



First Congregational Church, UCC
2001 Niles Avenue, Saint Joseph, MI 49085

Conversations on Open and Affirming Commonly Asked Questions

What is “Opening and Affirming?”

The United Church of Christ (UCC) has long maintained that integral to its mission is the unity of believers, even in the midst of visible and tangible diversity. One of the results of pursuing unity in diversity is a proclamation of “radical welcome,” or finding ways to be hospitable where for many, a community of faith has *not* been an option because of certain traditions. Those that have felt the sting of the church’s rejection strongest are those not only on the spectrum of sexuality, but also gender. The UCC has long been a proponent of gender equality, and one of the first, faith-based-defenders of human sexuality. The UCC believes that God’s Spirit *continues* to speak and that Scripture must be reviewed generation after generation to allow for new insights, so that Jesus’ vision of “they may all be one” (John 17) might be fully realized.

The “Open and Affirming” process was born out of this vision and the leadership of congregations who saw the hurt of the LGBTQ+ community and wanted to do what they could to make it known that no one was “outside” the welcome of Christ’s Body. This is not a recent movement, but one that the UCC has been offering since 1972.

“Open and Affirming” is a public recognition that a congregation’s welcome truly *includes* LGBTQ+ persons, rather than simply saying “all are welcome.” (See [UCC Open and Affirming Coalition](#)) “Open and Affirming,” though centered around welcome of LGBTQ+ persons, has implications for the *entire* human community -- for where efforts are made to be explicit in a statement of welcome, it is better known to those on the “outside” that *anyone* is truly able to participate and be included.

What does LGBTQ+ mean?

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and “+”, meaning that sexuality is a spectrum and there is real fluidity within these identities. Check this link for [some of the best vocabulary understandings](#) (www.glaad.org) and review the “Resources” list below

Why “Open and Affirming?”

Though gender and sexuality are certainly not the whole of the Gospel, much attention and energy has been given into translating and defining the “boundaries” of who is “in” and who is “out” (i.e. *who* can get married, work, and serve in the church?) Many

people see the Church's discussion and enactment of denying full participation to LGBTQ+ members as hypocritical and harmful. Whereas the rest of the world seems to be doing a far better job of welcome and inclusion, the Church is seen as lagging behind, or at least failing to uphold the ethic of love it so often proclaims.

While the question of timing is important, it can often negate the experience of those on the "outside." The LGBTQ+ community is waiting for the Church to take a vocal stance on their shared human-ness and participation in the life of the Church. Such a formal stance like this also honors the UCC's respect for science and God's wisdom being found in the *whole person* - understanding the complexity and diversity present not just in the human psyche but also within biology and sexuality.

If our mission at First Congregational Church is to "Welcome people to faith in Jesus Christ" - then we need to make sure that there are *no* obstacles to that invitation. By voting to become an Open and Affirming congregation, FCC has made our welcome truly for "all" – *everyone* is welcome into the life and worship of this community!

The Process

Our process, or journey of discernment, has been as follows: Church Council began a conversation in September 2020, deciding how and when to move the conversation to the wider congregation. During the Nominating Meeting in November 2020, Pastor Jeffrey included an introduction to this dialogue, notifying the congregation of upcoming opportunities to engage the topic of LGBTQ+ inclusion. Beginning January 2021, a survey was sent out to the congregation, polling people on their current understanding of our congregation's welcome, and how that might extend itself to the LGBTQ+ community. At the Annual Meeting, Pastor Jeffrey reflected on the results of that survey, inviting the congregation into a season of further learning and dialogue.

Those first learning opportunities were offered in February 2021 – a couple of panel discussions were held over Zoom, and were recorded and uploaded to the church's website – the videos can be found here:

Panel 1 – recorded February 10, with Rev. Mike Tupper from FCC South Haven and Rev. Ken Arthur from Phoenix Community Church in Portage

<https://boxcast.tv/view/learning-panel-conversation-on-open-and-affirming-tdlhcf23vzteuhjxual>

Panel 2 – recorded February 14, with Rev. Dr. Sid Mohn from Interfaith Action and Alex Cross, Program Coordinator for the OutCenter

<https://boxcast.tv/view/learning-panel-ii-conversation-on-open-and-affirming-koji3mgbyn1drwfyknbh>

A second set of learning opportunities was offered in March 2021 – Rev. Dr. Jim Brownson, professor of New Testament from Western Theological Seminary, offered both a lecture and follow-up Q&A, with input from Pastor Jeffrey:

Presentation of Scripture Interpretation and Issues of Gender and Sexuality

<https://boxcast.tv/view/bible-lecture-138104>

Follow-up Q&A with Dr. Brownson and Pastor Jeffrey

<https://boxcast.tv/view/bible-lecture-ii-539154>

Pastor Jeffrey offered a “Town Hall” on April 28, 2021 to review these sessions and offer time for Q&A. **Video link:** <https://boxcast.tv/view/town-hall-discussion-884783>

At **Church Council’s May 2021 meeting**, members of Church Council reviewed the process and made the decision to begin formulating an official statement to present to the congregation. Church Council then voted on and approved the following statement during a special meeting on June 6, 2021:

“FCC is Open and Affirming: Because we believe each person is made in God’s Image, we welcome all persons into the life and worship of this congregation.”

Pastor Jeffrey led another [session for questions](#) and learning on **Sunday, August 15, 2021** after worship.

On Sunday, August 29, 2021 FCC voted unanimously to adopt the UCC’s designation of Open and Affirming and create a “covenant of welcome” within the church bylaws.

A Note from Pastor Jeffrey

While it may be fair to say that gender and sexuality occupy very small amounts of the Bible’s actual teaching, *because* so much energy and attention has been given to this conversation, the Church owes reconciliation to those harmed by exclusionary and abusive traditions. It’s also important to note that this is not just a “topic” – these are *real people*, fellow human beings, that we’re discussing.

Properly discerning the Spirit’s movement is essential to our congregation’s vision and mission. This process is important not only to the welcome of the LGBTQ+ community,

but also how the Church will move forward into the future. How the Church deals with biblical interpretation and application in regards to gender and sexuality will also affect its relationship to the environment, race, economics, and all other areas of life that are intimately connected to our discipleship.

There are *many* things in the Bible, and we certainly need to pay attention to them. Yet holding onto a few select verses here and there is neither a holistic view of Scripture nor a worthy attitude for God's Word. We need to see the few *in light of* the whole, and it is the *whole* of Scripture – Genesis *through* Revelation – that reminds us that the story of God is summed up in Christ, whose love knows *no boundaries* and whose invitation extends to *all*, no exceptions.

Resources

- Video of Zoom Panel by Southwest Association of Michigan Conference UCC: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d60tRxfv4O8>
- *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays vs. Christian Debate* by Justin Lee
- *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* by Matthew Vines
- *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical's Change of Heart* by Mark Achtemeier
- *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* by Jack Rogers
- *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate* by Jeannie Gainsburg
- "What the Bible Really Says About Gay Christians May Surprise You" (article) <https://openandaffirming.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Bill-Lyons-What-the-Bible-really-says.pdf>
- The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality (video lecture) by Matthew Vines: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezQjNJUSraY>
- The "Clobber Passages" <https://ecinc.org/clobber-passages/>
 - There are 31,000 verses in the Bible. At most, 8 (the clobber passages) are texts commonly used against supporting same-sex relationships. But that's only 0.02% of the Bible. 0.02% should *not* control the conversation or be its final word. Jesus is always the Last Word for us.

