

## HISTORY

In 1987 the Unitarian Universalist Association established the Common Vision Planning Committee. This committee found many negative attitudes, deep prejudices, and profound ignorance about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, which resulted in the exclusion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people from Unitarian Universalist churches.

As a result of these findings, the delegates of the 1989 UUA General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to initiate the Welcoming Congregation program to educate its members. Each congregation adapts the program to best meet its goals and each unique situation can bring positive changes to individuals and congregations.

## WHAT IS THE “WELCOMING CONGREGATION” PROGRAM?

The Welcoming Congregation program is a volunteer program for congregations that see a need to become intentionally more inclusive toward people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. It consists of a series of workshops developed by the UUA. The goal of the workshops is to reduce prejudice by increasing understanding and acceptance among people of different sexual orientations and gender identities. Some of the workshop titles include: The Common Elements of Oppression; Racism and Homophobia/Heterosexism; AIDS; Religion and Homosexuality; Bisexuality and Biphobia; Transgender Identity: What It Means; and How Homophobia Hurts Us All.

Many congregations offer the workshop series several consecutive times as an adult religious education curriculum open to all members and friends. In some congregations the workshop series (and later the entire program) is sponsored by a Welcoming Congregation Task Force/Committee created just for this purpose, while other

congregations sponsor the workshop series through their Interweave chapters. In either case, the workshops are best facilitated by those who have experienced the curriculum.

## WHY *JUST* LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER?

Why single out people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender? The Rev. Douglas Morgan Strong probably states it best in the Welcoming Congregation manual: “For centuries, the church has been a leading force against sexual minorities. . . It is not surprising that people are reluctant to reach out to the very institution that oppresses them. Yet lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have no less need for warmth, caring, and affirmation than anyone else who calls the liberal church their religious home. In fact, as a subculture in society, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people may need our support more than the general population.”

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A “WELCOMING CONGREGATION”?

A congregation that publicly and successfully welcomes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals has the following qualities:

- Includes and addresses the needs of LGBT persons at every level of congregational life—in worship, in programs, in social occasions, and in rites of passage—welcoming not only their presence, but the gifts and particularities of their lives as well.
- Assumes the presence of LGBT people and celebrates this diversity by having inclusive language and content in worship.
- Fully incorporates the experiences of LGBT persons throughout all programs, including religious education.

- Includes an affirmation and nondiscrimination clause in its bylaws and other official documents affecting all dimensions of congregational life, including membership, hiring practices, and the calling of religious professionals.
- Engages in outreach into LGBT communities in its advertising and its active support of LGBT affirmative groups.
- Offers congregational and ministerial support for rites of passage for LGBT persons, including services of union and memorial services.
- Celebrates the lives of all people and welcomes same-sex couples, recognizing their committed relationships, and equally affirms displays of caring and affection without regard to sexual/affectional orientation.
- Makes no assumptions about gender identity or sexual orientation, and respects each person’s identity, self-label(s), and pronoun preferences.
- Seeks to nurture ongoing dialogue among people of different sexual orientations and gender identities and to create deeper trust and sharing.
- Encourages the presence of a chapter of Interweave.
- Affirms and celebrates LGBT issues and history during the church year.
- Attends to legislative developments and works to promote justice, freedom, and equality in the larger society.
- Speaks out when the rights of LGBT people are at stake.
- Celebrates the lives of all people and their ways of expressing their love for each other.

## AREN'T WE ALREADY A WELCOMING CONGREGATION?

Is it true that our church already meets most of the qualifications for a Welcoming Congregation? Our church bylaws state that we do “not discriminate on the basis of age, race, occupation, gender, past religious affiliation, or sexual orientation.” Our membership already includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons who are active members, willing to give of themselves and share their experiences with us.

Yes. However, official recognition as a Welcoming Congregation allows you to more publicly open your church as safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons; to take positions on oppression in your larger communities; and to accomplish outreach.

## HOW WILL BEING A WELCOMING CONGREGATION BENEFIT ME?

Confronting our prejudices and assumptions in a non-judgmental, non-threatening group allows us to explore their origins and offers an opportunity to replace those prejudices and assumptions with knowledge. Understanding our prejudices and assumptions leads to individual spiritual growth and congregational unity.

*This is a publication of the Unitarian Universalist Association's office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns.*

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## WHAT IS AHEAD OF US?

Our vision goes beyond the Welcoming Congregation program. By taking this first step, we hope to explore more issues than those presented here—such as ableism, racism, and classism, to name just a few. Becoming a Welcoming Congregation will act as a catalyst to learning more about ourselves and to ending exclusion. Only when we are truly open to the wealth of diversity in our world will the inherent worth and dignity of every person be affirmed with a large voice.

## WHAT IS *INTERWEAVE*? (Unitarian Universalists for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns)

The mission statement for Interweave reads as follows: “Interweave is a membership organization actively working toward ending oppression based on sexual orientation and gender identity, recognizing that we will not be free until all oppression is a thing of the past. We are a Unitarian Universalist organization and UU principles guide our work. We value and affirm the lives and experience of Queer people of faith, regardless of their age, race, ethnicity, income level, and ability. By providing and supporting leadership and working in collaboration with other organizations of similar vision, we strive to connect and nurture all Queer individuals, communities, and groups and their allies.”

Interweave membership is open to all interested UUs of all sexual orientations and gender identities. It has chapters in many UU congregations and districts, as well as a Continental chapter. Membership involves two primary goals:

- the creation of local groups for LGBTQ Unitarian Universalists for support, socializing, and sharing life issues, *and*
- outreach to the larger LGBTQ communities to publicize the religious alternative offered by Unitarian Universalism.

# Welcoming Congregation



What is it?  
What does it mean to me?

*presented by*  
The UUA's office of Lesbian, Gay,  
Bisexual, and Transgender Ministries  
*and*  
The *Interweave* chapter of  
Unitarian Church of Bloomington, IL