more than 1,600 UCC congregations that have already become Open and Affirming. Nor has it been the experience of the many congregations in other denominations such as the United Methodist church, the American Baptist Convention, The Episcopal Church in America, and the Unitarian Universalist Association. There's little reason to think we'll somehow be different.

If we become Open and Affirming, won't that mean our pledging will shrink?

UCC statistics show that the health of their churches is closely associated with their status as ONA congregations (Source: [https://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/Report-Public-Release-\(Updated-1.27\).pdf](https://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/Report-Public-Release-(Updated-1.27).pdf)):

We shouldn't be making decisions on the basis of our balance sheet, but upon the basis of what our beliefs require of us. However, the 1999 survey of U.C.C. churches that had voted to become ONA showed that two thirds noticed no significant effects on their pledging following the ONA vote. A little over a quarter of the congregations actually saw an increase in their budgets, while only 8% experienced a decline in their budgets. Reference: *ONA 1999*, Holden, MA: The UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns (1999).

A public welcome to LGBT seekers helps churches grow. When new ONA churches 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. (Watch the PBS documentary [ONA: An Opportunity for Growth](#))

Why single out LGBTQ people for special treatment?

An ONA congregation does not provide "special treatment" to LGBTQ persons. The ONA congregation welcomes, includes and supports LGBTQ persons exactly as they would welcome, include and support anyone else.

Why shouldn't we just take a "don't ask, don't tell" approach?

The "don't ask, don't tell" approach enforces a system where LGBTQ persons are required to hide their essential personalities and their relationships. This is neither fair nor equal treatment.

Why can't we just let people come as they choose, or not, and not make all this fuss about it?

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) 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. Unless we make public our commitment to be Open and Affirming, there is no way that LGBTQ Christians will know that our church is safe for them to attend. If we believe that all Christians are entitled to be able to participate fully in a community of faith, we need to let those of them who happen to be LGBTQ know where to find such a community.

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I get the "Open" part, but what, exactly are we "Affirming"?

An ONA congregation affirms that all people, including those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, are children of God and deserve to be treated as such by us. We are, in essence, affirming the essential humanity of us all. It's one of those "many gifts, but all one body" kinds of things. That is something that, as Christians, we are expected to acknowledge. The point of being Open and Affirming is to make it clear to all that we take seriously our Christian commitment to "love one another", and that we value the gifts each of us brings to the church or body of Christ.

Why is status as an ONA congregation not the default position of the UCC (and our) church?

Because each congregation in the United Church of Christ is independent, and therefore free to make its own decisions, there is a broad diversity of theology and practice in our tradition. In the UCC, there is no hierarchy that can impose uniformity on our churches. Each ONA congregation has independently adopted an Open and Affirming covenant after a journey of dialogue, study and prayer.

Let's get practical. If we become an ONA congregation, what does that really mean in terms of what we will do?

There are differences between congregations, but generally, an ONA church:

- is a safe space for open and honest conversation about human sexuality and gender identity.
- encourages LGBTQ members to serve in lay and ordained leadership.
- celebrates same-sex weddings.
- celebrates the anniversaries of LGBTQ married and partnered couples and offers rites to honor gender transitions.
- advocates for LGBTQ civil rights, and defends their LGBTQ neighbors when their dignity or safety are threatened.
- is willing to host meetings of support groups like PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays).
- advertises that it is a safe space for LGBTQ and questioning youth.
- participates as a group in the local LGBTQ Pride Parade.
- celebrates ONA Sunday once a year and annually renews its ONA covenant.
- Lists their church as one with an ONA congregation on their own and the UCC's website.