

May 2024 Open and Affirming Task Force Article in "The Caller"

MOVING TOWARD DECLARING:

Declaring ourselves to be an Open and Affirming Congregation should be the culminating step in a process of dialog and education – both individually and collectively. Face to face dialog with each other can be challenging – both in terms of finding the time, and the willingness to expose our beliefs and feelings to each other. It requires listening skills, and the courage to be open to change. Most of us, at least those of us who have been around for a half-century or more, grew up in an ethos, both within and without the church, that held that anything other than male and female gender and conventional expression of that sexuality was an affront to God, a violation of the biblical law, sinful, and worse.

Growing up in that ethos, some of us, at some point in our lives, have been fearful that we might have “feelings” whose expression would not meet the approval of classmates, our Sunday School teacher, or worse, our parents. Our environment seemed hostile, and our need for acceptance and approval made us fearful; careful of what we said, did or wore.

Contributing to that environment, many of us have used unpleasant words suggesting or expressing disparagement of non-gender conformance – such little things, as “throws like a girl,” “plays with dolls,” or “dresses like a boy” – much in the same way that many of us grew up using non-complimentary terms for persons of different ethnicity, color, religion, life-styles, economic strata, dialect, or speech patterns. We heard our parents, adult relatives, classmates, coworkers, even the media use these terms, and we owned them, they became part of who we are. In the struggle to become who we understand God would like us to be, we need to acknowledge that we carry this baggage, and gradually school ourselves to set it aside.

While it ought to be easy to say that all are children of God, and all deserve a welcome and a safe community where they can seek to understand and accept God’s love for them and who they are, it frankly is not that easy. We need to confront the values and habits we have absorbed over our lifetimes, and work with each other to move into a place where we can declare to others that we are truly “open and affirming”. In the process of arriving at that point, we need to be gentle with each other, invite conversation, embody compassion, and have consideration for each other’s struggles.

The ideal would be for our membership to be unanimous in support of adopting an Open and Affirming covenant. Realistically, this may not be possible. There will be those among us whose strongly held beliefs – at least at this juncture – prevent them from endorsing an Open and Affirming Covenant. We need to hold those members in love and ask them to do the same for us.

From your Open and Affirming Task Force.