

## ONA INSERTION – SEPTEMBER 2024 CALLER

### OPEN AND AFFIRMING

A church becomes an Open and Affirming church following a period of study, reflection, and discernment. When the church body has reached consensus that it is prepared to take on both the challenge of identifying itself as an Open and Affirming church and the hard and on-going task of living into that commitment, it adopts a covenant. The covenant is an agreement, a contract, if you will, to together be and become a truly Open and Affirming congregation.

Most of our New England Congregational Churches are covenant churches, with language along the lines of “we covenant with one another to walk in all of God’s ways, known, and to be made known...” It is a sacred agreement, a promise to one another to strive together to overcome our human frailties and short comings as we work to become the people God needs us to be in the time and place in which we find ourselves, and to support one another as we seek to discern what those needs might be.

An Open and Affirming Covenant, once its language has been hammered out and its adoption endorsed by the congregational body, is then “owned” by the church as an act of worship. The essential elements of such a covenant are a statement of full welcome and inclusion for all persons without regard to sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender identity. Many congregations, if not most, extend that statement to include race, ethnicity, creed, class, age, gender, marital status, physical or mental ability.

In an earlier article for the caller, an effort was made to acknowledge the concern for the word “affirming” and to explain why its use was both appropriate and needful. In short, affirmation of all persons as fully children of God is a statement we need to make. Such affirmation does not carry with it an approval or endorsement of actions or behavior hurtful to others. The designation “Open and Affirming” is code that is readily and clearly understood by those who need to see and hear it.

The matter of how a motion to adopt an Open and Affirming Covenant will be handled is to be the subject of another article. What is important at this point is that we must be very nearly unanimous on this matter. Ask ourselves, as we reflect on this very important decision, how welcome would any one of us feel, if when invited to be part of a group, we were to learn that a large minority of those in the group disapproved of who we were, and only reluctantly accepted our presence in the group because they were outvoted?

It is very challenging to be completely open to accepting all people into our community. We are by nature a tribal species. We seem to harbor a need to feel that we are somehow better than some others – partly, at least, because we have been made to feel less than others at some point in our lives. It seems that for all our lives we have been divided up into ‘teams’ to compete with each other – cowboys and Indians, white hats and black hats, “us” and “them”. Our challenge is to overcome that impulse, to stand with courage on the principle of inherent value in every one of God’s children, and to affirm that principle publicly for all to see.

For continued prayer and reflection.

From your Open and Affirming Task Force