

Coming Out of the Conversation

I have chosen the title of this reflection intentionally—it is a metaphor for the experience of homosexual people who have “come out of the closet.” For homosexual persons, coming out of the closet is a matter of making public what a person has known privately. For North Haven Church, coming out of the conversation is a matter of making public what we already know about ourselves as a congregation, namely that we are a church open to, and affirming in Christian support of, “people of all ages, tongues and races” and, yes, sexual orientation. This issue has been under discussion and study in our church for several weeks. I firmly and deeply believe it is time for North Haven Congregational Church to come out of the conversation about the “Open and Affirming” initiative of the United Church of Christ.

‘Why do I say we **already** are an open and affirming congregation? First, we have one, and only one, test of church membership. Our By-laws state "Membership consists of baptized persons who publicly confess Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord."¹ No other condition or confession is required for membership in North Haven Church. Furthermore, our declared purpose as a congregation “shall be to bind together followers of Jesus Christ to share in the worship of God, the mission of Christ’s Church, to make God’s will dominant in the lives of men, women, and children, individually and collectively, and to witness to the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” By joining this Church we have **already** committed ourselves to support **all** followers of Jesus Christ! Of course, and not surprisingly, we do have members who are homosexual and we do support and affirm them.

Second, we are a reformation church, that is, on both our Puritan/Congregational and our Evangelical/Reformed sides we take our theological cues from the Protestant Reformation. This means, chiefly, that we hold Scripture "as the sufficient rule of faith and practice, and [hold] that living in accordance with the teaching of Jesus Christ is the true test of fellowship. Each member shall have the undisturbed right to follow the Word of God according to the dictates of his/her own conscience, under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.” Let us make no mistake about it, a church policy that is open to, and affirming of, all people is thoroughly and deeply Biblical. The Biblical witness begins with the audacious idea that God would call a people, the descendants of Abraham, to be eternal witnesses to the love and sovereignty of God. The story of the Old Testament is a continuing saga about God leading this people into new and unexpected places in order that God might show them mercy and steadfast love. The New Testament is more audacious, claiming that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has invited all people to the sacred mission of witnessing to God’s sovereign love. The founders of the church, Peter and Paul, were unshakable in their conviction that the Church of Jesus Christ, the people called out (*ekklesia*) to bear this witness were not to carry any human exclusions or prejudices into this new body--the body of Christ. Paul wrote, in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:28-29).²

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all text set in quotation marks are from the By-Laws of the North Haven Congregational Church (Revised 2003)

² *The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

Third, our church is a member of the United Church of Christ. This denomination has long accepted homosexual persons for ordained ministry. It is, therefore, quite possible that now, or at some point in the future, we will call a homosexual person to the ministry of this church.

Finally, and most importantly, we are a caring and deeply supportive congregation. I constantly am grateful for the genuine love and concern our members show for each other and, indeed, for people who are not members of the congregation. This caring is a gift from God to each of us personally and to our church collectively. As such, it is not our place to ask for whom we should care nor where are the limits or boundaries of our caring. The gift of caring is a special part of our mission as a congregation and it is ours to share with all people God sends to us. We constantly must remind ourselves that the question our Lord posed as he concluded the parable of the Good Samaritan was not “who is my neighbor,” but “to whom may I be a neighbor?” There is a world of difference in these two answers.

Thank God we are who and what we are—a people called to serve God in a local church; a Puritan church, a Reformed church, an Evangelical church; a church that accepts the deepest teachings of the Bible; a church whose ministry is shaped by caring. All we ask of each other is that we share this ministry and this mission. Is it not time to acknowledge openly these truths about ourselves and then humbly wait on God for further guidance for the future? I think so and think many, many members of our church concur. Let us, then, come out of the conversation and into gracious leading of God that awaits us. Let us find some means, be it a resolution of the Church Council, a decision of a Congregation Meeting, a broad consensus of the congregation, or some other mechanism, to declare publicly who we are. Let us declare with praise and gratitude the deep truth that we are an opening and affirming Church.

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