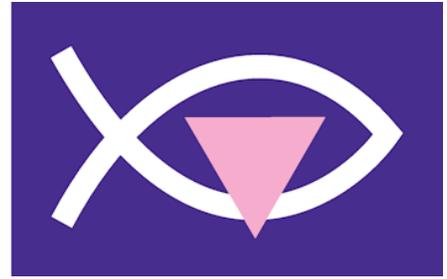


OPEN AND AFFIRMING COALITION UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST



Statement on “Stewardship of Exhibit Space” resolution by the Leadership Team, Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ

The Open and Affirming Coalition’s Leadership Team, after serious and prayerful consideration, cannot support the resolution “Stewardship of Exhibit Space as a Resource for a Mission of Justice.”

We respect the passion of those who drafted this resolution. And we know from personal experience the pain of those who have found a safe haven in ONA churches, only to learn that many UCC congregations are still unable to affirm their humanity as children of God. So our work is far from complete. The ONA Coalition has been an effective agent for change in our church and in the communities where ONA congregations fight for LGBTQ rights. The result is that today we are the largest and fastest-growing LGBTQ-affirming church movement in the world. But we agree with the framers of this resolution that the ONA movement cannot stop until every congregation in the United Church of Christ is a safe community for LGBTQ seekers and their families.

This is our mission. It should be the mission of every ONA congregation. But our ministry of radical transformation will not succeed—and we will not reach our goal of a “100% Open and Affirming church”—if we evict from public spaces the congregations that are not yet ready for an ONA commitment.

So we come to the group this resolution would exclude from public spaces in General Synod, the “Faithful and Welcoming Churches” (FWC).

FWC was organized in 2006 by congregations and pastors in the United Church of Christ to give a voice to their values as “evangelical, conservative, orthodox and traditional” (ECOT) Christians. Compared to the Open and Affirming Coalition, which now numbers more than 1,500 churches, FWC is comparatively small. Its influence is limited. We have observed this

group closely for several years, and we have seen no evidence that FWC is systematically organizing opposition to our movement for LGBTQ justice. Its existence has not impeded our rapid growth.

Obviously, the ONA Coalition and FWC are far apart. We reject their belief that the Bible mandates the expression of sexual love only in the context of heterosexual marriage.

But the ONA movement cannot continue to grow if this General Synod sends a message that conformity to its resolutions is a precondition for participation in public spaces in our church. The result would inevitably be the departure of many non-ONA congregations from the United Church of Christ. And that would be a serious blow to our movement.

The Open and Affirming movement is strong and growing in numbers partly because we have chosen to stay in relationship with those who disagree with us. **In every congregation that has adopted an ONA covenant over the past three decades, critics have never been silenced or excluded.** In our advocacy for the LGBTQ members of our church, we have always sought to be faithful to our values of radical hospitality. We call this “graceful engagement.”

It is not an easy path. **Graceful engagement does not mean silence in the face of injustice, but the courage to speak the truth in love.** It is the only way we know that hearts and minds can be changed. And it works. Precisely because we have chosen to stay in relationship in those difficult but necessary conversations, churches that ten or even five years ago would never have dreamed they could become Open and Affirming are joining our movement in amazing numbers. This is especially true in rural America, where LGBTQ seekers have no support structures—especially at-risk youth who are isolated in their search for integrity and affirmation. It would be a tragedy if these congregations turned away from the UCC, which we believe will happen if the resolution is adopted in its present form.

As a movement and a church, we need to stay in relationship with non-ONA churches, because otherwise there is no possibility of transformation. And we are confident that the day will come when some Faithful and Welcoming congregations, many of which are in rural communities, will realize that affirming the humanity and supporting the relationships of their LGBTQ neighbors is not inconsistent with their theological and biblical values.

Nevertheless, this resolution is a reminder that Faithful and Welcoming Churches should not merely be tolerated, but challenged in ways that build up the unity of our church in love. (Ephesians 4:16) We cannot support the exclusion of dissenting congregations from our public spaces, but we can support the passion for sexual and gender justice that motivates this resolution. We don't want to lose the urgency of its challenge. Therefore, we invite the leaders of FWC, the proponents of the resolution, and the UCC's national setting to a serious and honest dialogue. This may be a more difficult path than simply banning conservative congregations, but it is a path that offers the hope of transformation to every non-ONA congregation in the United Church of Christ.

We ask every ONA congregation to join us in this cause. Help us as we strive to become a 100% Open and Affirming church.

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. (Ephesians 4:25)

The Leadership Team and Staff

Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ

The Rev. Mak Kneebone, president

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Enclosed with this statement is our article on “Graceful Engagement” in Witness for Justice, or you can read it at www.openandaffirming.org/graceful-engagement.

Text of the proposed resolution is at

<https://www.uccfiles.com/synod/2019/resolutions/8-Stewardship-of-Exhibit-Space.pdf>.