

## **Overview of the Open and Affirming Study of the First Congregational Church of Stoughton - United Church of Christ**

Our church has spent much time this past year studying and discussing in a prayerful way what it means to become an Open and Affirming church. During the process we listened to your concerns and tried to address them. Some people of deep faith have grown up being taught that homosexuality is wrong. They heard very little about bisexuality and even less about people who would describe themselves as transgender. These persons of faith have a deep love of God and of other people but have difficulty understanding how the church should respond to them.

Therefore because we value Scripture and are serious about seeking its guidance in our lives, our first point of study was to see what the Bible does and doesn't say about homosexuality. We found that the Bible has a message for LGBT people as well as straight people. But it's not the message of condemnation we so often hear.

We found out that Jesus says nothing about same-sex behavior. The Jewish prophets were silent about homosexuality. And only six or seven of the Bible's one million verses refer to same-sex behavior in any way – and none of these verses refer to homosexual orientation as it's understood today.

The Bible is a book about God and His love for the world and the people in it. It was never intended to be a book about human sexuality. In fact, the Bible accepts sexual practices that we condemn and condemns sexual practices that we accept. Here are a few examples.

### **Deuteronomy 22:13-21**

If it is discovered that a bride is not a virgin, the Bible demands that she be executed by stoning immediately.

### **Deuteronomy 22:22**

If a married person has sex with someone else's husband or wife, the Bible commands that both adulterers be stoned to death.

### **Mark 10:1-12**

Divorce is strictly forbidden in both Testaments, as is remarriage of anyone who has been divorced.

### **Leviticus 18:19**

The Bible forbids a married couple from having sexual intercourse during a woman's period. If they disobey, both shall be executed.

### **Mark 12: 18-27**

If a man dies childless, his widow is ordered by biblical law to have intercourse with each of his brothers in turn until she bears her deceased husband a male heir.

### **Deuteronomy 25:11-12**

If a man gets into a fight with another man and his wife seeks to rescue her husband by grabbing the enemy's genitals, her hand shall be cut off and no pity shall be shown her.

The list goes on: The Bible says clearly that sex with a prostitute is acceptable for the husband but not the wife. Polygamy is acceptable, as is a king's having many concubines. (Solomon had 1,000 concubines.) Slavery and sex with slaves, marriage of girls as young as 11, and the treatment of women as property are all accepted practices in the Scriptures. On the other hand, there are strict prohibitions against interracial marriage, birth control, discussing or even naming a sexual organ.

Over the centuries, the Holy Spirit has taught us that certain Bible verses should not be understood as God's law for all time periods. Some verses are specific to the culture and time they were written, and are no longer viewed as appropriate, wise or just.

The evidence from science and from personal experience of LGBT Christians demands that we at least consider whether the passages cited to condemn them should be reconsidered, just as other Bible verses that speak of certain sexual practices are no longer understood as God's law for us in this day.

If the Bible is the story of God's love for the world and not a handbook about sex, then that should be how we read the Scriptures.

Because the text in the Creation Story says it is "natural" that a man and a woman come together to create new life, some people think that this means gay or lesbian couples are "unnatural". They read this interpretation into the text, even though the text is silent about all kinds of relationships that don't lead to children – couples who are unable to have children, couples who are too old to have children, couples who choose not to have children, and people who are single. Are these relationships or lack of relationships "unnatural"?

The creation story is primarily about God, a story written to show the power of God who created the world and everything in it. It teaches us that ultimately God is our Creator, that God shaped us, and that God said, "It's good." It says nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today.

Let's move on to Leviticus. Leviticus is a holiness code written 3,000 years ago. This code includes many of the outdated sexual laws that I mentioned earlier, and a lot more. It also includes prohibitions against round haircuts, tattoos, working on the Sabbath, wearing garments of mixed fabrics, eating pork or shellfish, getting your fortune told, and even playing with the skin of a pig. (There goes football!)

So what's a holiness code? It's a list of behaviors that people of faith find offensive in a certain place and time. In this case, the code was written for priests only, and its intent was to set the priests of Israel over and against priests of other cultures.

What about the word "abomination" that is used in Leviticus? In Hebrew, abominations are behaviors of people in a certain time and place considered tasteless or offensive. To the Jews an abomination was not a law, not something evil like rape or murder forbidden by the Ten Commandments. Jesus and Paul both said the holiness code in Leviticus does not pertain to Christian believers.

But what does this text say about God? Even if the holiness codes no longer apply to us as Christians, it's important to remember that in every age, people of faith are responsible for setting moral and ethical standards that honor God. Instead of selecting one item from an ancient Jewish holiness code, we should work together to set sexual standards that please God – standards that are appropriate for heterosexuals and homosexuals alike, standards that are based on loving concern, health, and wholeness for ourselves and for others.

Let's now turn to the New Testament. In Biblical times, people who traveled were not able to make reservations at a Hilton, Sheraton, or Embassy Suites. They didn't have chain restaurants like McDonalds and Wendys available everywhere they traveled. A journey across the desert was a dangerous and often unpleasant endeavor. People throughout the Mediterranean

world regarded the provision of food, lodging, and protection as a virtue and sacred duty. The survival of travelers could depend on that hospitality.

But the biblical concept of hospitality covers far more than the provision of safety for travelers. Hospitality is an obligation that we have to all those with whom we come in contact, including strangers and those who make us feel uncomfortable. The New Testament accounts do not focus on the worthiness of the stranger but rather on the faithfulness of the one from whom hospitality is sought. Several passages give helpful perspectives to us; for example:

**Matthew 26:6-13** gives an account of Jesus in the home of Simon the leper. Going to the home of a leper would have been unacceptable to the religious establishment, but Jesus does so without hesitation. While he is there, a woman pours a costly ointment on his head, showing a hospitality which foreshadows his burial.

**Luke 10:29-37** tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This well known parable answers the important question: “Who is my neighbor?” The parable strongly reinforces that all people are our neighbors, and the obligation to care for others cut across religious, ethnic, and economic lines. It also cuts across lines of sexual orientation and gender identity.

**Luke 14:12-24** includes the Parable of the Great Dinner, in which Jesus advocates that the one who extends hospitality invite “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” Jesus repeatedly urged people to reach out to those whom society was tempted to ignore.

**Luke 19:1-10** shows Jesus again with one of the people the religious authorities would have avoided – this time with Zacchaeus the tax collector. A similar reference is found in **Luke 5:27-32** in which Jesus eats with “a large crowd of tax collectors”.

**John 13:1-20** describes Jesus’ washing the feet of the disciples at the time of the Last Supper. Jesus not only accepted the hospitality of others, but he also displayed hospitality through his entire ministry. The ritual of washing feet of another is a clear affirmation of the value put on the one who is the guest.

**Matthew 25:31-46** tells us to reach out to those who are hungry, naked, homeless, or imprisoned. When we show hospitality to such persons, it is as though the kindness was actually being shown to Christ.

**Hebrews 13:1-2** encourages us to show “hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Whether we think of encountering an angel in the stranger, as suggested in Hebrews 13, or the actual presence of Christ, as suggested in Matthew 25, there is no question about the importance placed on hospitality to the stranger – including lepers, Samaritans, the poor, tax collectors, and other marginalized persons.

Another fear that was addressed is the idea that this may split the church and we may lose some of our church family members.

We’re afraid that some of our dear friends will leave our church. We all agree that that would be a terrible thing. But what is sad is the fact that some of these people who have expressed reservations about becoming ONA haven’t taken the opportunity to learn and grow with us. I feel badly that they were not here to meet my transgender son or to hear members of our church who are gay or bisexual pour out their hearts out about the pain of exclusion that they

have felt. They were not here to hear the anguish of families when one of their members is shamed into hiding his true self.

I hope that no one will leave our church even if they are opposed to becoming ONA. I hope that they will find other reasons to stay and if they do, they will share in the rich and rewarding experience of talking, working, singing, and praying with people who are free to be their authentic selves. When people are comfortable with each other and no one is hiding and no one is frightened and distrusting, strong, loving relationships develop. Our church will be bursting with God's abundant love for all of his children.

To address this fear, we had members of Christ Congregational Church in Brockton and the Congregational Church of Needham, two ONA churches, come speak to us. Yes, they did lose some members, but they also spoke about what they gained.

### **Here are some positive reasons for becoming ONA:**

#### **1) Truly welcoming everyone, including LGBT persons contributes to a positive image of Christianity, especially among young adults.**

In a book titled "Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...And Why It Matters", the authors David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons point out that Christianity has gained a negative image with people in their twenties and thirties. Many of them see Christianity as too judgmental, too narrow, and too antihomosexual. Many young adults are embarrassed by the church's treatment of gays and lesbians. Churches that fully incorporate LGBT people into congregational life send by their actions the message that they take Jesus' lessons of love seriously.

#### **2) Congregations with inclusive attitudes create an atmosphere in which church growth can happen.**

In a society in which people experience rejection and judgment in many different settings, people are hungry for the kind of full and healthy acceptance that such congregations offer.

Churches that embrace a broad hospitality are experiencing growth, not just from those who are LGBT, but also from those who are family members and friends of LGBT people who want to know that their loved ones are fully accepted, from young adults who are more accepting of diversity, and from those of any age who want a faith community which is accepting of everyone.

#### **3) Welcoming and accepting congregations gain the considerable gifts of LGBT people.**

Many churches are dealing with a crisis of leadership. They find it difficult to fill all the positions on boards, councils, committees, mission groups, and task forces with talented lay people. LGBT people who join local congregations bring with them rich gifts that can nurture congregational life. Our church already benefits from the talents and gifts of our current LGBT members

#### **4) Welcoming and accepting congregations become safe places for LGBT youth and for youth who are struggling with their questions of sexual orientation and gender identity.**

The reality is that some of the babies that are baptized in this church, the same babies that we promise to love and care for, will identify as LGBT when they reach the age of sexual

maturity. Many of these teens have concerns both about how to relate their sexual orientation to their faith and about how accepted they would be if their sexual orientation were known by the congregation. Non-heterosexual teens are almost twice as likely as heterosexual teens to have seriously considered or to have attempted suicide. This should be a matter of significant concern to us. In congregations that have taken a position as welcoming and accepting of LGBT people, teens feel safe to talk about their orientation with others in the youth group, with their minister, and with adults in the congregation. The congregation becomes a safe place for these teens, and many of them are desperately in need of such a safe place.

**5) Welcoming and accepting congregations show that they stand firmly for human rights and justice for all people, not just LGBT persons.**

We show that we recognize the presence of Christ in everyone and that affects how we feel about them and relate to them.

**What's Next?**

This is where we have been. This summarizes what we have learned. My personal opinion is that the ONA study has made us all grow closer. We have found that we can talk about difficult, emotionally charged subjects. We're aware that we all don't agree, but we love and respect each other anyway. This study has shown that this church is a safe place for us

Our next step is to make sure that people who have not yet come to our church know that it is also a safe and loving place for them. To do so the ONA committee has created a draft of a Welcoming Statement. Please pick up a copy or view it on our website. Your opinion is important and we look forward to hearing from you.

Joan Roan

*Bibliographic Sources:*

*"What the Bible Says –And Doesn't Say – About Homosexuality" by Rev, Mel White*

*"Taking a New Look: Why Congregations Need LGBT Members" a LifeQuest Publication*