

ONA: Celebrate and Pray!

Worship resources celebrate the of the Open and Affirming Church movement in the Massachusetts Conference.

**Collected and edited by the Rev. Dr. Fran Bogle and the
MACUCC Open and Affirming Task Force.**

This resource was edited by the Rev. Dr. Fran Bogle,
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*Special thanks to the Rev. Dr. Debbie Clark for her support and
encouragement with this project.*

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Introduction

This resource contains a variety of worship material and ideas for churches that are seeking ways to celebrate and welcome LGBTQISGL (Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, queer, questioning, inter-sexed and same gender loving) people in their congregations. All of the resources were contributed by members of MACUCC churches. We are grateful to each person who sent us contributions for this sample resource. More resources will be included in our larger collection. We welcome new contributors!!

Contact the Open and Affirming Task Force of the MACUCC if you would like more information or if you would like to have your material included in an expanded collection.

Contributors

We are grateful for the author's permission to make their work available to you. Each contributor retains publishing rights to his or her submission.

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Organizations

The Just Peace Players

WE CELEBRATE OUR OPEN AND AFFIRMING CHURCH!

Rev. Dr. Fran Bogle, a member of Church of the Covenant in Boston
and the Rev. Dr. Debbie Clark, pastor of Edwards Church, Framingham, MA.

It was a dark and snowy morning in Boston! As I pulled the covers over my head I heard my beloved say in a cheery voice “Time to get up, we don’t want to be late for church.” I groaned as I prepared to face the snow, and wondered what was so important about this church that we had leave our warm home to go out in a storm. I hadn’t always been welcome in churches in the past and the covers felt pretty good.

Imagine my surprise when we got to a beautiful Gothic inspired building and entered the basement! There on folding chairs around a piano and movable communion table sat about a hundred people. Two men held hands. Two women held their child. There were families of all shapes and sizes, and I knew that we were welcome. Debbie and I could be open about our relationship and would be loved for our whole selves. I wanted to weep with joy and a new found sense of God’s love.

What a blessing the Church of the Covenant, a federated ONA UCC church and a More Light, PCUSA congregation was on that wintry day, and what a blessing it has been for the past 18 years in our life together. Over the years we have celebrated as the children of lesbian couples were baptized and offered our prayers and blessings to couples who had commitment ceremonies in the sanctuary. We have wept with loved ones who were supported by our church but denied ordination in the PCUSA because of their sexual orientation, and we have rejoiced as many gay men and lesbians supported by our congregation were ordained in the United Church of Christ. We have felt the love of this community when we needed family in Boston, and have walked side by side with members of the congregation in the Pride Parade. We all wrote letters supporting the Freedom to Marry in Massachusetts, and walked the State House Halls with our pastor. Now we have danced with gay and lesbian sisters and brothers in Christ as they have been legally married in our church.

The Church of the Covenant is a place of love and acceptance in a world where we still wonder if we are welcome. It is a community of Christians committed to sharing God’s love with the world. It is a place where we try to live into Jesus commandment to love God with all our hearts and minds and souls and to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is an Open and Affirming Church!

Maundy Thursday Memories

Submitted by the Rev. Janet Dorman when she was the pastor of East Milton
Congregational Church, UCC

On Maundy Thursday, I was in the middle of final preparations for the service that night and was not in any mood to be disturbed. I heard a man's voice outside my office door asking the secretary if he could speak to the Pastor. I expected to see someone looking for some money or food, but instead found myself seated across from a middle aged man who came in because he had seen the small rainbow icon on our church sign. He knew that it usually meant that the church was inclusive of all and wondered if that also meant we were welcoming of gays and lesbians. When I said we were, he told be his story of growing up Catholic and not feeling welcomed. He hadn't been to church in a very long time, but this Easter, he felt the need to go. I told him about being Open and Affirming and gave him a visitor pack to learn more about us.

The next morning on Good Friday, I was in the church office at about 6:30 when I heard a dog barking. The sound seemed to be coming from the church, so I went to investigate. As I opened the door to the sanctuary I was surprised to find a stranger in the narthex and the front door propped open. A dog on a leash was tied to the railing and the man was looking through material on our information desk. I approached him and asked how I could help him. He, in turn, was startled to see me. "The door was open and so I came in. You see, I sometimes walk my dog this way and I have passed the church before. I see your rainbow on the sign and have always wanted to come in, so this morning I did. Again we talked and he took a visitor pack and said he might come for Easter. It had been a long time since he had been in church.

We had forgotten to lock the front door after the Maundy Thursday service, and I'm glad we did. He came back once since Easter and the other man has been coming regularly. After watching a new member Sunday, he asked how he might become one too. All because of a small rainbow flag next to the accessibility logo.

O Creator, Who Still Shapes Us

Rev. Ann B. Day

O Creator, who still shapes us; Christ, who bids us risk love's way;
Spirit, who sustains and kindles, we give praise to you this day!

Open and Affirming welcome gathers our community,
We are one yet we are many genders, sexualities.

Our abilities are different; each of us brings gifts unique,
All our colors beaming beauty of the kin-dom that we seek.

Songs and stories, meals and mission, signs that God is speaking still,
Children, youth, and elders learning what it means to do God's will.

O Creator, who still shapes us; quicken every heart and mind,
Help your church make peace with justice, blessing all of humankind!

Tune: Stuttgart (as for "Come, O Long-Expected Jesus")

Text: Ann B. Day (2006)

I Love to Tell the Story (Same tune, new verses!)

The Just Peace Players

I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.
I love to tell the story, because I know it's true;
It satisfies my longings as nothing else would do.

**Chorus: I love to tell the story; 'Twill be my theme in glory
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.**

I love to tell the story, 'tis pleasant to repeat
What seems, each time I tell it, More wonderfully sweet.
I love to tell the story, for some have never heard
the message of inclusion from God's own holy Word.

Chorus

I love to tell the story of how, from heav'n above
our gentle Savior Jesus Was sent to show God's love
To ev-'ry sacred creature upon this earthly place
how Christ, the gift from heaven, is God's great gift of grace.

Chorus

I love to tell the story, Of how he touched the lives
of every man and woman in all their joy and strife,
For Jesus honors difference, he welcomes you and me,
He offers to each person God's love eternally.

Chorus

Call to Worship Honoring ONA Founders

Rev. Dr. Fran Bogle

Leader: We remember the courageous women and men who helped to begin the ONA movement over 20 years ago.

All: Rosi olmstead and Marnie Warner, Kate Stevens and Ken Orth, Susan Dickerman, Bill Johnson, Nancy Krody, Oliver Powell and countless others, we hold you in love.

Leader: We remember all who dared to hold the hope and walk together into a new future for the United Church of Christ.

All: Avery Post, Paul and Mary Sherry, Donna Schaper, Mal and Barbara Bertram, Ann B. Day and Donna Enberg, John Thomas and Edith Guffey, we hold you in love.

Leader: We remember all who have called us to do justice daily.

All: Jan Greisinger and Sam Loliger, Rebecca Voelkel, Mike Schuenemeyer, Loey Powell, Nancy Taylor and Bernice Powell Jackson, we hold you in love.

Leader: We remember the many groups that are with us in this journey.

All: Associations and conferences, seminaries and campus ministries, local and national organizations, and the General Synod, we hold you in love.

Leader: We will always remember the power of love to change the world.

All: We give thanks for the hope and love embodied in every person, organization and congregation gathered here. Through our shared journey for justice, all are free to love and live as we choose. Let us worship together in spirit of love and hope, justice and joy, praise and thanksgiving.

An ONA Responsive Litany

Rev. Reebee Girash

This was written while she was the Associate Minister at First Church, Malden, UCC

One: O God, Source of all love, Help us share Your love with one another.

Many: Creator God, we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

One: You have created us, and touched every part of us. Even those hidden aspects of our being are precious to You. Help us celebrate our creation.

Many: Compassionate God, we cannot hide from You our pain.

One: You know those things which hurt us. When we are beaten, You, too feel the blow. When we are excluded, You, too feel shunned. Help us share with You and each other our whole stories.

Many: Empowering God, You give us strength to seek liberation.

One: You inspire us to reach out to one another, building community and creating safe places. Help us foster justice in Your world.

Many: Loving God, You rejoice when we find someone to love!

One: When we find the ecstasy of true partnership, You are ecstatic. When our relationships are whole, and healthy, we feel Your blessing. Help us build blessed relationships.

All: Thanks be to God, Source of all Love!

(Revised from a litany written as part of a paper on churches as safe spaces for GLBT people & battered women)

A Prayer for Families

Rev. Dr. Fran Bogle

This is a fill-in-the-blank prayer that can be used with children and adults. It makes an excellent children's sermon.

Dear God, today we pray for our families and for all of the people who love us.

Families come in all shapes and sizes. Some have _____

and _____ and _____ (kinds of families).

Others have _____ and _____.

Many families have _____ (pets)

as a part of them, and other don't.

Most of us are thankful that we have _____ (favorite relatives)

_____.

All of us are blessed by people like _____ (best friends)

And _____ (other people who love us

but aren't in our families). Our church is like a family too. Having special friends and

being in loving families makes us feel _____.

Help us honor and enjoy all of the special people in our lives. We are glad to be a part of

so many different kinds of families, especially your family, gracious, loving God.

A Manger Litany With ONA Themes

Rev. Dr. Fran Bogle

The leader reads the light print and the congregation reads the dark print.

Amazing God, you love us so much that you came to us as an infant.

Born in a stable because there was no room at the inn.

You call us to love the world as we have been loved by you.

Wrapped in swaddling clothes, you slept in a manger because there was no crib.

You command us to love our neighbors as ourselves

Shepherds welcomed you.

You call us to create an inclusive church in which everyone is welcomed and loved.

No one was turned away from the stable door.

You keep calling to us to open our doors, to welcome the outcasts, house the homeless, feed the hungry, and turn over the tables in the temple.

Lambs and cows, chickens and donkeys, men, women, children...angels of all kinds surrounded you.

Help us create a world and a church in which all of your children are safe and loved, affirmed, welcomed and fully accepted, where we all have a community of angels surrounding us.

One star brighter than the rest led the world to your door.

May our love and work in the world be a beacon of hope to the hopeless, a ministry of welcome for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, queer, transgender, questioning, same gender loving and heterosexual people. May our churches be warm stables for all who have been hurt by homophobia and places of peace and healing for all who have been wounded by violence. May we always seek to make the powerful uncomfortable and accountable, especially when they are us.

Dear Child of Bethlehem, as remember the stable and the manger, the dusty roads you walked and the cross on which you died, give us the faith and courage to tell your truth and make it our own. May your story guide us and help us claim the sacredness in our own lives and stories. Help us follow you with all of our hearts and minds and souls and strength for you are our hope and redeemer. Amen

Gay Pride Service Resources

Rev. Dr. Fran Bogle

Feel free to adapt these resources and to select your own scriptures, hymns and other relevant worship material. I hope you find this outline helpful.

Call to Worship

One-We come together in a rainbow of hope and love.

All- We come together with fear and trembling for the new world we are creating.

One-With open arms, with pride and joy, we welcome people from every nation and ethnic community into our church. Gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, trans-gender, bi-sexual, queer, questioning, same gender loving, straight, old, young, disabled, athletes, people with questions and those who know the answers, are welcome here.

All-No one is excluded from Christ's table.

One-God loves us all.

All-We are one in the Spirit! Alleluia! Amen.

Unison Prayer or Prayer of Confession

Gracious, loving God, we open our hearts to you. We confess that there have been times when we have turned away from you. There have been times when we have hurt and rejected our neighbors. Sometimes it has been difficult to love and accept ourselves. All of us have participated in the systemic oppressions that are part of our culture. Forgive us for our racism, sexism, homophobia and economic elitism. Give us the courage to stand up for the dignity and rights of all of our sisters and brothers. Make us willing to change our lives in response to your call to love our neighbors and to create a world of peace and justice for all of your beloved. In Jesus name we pray, Amen. (or) Hear us now as we pray as Jesus taught us saying....Our Mother and Father..."

Words of Assurance

Friends, God hears our confessions with an ever merciful and loving heart and forgives us over and over again. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Let us rejoice in this good news. Amen

Passing of the Peace

As we are loved, let us share the love and peace of Christ with our neighbors and the world.

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: And also with you.

Invitation to the offering

Friends, on this day of pride and joy let us share our gifts or time, talent and money with our church and the world.

Prayer of Dedication

Spirit of openness and affirmation, we dedicate this gifts to the ministry of love and acceptance in the world. May we ever seek to use all of our resources to create a world and a church where all are welcome and honored, loved and fully known. This we pray in the name of Jesus who welcomed everyone to his table. Amen

Benediction

May the God whose loves fill us with peace and joy bless us as we go forth to do the work of justice in the world. Our service had ended, our service begin. Amen

Commissioning for Pride Marchers

Rev. Dr. Fran Bogle

This can be adapted to commission people for other occasions. I assume it will be done on the Sunday before a Pride March.

Leader: Friends, we gather to offer our blessings and support to (can use names if it is a small group or might say- to these friends and members of our church who are planning to represent our faith community in the Pride March next Saturday.

All: We share in their joy. We honor their courage and will march with them in spirit.

Leader: Now we commission you (or bless you) to do this ministry in Jesus name and in the name of (name of the church). Let us pray together.

All: Holy God, pour out your blessings on these beloved members of our church. Fill them with love and hope and joy as they march with pride through the streets of our city. Help them remember that your love is with them and our love is with them too. We share in their joy and rejoice in their courage. We commission them to act in love in our name and on our behalf, representing (name of the church), bringing our extravagant welcome to all and sharing your radical love with the world. May their footsteps be sure and their hearts filled with the Holy Spirit. This we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Group returns to their seats in the congregation.

love with the world. May their footsteps be sure and their hearts filled with the Holy Spirit. This we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Group returns to their seats in the congregation.

Denise's Story

The Just Peace Players

Monologue

My name is Denise but I wish it was Donald. All my life I have felt like I was trapped in the wrong body. When my parents wanted me to wear dresses and patent leather shoes I wanted to wear jeans and hiking boots. When the girls at school jumped rope and played Barbies I wanted to play football or go fishing.

My parents let me be a tomboy, but I could never tell them I wanted to be a real boy. They never would have understood.

I felt betrayed by my breasts and vagina. I did pretend to enjoy some girly things, but I wept and raged inside. I wondered what was the matter with me... Was I the only person who felt this way? It was just too weird.

At times I wanted to die because it hurt so much, not knowing who I was, not being able to share my pain with anyone. I wanted to kill myself and I wanted to live... mostly I just wanted to be happy like everyone else.

Thank God I saw the pink triangle safe zone sign on our new pastor's door. She put it up the first day she moved in. I finally screwed up my courage and talked to her... well, mostly I cried, especially when she told me what transgender is.

Now I know that I am not alone. There are lots of people like me, and it's OK. God loves me.

My struggle isn't over, but at least I understand what's going on. I'm not alone and I have choices. Thank you God and Pastor Smith.

Bi... Bi...Bi...!
The Just Peace Players

Three actors stand with their backs to the audience. They are holding phones. They turn to the audience one at a time.

1: Hello...Oh Hi, how are you? News...Oh, I'm always interested in news about the church. You heard something about the pastor...do tell! She's what...bicentennial, well I'm sure she is preparing for the bicentennial, after all our church will be 200 year old next year, and there's a lot to do...Oh, you said bi-sexual...Isn't that interesting...How do you know she had sex with two people? Have you been looking in the parsonage windows again...Oh, it doesn't mean that...well what does it mean?...You're not sure either but someone told you and you wanted to tell me...well, I better call my daughter in San Francisco and see if she can tell us. (Turns back around as the next person turns around!)

2: Bi-lateral...of course she is. Most of us who favor peace and justice believe in bi-lateral agreements. Bi-sexual...Yes, I know what it means thank you very much miss know it all, but I wonder what it means for our church. What will our neighbors think? Of course it doesn't matter to me, I love every body...Hey does that mean I'm bi-sexual too? (Turns back around as the next person turns around!)

3: Bicuspid? Oh dear, you mean the pastor has to go to the dentist? Why I had a root canal last year and it was...what...bi-sexual...I thought her partner was that lovely man who lives in the parsonage. He is, but in one of the ONA meetings she said was attracted to women too and had been in a lesbian relationship that ended before she met him? Well isn't love grand! I think that was very courageous of her to say that at the meeting! Good grief no, I don't think it's anything to worry about! She is just sharing her story with us like we asked everyone to do! We should give her a lot of credit for trusting us. I wonder how we can offer her some support? Try to relax and have a nice day. God loves everyone and you should too.

All: We better keep going to those ONA meetings!

PRAYER FOR A SAME SEX MARRIAGE CEREMONY

Rev. Dan Smith, First Church, Cambridge, MA

Holy God, let us sing out and celebrate. Today is a day for justice and a day for joy. Today is a day in which we are able to fully recognize, with an ever wider number of people, something that we have known for a long, long time . . . that love makes a family!

Until recently, _____ and _____ could barely hope, barely dream of this day coming. We know the feeling. Well . . . dreams we would not let ourselves dreams, hopes we would not let ourselves hope, come true this day. When it come to those dreams of equality and justice for all you're children, we know that our dreams are your dreams God. And today, _____ and _____, become living symbols of your dream come true, God! May we all take inspiration from their courage in the struggle for justice for same-sex couples, may we take inspiration from their courage to create and raise a family together, long before our state would even begin recognize their actions and their love. We already know that their family is blessed. We already know that their love is sacred. We already know these things but what a joy it is to be able to celebrate it this day, to say it loud and proud for our nation to hear! Continue to bless them with your presence, with your courage, with your ongoing dreams for their lives and for the lives of those around them. May we all go forward inspired to make each of our dreams of peace and justice a reality for all your children. Amen.

A Ceremony of Holy Union
Questions of Intent and Vows
Susan Smith, First Church, Amherst

This can take place in as part of a Sunday morning service, or may be part of a separate celebration by the couple and their friends.

Questions of Intent

Minister: Why are you here?

Couple: We have come before God and this gathered community of family and friends, to publicly declare our love for one another.

M: How will you live out this declaration?

Couple: It is our intent to live together in holy covenant, faithful to God and to one another.

M: Are you willing this day to make your covenantal vows, witnessed by all assembled here and in the presence of the Holy Spirit?

Couple: We are so willing.

M: Then, as you have freely and willingly declared your intention to join in concert with each other, let all assembled here be witness to this declaration.
(To congregation) Will you stand as witnesses to the vows made here and attest to the intent to covenant declared by Lisa and Susan?

Cong: We will stand as witnesses to this covenant.

M: Let us proceed then, with joy and thanksgiving, to unite these two loving hearts.

Vows

[Name], I promise to love you, to be patient with you, to grow with you, to share both joy and pain with you as long as we both shall live. Wherever you are, there will I be also, where you dwell, there will I live also, we shall be God's children together and not even death shall part us.

The other partner repeats these vows.

Minister- You are now joined in love and life, blest by God and this congregation. May your days together always be an affirmation and celebration of your love.

**If this is a ceremony performed in Massachusetts the minister could simply say
“I now pronounce you legally married.”**

A Wedding Liturgy

Rev. Molly Baskette, First Church, Somerville

Prelude

Seating of Family

Processional (B&G process simultaneously with mothers)

Greeting: Pastor

Love comes from God. Everyone who truly loves is a child of God.
Let us worship God.

Welcome: Pastor

Dearly beloved, We are gathered here as the children of God to witness the marriage of ___name and ____name. We come to share in their joy, to witness their promises, and to ask God to bless them. Marriage is a gift of God, a sign to this world of God's love for us and the victory of love over all other forces. Marriage is also a lifelong lesson in how to love more perfectly, stumbling over our humanness as we work to love each other through crisis, and conflict, through the demands of work and family, and aging, and frailty.

Marriage is not to be entered into lightly or unadvisedly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with God's purposes, for the upbuilding of the treasury of love in this world. Marriage teaches us how to forgive again and again, and inspires us to love and serve others more generously.

But most of all, marriage is a bit of grace, a free gift of God that we give to each other. Jesus' first miracle was to change water into wine at the wedding in Cana so that the guests might really celebrate! This moment, this mystery that is to happen between _____ and _____, is another of God's miracles.

Prayer of Invocation

God of Light and Love, We thank you for the gift of love and the mystery of marriage that you are giving to _____ and _____. Help them to feel this moment as more sacred and more real than any they have yet experienced, and to acknowledge the consequence of this moment. Gandhi said, "A vow, far from closing the door to real freedom, opens it." Open today this doorway to freedom, to responsibility, and to deeper joy for this couple and for all of us. AMEN.

Homily (optional)

[a short message relating to the rite of marriage in general and the couple, specifically]

Declaration of Intention:

This union is most sacred and most serious, because it will bind you together for life in a relationship so close and so intimate that it will profoundly influence your whole future. That future, with its hopes and disappointments, its joys and its sorrows, its years for asking questions and its years for answering them, is hidden from your eyes. You know that these elements are mingled in every life and are to be expected in your own. And so, not knowing what is before you, I ask you to state your intentions to each other.

To one partner:

_____, do you take _____ to be your husband/partner/spouse, and do you promise to love him/her, comfort him/her, forgive him/her, honor and protect him/her as long as you both shall live?

response:

I do, with the help of God.

To the other partner:

_____, do you take _____ to be your wife/husband/partner/spouse, and do you promise to love him/her, comfort him/her, forgive him/her, honor and protect him/her as long as you both shall live?

Response:

I do, with the help of God.

Pledge of Support

_____ and _____ cannot live out their vision alone. Just as no marriage can be successful without the support of a loving network of friends and family, so no wedding can happen without that same support. Will the families of _____ and _____ please rise in support of this couple?

from family:

Do you offer your prayerful blessing and loving support to this marriage? If so, please say "I do."

from congregation:

And will all the people please rise: Do you, as people of God, pledge your support and encouragement to the covenant commitment that _____ and _____ are making together? If so, please say, "We do."

God of our mothers and fathers, hear our pledges supporting and encouraging this union between _____ and _____. Bless us as we offer our prayerful

and loving support to their marriage, and help us to be angels for them in times of distress and servants to them in times of need. AMEN.

Unity Candle

When _____ and _____ were born, each one was given a unique set of gifts, and shone a never-before-seen light on the world. But now that they join as one flesh, their individual lights merge and grow brighter, their love illuminates a larger corner of the universe. Together they are more powerful than each would be alone. I invite you to light your unity candle.

Vows and Rings

_____ and _____, speak your covenant promises that you have come to offer before God and this people.

Partner: In the name of God, I _____ take you _____, to be my husband/wife/partner/spouse, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. I promise to forgive often and ask forgiveness of you, to give and not count the cost, and to bring to this union (**your gift**) and (**your gift**). This is my solemn vow.

Partner: In the name of God, I _____ take you _____, to be my husband/wife/partner/spouse, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. I promise to forgive often and ask forgiveness of you, to give and not count the cost, and to bring to this union (**your gift**) and (**your gift**). This is my solemn vow.

optional vows:

I promise to share my work, my home and my bed with you. I will share your interests and hopes for the future. I will love you, care for you and consider you before my own needs. I will trust and be honest with you, in good times and in times of difficulty. I will work toward compromise in all disagreements, and will try to understand you even when I do not agree with you. I will rejoice when you are happy and grieve when you suffer. I will help you to be your true self and honor you as a dwelling place of God. In all this I ask for God's help, today and in all the days to come.

(take the rings)

By these rings of promise, loving God, always remind _____ and _____ of the lasting commitment they have made to each other and You to them. May their love and faithfulness be like these circles, unbroken, with neither beginning or end.

Partner:

_____, I give you this ring as a sign of my love and faithfulness. And with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Partner:

_____, I give you this ring as a sign of my love and faithfulness. And with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Pronouncement

Now that _____ and _____ have given themselves to each other by the exchange of promises, by the joining of hands and the giving and receiving of rings, according to the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the faith and order of our Creator/the United Church of Christ, I pronounce that they are married with the blessing of the People. Those whom God has joined together, no one may put asunder. You may bind your covenant with a kiss.

The Blessing

Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all Life, author of Love, and Giver of all Grace: look with favor upon the world you have made, and for which your Son gave his life, and especially upon this couple whom you make one flesh in Holy Matrimony.

Give them wisdom and devotion in the ordering of their common life, that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy. Encourage them to welcome both friends and strangers into their home, for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares.

Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and one another all the days of their life.

Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours.

Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this wounded and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair.

Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others, and inspire others by their oneness and joy in each other.

Grant that all married/partnered persons who have witnessed these vows may find their lives strengthened and their commitments renewed and refreshed.

And finally, God, grant that these three always remain in the life of this marriage: faith, hope and love; with the greatest of these being love. AMEN.

(you may have friends offer various blessings)

Blessing on the new family: (if there are children from a previous relationship to include)

Holy God, the One who invented Love,

We thank you for bringing this new family together and ask you to give them everything they need for a healthy beginning to this new relationship. Give them affection as warm as the sun, patience as wide as the plains, laughter as deep as the ocean, wisdom as rich and silent as the sky after a storm. When they argue, help them to admit when they are wrong and say they are sorry, and may they never go to bed angry. In all things, let them put faith first, for from faith will come anything else they may need. May they learn from each other, parents as well as children, and find great joy and comfort in playing and being together as your children, through the sad times as well as the happy ones. AMEN.

Passing of the Peace *(optional)*

Peace be with you.

And also with you.

Let us share God's peace with one another by offering your neighbors a handshake or hug.

A Letter to a Fellow Christian

James 1:17-27; Luke 7, selections

Rev. Deborah L. Clark, August 31, 2003

It was a hot August afternoon in New York City. Our group of 26 youth and 11 adults from Massachusetts churches had just come back together from a day of working in soup kitchens, moving furniture, caring for homeless children, and distributing food to hungry families. All day, we had been with homeless people, trying to make connections and to make a difference. It was a perfect time to meet James Macklin, Associate Director of the Bowery Mission, who told us his life story and gave us new insight into what we had been experiencing.

James Macklin was born in the South, raised by his mother until she died and then cared for by a foster family. He left at the age of 14 and headed to New York City. Somehow, at that tender age, he survived, and by the time he was a young adult, he had made a good life for himself and owned a cleaning service in New Jersey.

But it wasn't enough, he said. He had never had a childhood, and he tried to fill the void in his life with more and more expensive things. He began selling drugs, but soon became his own best customer. Before long, he was homeless on the streets of New York City.

One night, when he was riding the subway in order to stay warm, a woman came up to him. "You don't belong on the streets," she said. She handed him a card with the address of the Bowery Mission, one of the oldest soup kitchens in the city.

The vast majority of soup kitchens we visited in New York City are faith-based—sponsored by churches and synagogues seeking to live out the commandment to care for the vulnerable and weak in our midst. Some begin their meals with a prayer, but for the most part they share their faith implicitly, through their acts of hospitality and caring. The Bowery Mission also is faith-based, but is different in being much more explicit about its Christian commitment. Before each meal, there is a worship service, a reflection of their belief that transformation of the spirit is as important as food for the body.

James Macklin took this mysterious woman's advice and went to the Bowery Mission. He walked into the church service and thought, "This is where I need to be." Afterward he went up to one of the ushers and asked, "How can I join?" He entered their Discipleship program, and began his climb out of homelessness. Ultimately, he moved into a position of leadership and tremendous influence.

Through it all, he never forgot the woman on the subway. He concluded that she was an angel, sent by God to introduce hope into his life, and also to challenge his "stinkin' thinkin'", as he called it. An African-American man, Mr. Macklin grew up hating all white people. But this woman was white, and she had cared enough to reach out to him. Her caring led him to "reprogram his computer", as he put it, to begin to work through his prejudices and stereotypes. Over the years, he said, there have been many people like the woman on the subway, angels who have further challenged him to look beyond the surface to a person's heart. "Show me who you are by what you do," he told us.

Mr. Macklin told us about further obstacles he has faced—a diagnosis of HIV in 1995, and prostate cancer more recently. In the midst of talking about how faith has

given him strength to fight these illnesses, he said, out of the blue, “God made Adam and Eve, not David and Steve.”

I froze. I have seen those words too many times, mostly on signs held by anti-gay protesters. They are not even words that belong in an honest dialogue about the Bible and homosexuality; they are a sound-bite that shuts down conversation.

I was stunned. Here was this man whose deep faith had transformed his life, a man who was speaking to us about the power of God to change our narrow-minded thinking. And in the midst of this powerful, liberating message were these words of prejudice, these words so often used to condemn a whole group of people, including me.

I struggled with what to do. I didn’t want to take away from the power of his message, or to lose the focus on homelessness, and I had a sense that challenging Mr. Macklin during the Question and Answer period would not be constructive. But what message would silence give to the young people in our group? Finally, I decided I would make sure our group discussed this at some point during the trip, and I also decided I would write James Macklin a letter.

I began writing my letter that night in the laundry room at the Youth Hostel. But there were too many distractions. The next day was the power outage, and my grand idea got lost in the shuffle.

Reading the gospel lessons this week made me realize I needed to finish my letter. In the strange story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, Jesus is changed by his encounter with this outcast. Her need, her persistence, and her quick wit touch him and transform his understanding of his own mission. This story points to a truth James Macklin lifted up in his talk: God works through other people—unexpected people—to touch our lives and call us to change. Just as the Syrophenician woman awakened Jesus to a broader vision of God’s healing realm, just as the woman on the subway called James Macklin to move beyond skin color, perhaps my story could make a difference. For myself, if not for James Macklin, I needed to put it out there. I needed to trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, that my story might touch Mr. Macklin’s heart and challenge his thinking. So I wrote my letter. I would like to share it with you.

Dear Mr. Macklin,

On Wednesday, August 13th, I had the opportunity to hear you speak to our group from the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ. I want to thank you for sharing your story so honestly. I especially appreciated what you said about the angel who came to you on the subway and gave you a sense of hope. Although my life has been very different from yours, I resonated with that part of your story; I have certainly been blessed by angels who have given me hope.

I also appreciated the way you talked about interactions with different people, over the years, that have led you to “reprogram your computer,” and have taught you to value people for what they do rather than what they look like or where they fit in our society. I took from your words a sense that the lessons other people bring us are gifts from God.

I am writing because I was deeply moved by the story you told of your own transformation and growth, and also because I was troubled by a comment you made. In the midst of talking about your own experience of being HIV-positive, you said, “God created Adam and Eve, not David and Steve.” There are words I associate with arguments against the acceptance of gay and lesbian people. I was surprised by this statement, especially since you brought such a powerful message of acceptance of people who are different from us.

The youth and adults who came on our mission trip are all members of churches in the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ. We are an Open and Affirming Conference, which means we make a public witness that people of every race, ethnicity, background, economic status and sexual orientation are welcomed and affirmed for who we are. As pastor of an Open and Affirming church, I am proud of our efforts to create an atmosphere of true welcome, and I work hard to proclaim the gospel that breaks down barriers and overcomes divisions.

I would like to share some of my own story with you. Just as your story gave me a new understanding of homelessness, and also of the power of God to heal brokenness, I hope mine will give you a new understanding of gay and lesbian people.

I am a lesbian. For the last seventeen years, I have lived in a committed relationship with my partner Fran. We have been blessed with friends, family members, and churches who have treasured us for who we are. We have also come up against people who have judged us without knowing us or the quality of our relationship, and we have had to reaffirm our love in the face of rejection and misunderstanding.

Over the years, our love has grown deeper and stronger. We have supported and encouraged each other through difficult times, and we have celebrated together as well. The solid base of our relationship has enabled each of us to seek healing for our brokenness and to grow into our potential. Our home is a place of peace and compassion. Both of us are ordained ministers, and the love we share for one another gives us strength and sustenance to go out each day and to share the gospel of God's amazing love, through our words and our actions.

I believe our love for one another is a gift from God. It is a gift that has brought healing, wholeness, and joy to my life; it is a gift that has multiplied and enabled me to offer compassion, healing, and hope to others.

As a Christian, I seek to follow the example and teachings of Jesus. Jesus reached out to people on the margins of society, people others judged and excluded. He consistently challenged the human tendency to judge people by external factors, and called attention instead to the quality of their love and mercy. He was less interested in whether someone followed the purity laws, and more concerned about how they cared for the widow and the orphan. While Jesus said very little explicitly about families, it is clear from his teachings that he would be less interested in what a family "looked like" on the outside, and more concerned about the quality of love that emanated from their household. Building a relationship and a household based on Jesus' commandment to love one another is one of the greatest challenges anyone could take on; only by God's grace can we do so. I have experienced God's grace in and through my relationship, as I have learned to love ever more deeply and fully, and to share that love more widely.

I am grateful for your honesty in sharing your story the other day, and I especially value your description of how other people have touched and challenged you. I hope my story might touch you and make a difference in your life.

May the peace of Christ be with you,

Rev. Dr. Deborah L. Clark

I don't know whether I will hear back from James Macklin. I trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in this process, maybe changing Mr. Macklin's heart through the reading of my letter, maybe changing my heart through the writing of it. I pray the Holy Spirit will be at work in all of our lives, sending us angels to challenge our narrowness and sending us forth as angels for one another. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Open and Affirming – What I Believe

Rev. Jamie Howard , First Church, Bedford, MA

I was a brainy geek in junior high and high school. I had friends, but I certainly wasn't in the "in crowd." In junior high I had my share of people who made fun of me for being smart and for being physically less mature than other girls. In senior high I went to dances and was ignored by boys. I had lots of crushes on different boys in my school, but none was ever reciprocated. And I can confirm that the attitude was still pretty much the same when I went to my 25th high school reunion. The old cliques were there, and still pretty solid.

I lived in one town, went to high school in another, and went to church and other meetings in a third. I was part of a church youth group in junior and senior high, and I had friends in other boys' and girls' organizations, and that's where I found the friends who welcomed me, and the boys who were interested in dating me. These friends may have known I was a very good student, but they didn't let that get in the way. They never called me names, nor were they distant or superior around me. And they made a point of wanting to know who I was and what mattered to me. They wanted to work with me on whatever program or service in which we intended to engage.

Both arenas were open. But both were not equally affirming. I could be in the junior high or high school, but if I wanted to be truly myself, I had to put up with exclusion and putdowns. I could be in the youth group or other organizations and could be truly myself. It's a homely example, but it's a start. Kathie Carpenter, who was here about a year ago with a very informative panel of folks sponsored by our ONA Committee, has given some helpful descriptions about these terms used by UCC churches. She says it's an issue of degree and "realness."

She uses these pairings as examples:

Open – everyone says they're open
Affirming – takes understanding, work, commitment

Open – has potential
Affirming – is happening, is real

Open – welcome
Affirming – stay and tell us about yourself

Open – Door is open, come on in
Affirming – come back again, share fully in the life of...

Open – this is your name
Affirming – tell us who you are, how you want to be described

Open – I can say I'm Kathie
Affirming – I can say I am a Christian and a lesbian

Open – visitors don't know
Affirming – visitors know

Someone said to a friend of Kathie's during their church's ONA process that they "had a hard time giving approval to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people." The friend replied, "I don't seek your approval. I seek your welcome."

When I was a kid, I didn't even know homosexuality existed. I remember hearing people say, "Don't wear green on Thursdays – it means you're queer." I surely didn't want to be queer. What kid would want to be singled out as different and weird? I had no clue that the singling out could be even worse than anything I had ever experienced or could imagine.

When I was a college student in the sixties, I learned a little more. And maybe because there had been no overt homophobia expressed in my family or my immediate circles of significant influence, I just figured "those people" were different, especially since the sociology course talked about social and sexual "deviance." But I never had a sense of wanting to avoid gay and lesbian people – just not quite knowing what to think about them.

As my adult life went on I discovered that a number of the most important and caring people in my life were gay or lesbian. I knew that I also knew at least a couple of people who called themselves bisexual and one who was pretty sure he was truly a woman within and intended someday perhaps to have "the operation."

I learned more and more how hard it was for friends who were closeted. I learned of the horrors of gay-bashing, and the increasing drumbeat on the right that said glbt (gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered) people were terrible sinners, human monstrosities, unloved by God and not to be considered equals in religious settings or the greater society. And that turned my stomach.

I believe that God created us – all of us – in infinite love. I believe that Jesus Christ came for all of us. I believe that God's Holy Spirit works within and among and through all of us. When I see Jesus reaching to anyone and everyone, and calling to each person to live into the fulfillment of God's vision for him or her, I see a love that far exceeds my own will to love. And I see a love that cannot be boxed in by any of my own prejudices or fears or doubts.

Jesus challenges me every day of my life – but always within the context of a love that is bigger than I can imagine.

As a pastor, I believe that a church is meant to be open and affirming of all individuals – that's affirming of their essential being as children of God, regardless of whether they trip our own comfort sensors. That's affirming of their essential being as children of God -- regardless of their color, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, traditions, marital situation, economic status, physical ability, mental health or capacity, theological point of view, politics, age, their music, their number of body piercings, or whatever.

As people who are a church we are called by God to love God and neighbor, to reveal how we love God by how we love our neighbor. That doesn't mean we have to feel all warm and fuzzy about our neighbor, but rather that we are called to seek his or her well-being. If we truly say that all people are children of God, then we start with our basic humanity and the recognition that no one person is more God's child than is another.

When Jesus went up the mountain to pray – and there was this strange experience that the disciples only talked about some time later, the Transfiguration, where they saw him in light with Moses and Elijah,

he was different in their eyes when he returned to them. He was transformed.

They, too, were transformed, although it took them awhile to grow into it (if you ever get to wondering about your own faith journey, just remember how the disciples were generally several steps behind Jesus in “getting it,” and you'll feel better). But all this transformation was a prelude to going on back into the daily pilgrimage, and back into the situations that would call for profound commitment, even into death.

The whole scope of the Biblical story is one of transformation:

the wonder of creation to the pain of its brokenness; the courage of Abraham to move from everything familiar at the call of a God of promise and presence who called him to a different way of living; the transformation of Moses, a Hebrew child raised by Egyptian royalty who discovered the call of God to lead his people out of slavery and into a Promised Land; the faithfulness of a Moabite woman, Ruth, who pledged steadfast loyalty to her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi and traveled to a brand-new homeland; the passion of prophets who weren't always sure that they wanted to proclaim God's call to a people who would not listen but who did it anyway; the wonder of God revealed uniquely in Jesus of Nazareth — and declared in mystery through his resurrection that transformed the power of death into new life by the power of God's love... the amazing life experiences of those who followed Jesus, both Paul who has a sudden conversion and many others who grew into the Good News...

Open and Affirming as a process is just that. It isn't something we become overnight. Even after creating and confirming an ONA statement we would still be growing into it for some time to come. Through conversation and study and thought and prayer we look at what it means, and we open ourselves even as countless pilgrims in faith have done to see how God is calling us to move from the way we assume we are and the way we assume others see us to whatever way God is calling us to be in a new day.

Open and Affirming calls us to be careful and caring of how we converse with one another on this process. Rather than jump into heated refutation of someone's statements, we can ask one another, “What I am hearing you say is x,y,z...am I hearing you correctly?” We can then ask, “Can you describe your particular concerns or your particular hopes about what our being an Open and Affirming Church might mean?”

In all our conversations we can carry what the apostle Paul called the more excellent way, which is to remember that we still can and are called to love one another even when we disagree.

If we choose to create a statement that proactively proclaims that we are Open and Affirming, then we are saying to people to whom it matters that this is a safe and truly welcoming place, a place where we really wrestle with the call of the gospel to love God and neighbor and to make that evident to neighbor and visitor, traveler, new resident, stranger, and friend yet to be discovered. People to whom it matters are not just glbt folks – but also their parents, their children, their siblings, their friends, their partners and spouses –and also straight people who believe that this is a matter of justice can faith and compassion –and also people who are of a different color or background, people who have a marriage with someone from a very different religious tradition, people who have mental health issues – and their loved ones, people who are differently able-bodied – and their loved ones, people who have differing mental abilities – and their loved ones, people who are in all kinds of living situations, people who express their faith in different styles, people who are or aren't in recovery, and more.

As a pastor, I can state what I believe, but I also need to emphasize that when someone disagrees with my point of view I am still his or her pastor, ready to be there for him or her in life's ups and downs. Balancing the call to give at times what some label “the prophetic message” I still hold up that which is “pastoral” in community and care.

I wish that here the friends we have known – who have indeed been among us but are now with God – could have known that it was okay to be out about who they were. We loved them, or so it certainly seemed to me as I watched them within this congregation over the years –but because we had never said anything as a congregation that indicated it was truly safe for them, we never made it truly comfortable for them simply to be. That's true in a lot of churches, but it is changing...it has changed for sister congregations in:
(read from four different miked people)

Amherst, Andover, Ashfield, Auburn, Auburndale, Baldwinville, Belchertown, Boston, Brighton, Brookline, Cambridge, Chicopee, Concord, Danvers, Deerfield, Dudley, Feeding Hills, Framingham, Harvard, Harwich, Haydenville, Hingham, Holliston, Jamaica Plain, Lenox, Lexington, Lincoln, Lowell, Lynnfield, Malden, Melrose, Milton, Natick, Needham, Newburyport, Newton, Newton Highlands, Northampton, Northborough, Norwell, Norwood, Pembroke, Reading, Salem, Somerville, South Dartmouth, Springfield, Sudbury, Wellesley, West Barnstable, West Newton, Weston, Williamstown, Winchester, Worcester

And other UCC churches in Massachusetts that are considering becoming ONA even as we are. I love this church. I love this congregation. I tell people about this congregation wherever I go. I would like to be able to tell them that they – whoever they might be – would find a place that has declared thoughtfully and lovingly that it is open to them and affirming of them as children of God: gay, straight, got it all together or really struggling, rich, poor, married, single, divorced, widowed, whatever. I think that then we would be an even more vivid preview of God's realm than we already are. And I think it would open us up to even greater life and service as a church of Jesus Christ.

Creating a Church Banner and T-shirts for Gay Pride

Oliver Finch, Church of the Covenant, Boston, MA

Target groups: High School age youth and Young Adults

Description: We had fun creating a banner and t-shirts for our church to march with at Boston's Gay Pride Parade. Our young adult group designed a t-shirt with our churches name and a Pride logo on it. We sold the shirts at cost to church members and friends and everyone had a great time.

We also designed a banner which we carried behind the MACUCC float in Boston's Pride March! It was a wonderful affirmation our churches More Light (PCUSA) and Open and Affirming (UCC) commitment.

Advance preparation:

A meeting time and design materials

A place to have the shirts and banner printed

Time for the sale before the Pride event

You will need:

Material for designing the t-shirts and banner. After you decide what you want to do for the banner and shirts you will know what additional materials you need.

Work for Justice!
**25 ways to support gay, lesbian, transgender,
bi-sexual, inter-sexed, questioning and same gender loving people
at your church!**

Rev. Dr. Fran Bogle

Become an Open and Affirming (ONA) church! Make a public statement that you welcome lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, inter-sexed, questioning and same gender loving (GLBTIQSGL) people into the full life and leadership of your church. A resource manual is available from the ONA Task Force at the Massachusetts Conference. If you are not UCC, look similar programs for your denomination.

Display your ONA statement proudly. Put ONA on your sign, and in all advertising. People need to know they will be safe and welcome before they come into your church.

1. Invite GLBTIQSGL friends to worship and a special event like a pot luck. Help them feel welcome at your church.
2. Make sure your churches boards and committees reflect your commitments to justice and include GLBTIQSGL members.
3. Write a regular article in your newsletter discussing the activities of the United Church of Christ Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Bi-sexual Concerns. Include events happening around the Mass. Conference
4. Advertise your church on the web. List it with the wider UCC as an ONA or especially welcoming congregation.
5. Get involved! Attend and sponsor LGBTIQSGL events and bring some of that energy back to your church! March in the Gay Pride Parade with a banner from your church. (Many cities and towns sponsor these events)
6. Welcome gay marriage and commitment ceremonies and advertise your churches availability in local papers and papers with a special outreach to the GLBTIQSGL community.
7. Celebrate Gay Pride with special activities in worship on the Sunday nearest to your town's Pride Parade.
8. Start a Pride Parade of your own if town doesn't have one.
9. Mention GLBTIQSGL joys and concerns in church services and fly a rainbow flag on special occasions.
10. Create a telephone and letter Action Tree and invite people to contact local and national legislators to advocate for GLBTIQSGL rights and needs.

11. Send supportive “Letters to the editor” about GLBTIQSGL issues to your local paper, and always respond promptly to anti-gay statements in the paper.
12. Invite folks to your home for a game night, special dinner, bible study or time to reflect together on a wide range of spiritual concerns, especially those facing the GLBTIQSGL community.
13. Sponsor a panel of biblical scholars to talk about the Bible and homosexuality.
14. Invite the wider community to a yearly lecture on GLBTIQSGL themes.
15. Keep a well stocked literature rack with positive information about GLBTIQSGL people and their families in an easily seen and accessible place in your church. Use UCC and PFLAG resources.
16. Start a hotline or drop-in center in your church for GLBTIQSGL youth.
17. Volunteer opportunities abound in all our denominations for people who want to be advocates and allies. Call the ONA Task Force at the Massachusetts Conference for ideas and join UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns.
18. Ask the Conference to sponsor more events supporting GLBTIQSGL rights and offer to host meetings at your church.
19. Call openly LGBTIQSGL staff and field education students
20. Talk about GLBTIQSGL concerns as a part of your Sunday school and youth group activities. Make sure GLBTIQSGL youth feel safe and supported.
21. Raise and give money to UCC and community agencies that support LGBTIQSGL folks and their families.
22. Invite members of neighboring religious communities to come to a forum or discussion about GLBTIQSGL issues and their traditions.
23. Support or start a Gay and Straight Alliance in your school system.
24. Offer to send speakers to schools or religious communities in your area to talk about your churches commitments to supporting GLBT people.
25. Create a scholarship program and support a LGBT seminarian.

***Send us more ideas! We want to know what you are doing in your church!
Rev. Dr. Fran Bogle, MBA Just Peace Coordinator (fbog@aol.com)***