

ONA FAQ

or Frequently Asked Questions about Open and Affirming

L. G. Piper -- October, 2001 - February, 2002 -- v. 1.11

Note: When reference is made in these FAQ to "gay people" or "gays", we are in fact talking about gay men and lesbian women and people who are bisexual or transgendered. Many people refer to this group as GLBTs.

General questions on the FAQ

A. Who provided these FAQ?

These FAQ were conceived entirely by the ONA committee at the First Congregational Church of Reading, U.C.C. and written up by committee member L. G. Piper

B. What is the source of the information in these FAQ?

The information in these FAQ came from the various forums and studies that have been held at our church over the past two years. Some additional information is the result of outside research done by ONA committee members.

C. Could you quickly summarize the purpose of these FAQ?

There are three sets of issues an individual must consider in developing a position on ONA: sociological, religious and visceral. The first two sets of issues are clouded by myth, but can be resolved by facts. This document tries to provide those. The visceral issues can only be resolved by prayer, but the prayer should be guided by facts, not myths. Thus the point of this document is to dispel common sociological and religious misunderstandings regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. With new understanding, then, we hope that readers will find prayer more fruitful as they try to remove their own visceral roadblocks to inclusiveness.

Introducing the topic

1. What are these mysterious letters 'ONA' anyway?

ONA is an acronym that stands for Open and Affirming.

2. What do you mean by Open and Affirming?

In the situation addressed by these FAQ, Open and Affirming refers to a classification and way of being some UCC churches have. Currently, the First Congregational Church of Reading, UCC, is not Open and Affirming.

3. Why do you say our church is not Open and Affirming?

The reason our church is not Open and Affirming is that we have not, as yet, made a public declaration and demonstration of our commitment to be so. To become an Open and Affirming congregation we need to draft and adopt a statement declaring ourselves to be Open and Affirming and, in addition, to model our congregational behavior in such a manner that our declaration rings true.

4. But we don't discriminate; how can you say we're not Open and Affirming?

To be an Open and Affirming congregation, we must explicitly state and demonstrate that we welcome, not just tolerate, but 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 orientations and gender identities, that is gay men, lesbian women, bisexual people and those who are transgendered.

5. This ONA business is one of those California things, right?

No way! There are almost 400 congregations in the United Church of Christ that have declared themselves to be Open and Affirming. Some of them are in California, some are in Massachusetts, some are in quite a number of other states. Believe it or not, there are ONA congregations in states such as Alabama, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, South Carolina, Utah, and even one in Peoria, Illinois. As of June, 2001, the Mass Conference had 38 ONA congregations, or about 1 out of every 10.

Neither is the effort to be open and affirming limited to UCC congregations. The United Methodist church has what they call Reconciling Congregations, the American Baptists, Welcoming and Affirming, The Evangelical Lutherans, Reconciling in Christ, The Presbyterian Church, USA, More Light Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, Integrity Partners, and, naturally, denominations such as the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Religious Society of Friends (i.e. Quakers) have, in general, been open and affirming for quite some time. There's even a movement within the Roman Catholic church called Dignity/USA that seeks to gain full acceptance of gays and lesbians by the church.

6. Why is the ONA focus on gay people? Shouldn't we be open to everyone, not just gays?

Indeed we should be open to everyone. The reason the focus of ONA appears to be primarily on gays is that they are a group that is still actively stigmatized and shunned by many in the church. In general, 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.

7. Are you talking about giving special privileges to gays?

No. We are talking about giving equal privileges to gays.

8. Why do you say they don't already have equal privileges?

Most gay people have experienced significant levels of discrimination in the church. In some congregations gays are actively expelled, in some they are allowed to show up for regular service, but are shunned or ignored. In many congregations gays are welcome only if they hide the fact that they are gay and hide their relationships from the rest of the congregation. That is, they must keep significant parts of their essential personality hidden.

To give a simple example of how this can affect people, most heterosexuals wouldn't attend a church where they had to hide the fact that they were married. Most gay people aren't allowed to attend a church if they don't hide the fact that they are living in a committed relationship with another person who just happens to be of the same gender. So if, for example one partner in a heterosexual relationship falls ill, is injured or dies, the healthy or surviving partner will generally receive significant support and consolation from the rest of the congregation. Such support and consolation is not available to the healthy or surviving partner in a homosexual union if the union must be hidden.

9. Wait, aren't you being confused here? Gay people can't marry.

In all but a very few states your statement is technically true. Gay people are generally denied one of the rights of citizenship, legal recognition that they are living together in a committed relationship. In some states, heterosexuals are considered legally married if they live together in a committed relationship for some period of time, often seven years (common law).

Gay people who live similarly aren't accorded the legal acknowledgment of their relationship, even though the essence of the relationship is the same. The central issue is not one of legal technicalities, however, but one of relationships: gay people are forced to hide them while heterosexuals are not. That is not equal treatment.

10. Aren't we taking an anti-family stance by letting gay people into the church?

No. From its very beginnings, the church has welcomed people living in all kinds of circumstances. New Testament writings in particular contain constant admonition that the people of the church take in widows and orphans. Neither of these groups of people live in what we would call traditional nuclear families. The phrase, "widows and orphans", is, in effect, shorthand for all people who have nowhere else to turn and, thereby, properly includes the poor, the oppressed, the disadvantaged, the outcasts of society. Certainly a portion of society's outcasts would include gay men and lesbian women and people who are bisexual or transgendered.

In reality, by accepting all people into the family of God, we are taking a pro-family stance. We don't pick and choose who is fit for membership in our birth families. Neither should we pick and choose when it comes to membership in the greater family known to us as the church.

Furthermore, we would most assuredly be taking a pro-family stance if we provided support to families in which there were gay children. Some churches force parents to choose between their religious practices and their children. Such is a decidedly anti-family stance, one which we should emphatically reject.

Concerns about the nature of gay people

11. What exactly do you mean by gay people?

Gay men and lesbian women are people who are naturally attracted to members of the same sex. Bisexual people can have feelings of attraction towards members of either sex. Transgendered people are those whose gender identity, i.e. the way they think and feel about themselves, is different from their outward biological characteristics. Please note, we are talking about feelings and attractions not about modes of behavior.

reference: American Psychological Association
[<http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/answers.html>]

12. Isn't being gay unnatural?

Absolutely not! People who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered were born that way. That is to say, whether or not one is gay is determined by genetics. Having a characteristic not shared by the majority of people doesn't make one unnatural, only different. People naturally vary in many ways such as coloring, intelligence and abilities. We don't refer to those whose intelligence or capabilities are vastly different from the majority, e.g. Albert Einstein or Ted Williams, as being unnatural. The same is true of gender identity and sexual preference. People naturally differ in these characteristics.

reference: American Psychological Association
[<http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/answers.html>]

13. Aren't gay people mentally ill?

No more than anyone else. Being gay is quite clearly not a mental illness. A century ago some people tried to describe homosexual behavior as being a form of mental illness. No reputable mental health organization maintains such a belief today. This includes The American Psychological Association, The American Medical Association, The American Psychiatric Association, The American Psychoanalytic Association, and The American Academy of Pediatrics. Sexual orientation is a biologically determined characteristic, much like one's being left-handed or having red hair. Because being gay is natural biological characteristic of some people, gay people simply cannot be cured of their "gayness", either through medical or spiritual intervention, in

much the same way as left-handed people can't be cured of left-handedness (something that was also tried in the not too distant past).

Reference: American Psychological Association
[<http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/answers.html>]

14. Aren't we opening our church to a bunch of perverts and child molesters?

Not at all! Most people who abuse children sexually, in fact an overwhelming majority of them, are heterosexual. In fact, gay people are no more inclined to abuse children than anyone else. Furthermore, to protect our children, we have instituted a "safe church" policy. Discriminating against gays and lesbians will provide no additional protection.

References: P. J. Falk, *American Psychologist* 44, 941-949 (1989).
A.N. Groth, & H.J. Birnbaum, "Adult Sexual Orientation and Attraction to Underage Persons", *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 7 (3), 175-181(1978).

15. Don't we have an obligation to protect our children?

Yes indeed, we do. That's one reason we need to become an Open and Affirming congregation. Our children aren't threatened by the presence of gays and lesbians in our congregation because most child molesters (more than 90%) are heterosexual males (generally relatives or close family friends of their victims). However, if we become Open and Affirming, those among our own children who happen to be gay or lesbian will find the church to be a safe haven. Studies have shown clearly that suicide rates among gay and lesbian children who do not have an accepting environment are four times greater than among non-gay children, or gay ones who do have an accepting environment in which to live.

Reference: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide", Washington, D.C. (1989)

16. If we let a bunch of gay people in the church won't they try to make our children gay?

Sexual orientation is inherent (i.e. inborn) and not learned. No one could make our children gay or lesbian even if they tried. Studies have shown that the distribution between gay and straight among children brought up by gay parents is the same as in the general population, i.e. predominantly heterosexual.

Reference: A.P. Bell, M.S. Weinberg, & S.K. Hammersmith, *Sexual preference: Its Development in Men and Women*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1981).

17. If we let a bunch of gay people in the church won't they start hitting on us?

This won't happen. Like everyone else, gay and lesbian people don't make overtures towards people from whom reciprocal signs of interest are unlikely.

Reference: A. P. Bell and M. S. Weinberg, *Homosexuality: A Study in Human Diversity*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.

18. Aren't gay people promiscuous?

The majority of gay and lesbian people are not promiscuous. Just as is the case with heterosexuals, there is a minority of gay and lesbian individuals who are. People who tend toward promiscuity are more likely to have their peccadilloes publicized.

Reference: A. P. Bell and M. S. Weinberg, *Homosexuality: A Study in Human Diversity*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.

19. Why do gay people have to force their views of sex down our throats?

Actually they don't want to. The subject of sex invariably is introduced by people opposed to including gays into the life of the church. Gay Christians don't talk about sex any more than do heterosexual Christians.

Biblically related questions

20. Shouldn't we hate the sin but love the sinner?

Perhaps we should. In this case, however, the phrase isn't relevant because being gay is not a sin.

21. But doesn't the *Bible* say that being gay is a sin?

Absolutely not! Some people have taken a few selected passages from the *Bible* out of context to support such a claim. Stripping a phrase from its context can be, and often is, a good way to subvert the meaning the author intended to convey. It is, however, a good way to provide the illusion of outside support for one's prejudices. In the not too distant past, selective quotation from the *Bible* has been used to justify such things as slavery, subjugation of women and child abuse. Biblical support for these, none of which we would countenance today, is actually stronger than is Biblical proscription of homosexuality. Remember what Shakespeare said, "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose".

In addition to the problem of quoting passages out of context is the problem of whether a quotation accurately represents the original meaning of the words that were recorded. Generally we quote *Bible* passages in translation rather than referring to the original text, or as near to the original as possible. Unfortunately, many translations of the *Bible* have flaws, that is, they are not true to the original text and words are either inadvertently or purposely mistranslated, contexts juggled, etc. In some cases, words have changed meaning over time, or their original meanings have been lost. Often, the translations on which we rely were themselves made from earlier translations and if the earlier translations contained errors they will be passed on.

22. What do you mean by mistranslations?

A good example of this translation problem is with the Greek word *malakoi*, which essentially means "soft". The word was often used in talking about fine cloth (see Mat. 11:8 and Luke 7:25). In the context in which Paul used it (I Cor. 6:9), it most likely meant people with soft moral character, or as we might say today, weak willed or easily swayed. This was a common use of the term in the Greek world around the time Paul was writing.

Because the term eventually evolved into a slang term for what we might today call "dandies" (i.e. people who wore fine clothing), the word started to be taken differently from its original meaning. Over the course of time, translators have represented this word with the words weaklings, lecherous, effeminate, sexual perverts, voluptuous persons, masturbators, "those who participate in homosexuality", sissies, catamites (young boys kept by older men for sex), and male prostitutes. The implicit identification of the word with sexual behavior didn't occur until the Middle Ages. The actual word "homosexual" didn't appear in any translation of the *Bible* until 1946.

The translation issue is, of course, somewhat more complicated than just presented and involves consideration of more than just the word *malakoi*. However, similar problems exist for other passages also. Either words have been mistranslated or context has been ignored. Those wishing to undertake an in-depth study of the issue might begin by investigating some of the references found at the end of these FAQ, or by asking a member of the ONA committee to borrow a copy of the *Bible* study guide from which we worked during our Lenten series in 2001.

Reference: Here's a pointer to a Greek Lexicon on-line where the word *malakoi* and its variants are discussed. Clearly the word does not mean homosexual as we understand that word to mean.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/lexindex?entry=malako/s>

23. Could you be more specific about problems of context?

There is no evidence from historical studies of biblical times that people had a concept of two people of the same sex living together in a committed relationship. There is, on the other hand, clear historical evidence that some men in biblical times used young boys as sexual toys and that some men would rape those they had defeated in battle as a form of inflicting additional humiliation on them. Further, there is historical evidence that sexual acts, sometimes between men, were used in pagan fertility rituals. Most scholars believe these kinds of behavior were what was being proscribed in the Biblical passages most often cited as evidence that homosexuality is wrong. Leviticus was taking a stand against Canaanite fertility rituals, not against committed, same-sex relationships. Paul was talking about excesses in a number of forms of self-gratification, one of which may well have involved sexual activity between men and boy prostitutes.

What was a bad idea two or three millennia ago, i.e. abuse of other people, either for self-gratification or to humiliate the other person, and the incorporation of sexual activities into pagan fertility rituals is still a bad idea. On the other hand something that is, and always has been, considered to be a good idea, that of two people who love each other living together in a committed relationship, should not be considered a bad idea just because the relationship is between people of the same gender. Furthermore, such a relationship is certainly not against biblical teaching (there is no teaching on that subject in the *Bible*).

24. Well, what would Jesus do?

We can't know for certain, of course, what Jesus would have done. We can only make guesses based on his life and teachings as reported in the Gospels. To begin with, Jesus said nothing that could even remotely be construed as condemning homosexuality. The Gospels make it quite clear, however, that Jesus repeatedly told his followers to welcome the outcasts of society. Certainly gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people would fit this category today. Jesus also said we should love our neighbors, treat others as we would have them treat us, and deal with people in a non-judgmental fashion. None of these ideas is consistent with excluding people from our congregations based solely on their sexual orientations or gender identities.

Local congregational concerns

25. If we become Open and Affirming won't we be taken over by gays?

Such has not been the experience of the nearly 400 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.

26. If we become Open and Affirming, won't we lose members?

Whichever way we vote on the issue, we could lose a few members, but such losses are unlikely to be dramatic. A 1999 survey of more than 100 U.C.C. congregations that voted to become ONA indicated that only 4% lost more members than they gained in the aftermath of their ONA vote. Almost 80% of the congregations surveyed indicated slight to significant increases in membership.

The decision whether or not to become Open and Affirming, however, should be made upon the basis of our understanding of Christian principles, not on what might least affect our current status as a congregation. We determine our understanding of Christian precepts by study and prayer, not by considering potential short-term prospects of our balance sheet.

Reference: ONA 1999, Holden, MA: The UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns (1999).

27. If we become Open and Affirming, won't our pledging shrink?

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.

Again, we shouldn't be making decisions on the basis of our balance sheet, but upon the basis of what our beliefs require of us.

Reference: ONA 1999, Holden, MA: The UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns (1999).

28. If our church votes to be an "Open and Affirming" church, what does that mean for the Boy Scouts?

Our sponsorship of the two troops meeting in our church almost certainly will continue. A discussion with a representative of our troops indicated that the troops' leadership oppose discrimination in any form. In addition, the Minuteman Council, the organization which charters our troops, approved a bylaw on July 19, 2001 which bars exclusion of anyone from participation in scouting on the basis of race, religion, or sexual orientation. Communications around these issues between church and scout leaders will continue.

29. Don't we need to worship God with a little dignity? We'll hardly have that if a bunch of drag queens are parading around the church?

Most people who cross dress are not gay. Furthermore, most cross dressers, even the gay ones, tend to confine their cross dressing to specific places where such activity is more or less appropriate. Church people have always known how to dress appropriately. There is no reason this should change. We are not a night club after all, we are a church. Doves of drag queens haven't appeared on Sunday mornings at other ONA churches. Why should ours be the first?

30. Why can't we forget this ONA stuff and just have a "don't ask, don't tell policy"?

The "don't ask, don't tell" approach enforces a system where gays are required to remain in the closet, i.e. to hide their essential personalities and their relationships. This is neither fair nor equal treatment.

31. Well, how about if we just let people come or not as they choose and not make a fuss about it?

The problem is that gay men and lesbian women have not only been excluded from churches for many centuries, but also have been actively persecuted by the churches. Unless we make public our commitment to be Open and Affirming, there is no way that gay 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 gay know where to find such a community.

32. Ok, I'll buy the Open thing, but I'm not sure I'm willing to go so far as to affirm. Doesn't being affirming mean I think being gay is somehow a condition I should encourage people to attain?

No. People can't attain a gay condition. They are either born that way or they are not. What you are affirming is 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.

33. What do we get out of this?

Why should there necessarily be a pay off for doing the right thing? Ostensibly we take Jesus' admonition to "love one another" seriously. Notice that Jesus never said, "love one another, except...." We should also take seriously the words we say before every act of communion, "all are welcome at Christ's table." By taking these words seriously, we can develop a sense of corporate integrity. Clearly there is benefit from being true to the teachings Jesus gave us.

There is, however, another potential benefit: we just might get some talented, interesting and hardworking new members involved in the work and life of our church.

34. Can you explain the rainbow stripe?

A rainbow flag was designed by Gilbert Baker in 1978 as a symbol for the Gay Pride movement in San Francisco. The rainbow flag and symbols derived from it rapidly spread to other parts of the country, and by the mid 80s the rainbow symbol was internationally recognized as a symbol for the gay community. When gay, lesbian or transgendered people see a rainbow stripe on a church sign, they know that particular church will provide them a safe place for worship. Such symbolism is nothing new for Christian churches. In the first centuries after Christ, when Christians themselves were heavily persecuted, the fish symbol was used to mark houses where Christians could worship God in safety.

Additional references

35. If I don't want to take your word for this stuff, where can I find other points of view?

The easiest way to find information now days is on the Internet. Because not everything on the Internet is necessarily well researched or documented, what one reads must be viewed with a critical eye, i.e. consider the source and check for supporting documentation elsewhere. If you read enough things with a skeptical eye, you can usually figure out the truth. If you don't have Internet access at home, you can get it at virtually any local library. Generally people there will help you find the web pages.

Internet Sites

Many of the following sites have links to numerous other relevant sites:

From The American Psychological Association -- Answers to Your Questions About Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality
<http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/answers.html>

The other health organizations provide statements which are much less comprehensible than that of the American Psychological Association (i.e. lots of arcane jargon), but we provide pointers to their statements for completeness:

The American Medical Association
http://www.ama-assn.org/apps/pf_online/pf_online?f_n=browse&doc=policyfiles/HOD/H-160.991.HTM

The American Psychiatric Association
http://www.psych.org/pract_of_psych/coppttherapyaddendum83100.cfm

The American Psychoanalytic Association
http://www.apsa-co.org/ctf/cgli/reparative_therapy.htm

The American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://www.aap.org/policy/05072.html>

Basic Facts about homosexuality, including biblical perspectives -- this is a very good site
<http://hcqsa.virtualave.net/index.html>

The excellent web site run by the Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance contains many articles that examine both sides of a number of religious issues, and in addition, links to other web sites dealing with them. The following two links to this site deal with homosexuality and with Biblical perspectives on homosexuality

Summary of opinions on both sides of the issue
<http://www.religioustolerance.org/homosexu.htm>

Links to a number of Internet sites dealing with homosexuality and the *Bible* from both points of view
http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibl1.htm

UCC information on ONA [not particularly good]
<http://www.uccoalition.org/index.htm>

Appears at first sight to be rather polemic, but contains thoughtful responses to counter the bigotry of one of the U.S.'s most prominent clergy.
<http://www.Fallwell.com/>

Pamphlet

Walter Wink, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, this pamphlet has been freely available in the church (outside the pastor's office) since April 2001.

Books

Most things not immediately available at the Reading Public Library can be obtained for you via interlibrary loan. These are also all available at bookstores such as Amazon.com. They are all in the library of the First Congregational Church of Reading, UCC .

David L. Balch (Editor), *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; ISBN: 080284698X (2000).

John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, University of Chicago Press (Trd); ISBN: 0226067114 (1981).

Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, Alamo Square Press; ISBN: 096247519X (1994).

Robin Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*, Fortress Press; ISBN: 0800618548 (1984).

Jeffrey S. Siker (Editor), *Homosexuality in the Church : Both Sides of the Debate*, Westminster John Knox Pr; ISBN: 0664255450 (1994).

Walter Wink (Editor), *Homosexuality and Christian Faith : Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, Fortress Pr; ISBN: 0800631862 (1999).

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