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Alternative track towards ONA certification for congregations that historically are LGBT-affirming

In most situations, the UCC Open and Affirming Coalition requires an extended process for future Open and Affirming (ONA) congregations that includes careful planning, study, dialogue, discernment and prayer. But some churches may not need a lengthy period of discernment and growth if the congregation is already Open and Affirming in practice. These congregations can be certified as ONA after an abbreviated process (or, in some cases, without a process)—provided the congregation adopts a written ONA covenant with an explicit welcome to the LGBT community.

The following checklist will help your congregation’s leadership determine if this alternative track towards ONA certification may apply. Please check each box when the answer is “YES.”

- Does your congregation have LGBT leadership in your governing board and other ministries?
- Is your welcome to the transgender community rooted in your congregation’s practice? Has your congregation undertaken a study of the transgender experience?
- Does your church host same-sex weddings or blessing ceremonies, or is it willing to do so?
- Does your congregation welcome LGBT couples (and their children) as families, and do they participate in congregational life in the same way as other families? Are anniversaries and significant events in the lives of same-sex couples celebrated in the same way as those of other couples?

- Is your congregation prepared to advocate for your LGBT neighbors when their rights or human dignity are under attack? Would your members be willing to advocate for LGBTQ youth threatened by bullying in your community's public or chartered schools?
- Is your congregation served by an openly lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender minister, or would your leadership seriously consider calling an openly LGBT minister if that person were the best candidate?

If the congregation's leadership can answer "YES" to all of these questions, the Coalition can offer a simplified track to ONA certification.

If the congregation's leadership answers "NO" to one or more of these questions, the Coalition is ready to help your church with further discernment and study. In many cases, a relatively brief process of dialogue and education about that particular issue may allow the congregation to change its answer to "YES."

To qualify, a congregation may also provide the Coalition with documentation or a brief narrative history of its ministry and other activities as an LGBT-affirming church.

Please note that the Coalition is not able to certify churches as ONA without a written covenant that specifically welcomes persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities or expressions (or equivalent language). The covenant should be an official action of the congregation, adopted either by the governing board or by a congregational meeting.

Even for churches that are explicitly LGBT-affirming, a shortened ONA process may still be helpful. It can help inform your congregation about areas (such as transgender inclusion) where growth may be needed, and introduce your members to expanded opportunities for ministry, mission and evangelism in your community.

The Coalition can advise and support your congregation if your leadership feels this alternative track to ONA certification is appropriate. Contact us at ona@openandaffirming.org, and learn more about the Coalition's ONA program at www.openandaffirming.org/how.

Why is a covenant required?

An ONA covenant is a public welcome to communities (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) who know from painful experience that the words “all are welcome” often don’t apply to them. The words are important, just as a Christian marriage normally begins with an exchange of promises or vows. By affirming a covenant, a congregation is able to demonstrate that it is not deeply conflicted in its support for its LGBT members, their relationships, and their families.

For congregations that are already LGBT-affirming in practice, adoption of a covenant can be a relatively simple process. The congregation’s governing body, for example, might simply adopt a statement that affirms the congregation’s existing values. The text might be based on an existing mission statement or a clause in the congregation’s membership policy. More information about ONA covenants is at www.openandaffirming.org/ona/how/covenants.

Can New Church Starts apply for the alternative track?

The Coalition will certify a New Church Start as Open and Affirming after adoption of an ONA covenant by the congregation’s founding circle. However, the congregation may find elements of an ONA process useful as an exploration of opportunities for mission in the community. Please contact the Coalition for more information.

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