

FAQ about ONA

1. What does "Open and Affirming" (ONA) mean?

Reflecting the [Open and Affirming action of the General Synod \(1985\)](#) and the [Transgender action of the General Synod \(2003\)](#), to say that a setting of the UCC (a local church, campus ministry etc.) is "Open and Affirming" means that it has publicly and specifically declared that those of all "sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions" (or "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" people) are welcome in its full life and ministry (e.g. membership, leadership, employment, etc.) It bespeaks a spirit of hospitality and a willingness to live out that welcome in meaningful ways.

Note: This language reflects the [change in the ONA policy](#) of the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns (The Coalition), effective July 14, 2010. The Coalition is the organization that established and manages the ONA listing.

In 1997, The Coalition changed its name from the "United Church Coalition for Lesbian/Gay Concerns" to "The United Church of Christ Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns." This was done to intentionally and publicly announce our commitment to the inclusion of all persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. The ONA Study Packet reflects this commitment by containing materials about all four identities. (See also #8 and #10 below)

2. Why is "ONA" used for "Open and Affirming"?

"ONA" is the "caps" version of "O 'n A" (as in "salt 'n pepper"). The Open and Affirming Ministries in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) use "O&A" to identify their welcoming congregations

3. What is the background of ONA in the UCC?

Using the language of "More Light" (employed by Presbyterians who support lgbt-inclusion), the idea of "Welcoming congregations" was first raised at the General Synod in 1983. No formal action was taken by the General Synod but, in the months after that, a group of UCC members from the MA Conference continued work on this. They developed a resolution using the term "Open and Affirming" and it was adopted by the Annual Meeting of the MA Conference in 1984. That resolution and one from the Rocky Mountain Conference formed the basis of the resolution adopted in 1985 by the Fifteenth General Synod (national delegate body of the UCC).

The resolution was entitled: "[Calling on United Church of Christ Congregations to Declare Themselves Open and Affirming.](#)" This General Synod action "...encourages a policy of non-discrimination in employment, volunteer service and membership policies with regard to sexual orientation; encourages associations, Conferences and all related organizations to adopt a similar policy; and encourages the congregations of the United Church of Christ to adopt a non-discrimination policy and a Covenant of Openness and Affirmation of persons of lesbian, gay and bisexual orientation within the community of faith."

Preparing for General Synod 2003, several conferences worked on a resolution, which was endorsed by The Coalition, and called for the UCC to publicly reject discrimination and violence against transgender people. Another resolution was introduced at General Synod 2003 and called for full inclusion of transgender persons into the life and leadership of the denomination. These two resolutions were combined and passed.

The final General Synod 2003 resolution, "[Affirming the Participation and Ministry of Transgender People within the United Church of Christ and Supporting Their Civil and Human Rights,](#)" encouraged all congregations of the United Church of Christ "to welcome transgender people into membership, ministry, and full participation" and encouraged all settings of the UCC "to learn about the realities of transgender experience and expression, including the gifts and callings and needs of transgender people, and are encouraged to engage in appropriate dialogue with transgender people."

4. Were these resolutions the first to affirm people in regard to sexual orientation and gender identity/expression?

No. Bodies in the **United Church of Christ** had been making such statements for decades prior to the **1985 Open and Affirming resolution**. They have addressed, among other issues: support for GLB civil rights, elimination of institutionalized homophobia within the UCC, HIV/AIDS education and care as it affects GLB persons, and affirmation of the gifts and ministries of GLB clergy and laity.

However, the **2003 Transgender resolution** was the first time that transgender concerns were addressed at this level.

5. Are all UCC settings required to be ONA?

No. The UCC's General Synod "speaks to but not for" local churches and other settings of the denomination. Because we are in covenant with one another, we are called to prayerfully consider all actions taken by General Synods; other settings of the church are then free to respond faithfully, according to their discernment of the leading of God's Spirit.

6. What is the process for becoming ONA?

Most local churches and many other settings engage in a time of study, prayer, and conversation before adopting an ONA statement. An average process is about 2 years. Each process is different in order to address the interests and concerns of the setting. (**Numerous study resources are available**. See question #12.)

7. How do UCC churches and other settings become recognized as ONA?

Since the **1985 General Synod action**, The UCC Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns has maintained the **listing of ONA Churches**. (In addition, it now has listings for: **ONA Campus Ministries**, **ONA new church starts**, **ONA Seminaries/Divinity Schools**, **Congregations in Conversation with the UCC** (churches in early stages of development or coming into the UCC from other denominations), **ONA-Spirited Youth**, **Conferences**, and **Associations** which have adopted an ONA resolution. More than 900 UCC settings are listed as ONA.

If your church or setting is drafting a statement, it is recommended that you be in touch with the Coalition's **Administrator** of the ONA listings for consultation on the criteria for listing ONA churches and other settings.

If your church or setting has adopted an ONA statement and you wish to be listed as ONA, please submit your statement to the Coalition's ONA Listing **Administrator**, Kathie Carpenter, email: kacarp@comcast.net.

8. We already say: "We welcome everyone." To whom does it matter that UCC settings make public statements of welcome specifically to LGBT persons?

Too many LGBT people and their families live with the pain of having believed that "everyone" meant them, only to discover otherwise. No one should have to guess about the "boundaries of inclusion" of a congregation or other ministry. A clear welcome matters to LGBT adults who, seeking to share their faith and gifts with the church, often wonder if they will meet with silence or condemnation if they are "out" in church. It matters to LGBT youth who need the guidance of faith communities as they question and establish their understandings of sexuality, spirituality, and relationships, but fear the same disapproval of their lives or dismissal of their gifts. It matters to families which too often hide the fact that they have LGBT children or other relatives. Fearing the indifference or rejection of their church, they are cut off from support and sharing which would enrich them and their congregation. It matters to LGBT clergy who often feel that to serve the church they must hide their true selves and lives. It matters to all Christians who believe that God's affirmation of the gifts of loving relationships and sexuality are not restricted to those who are heterosexual, and who look to their church to witness to God's inclusive love and help them to better understand and live it.

9. If a local church or other setting already functions in an "open and affirming" way, why become officially "ONA"?

Every congregation, campus ministry etc. that adds its name and commitment to the ONA movement helps to counter the widespread perception that "Christians think being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender is wrong/sinful." The ONA message is that sexuality is a good gift of our Creator, as is its responsible, loving expression. God's love, Christ's church, and the Spirit's power are for people of every color, age, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, economic status, and ability - whether they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. As the list of churches and other bodies which affirm this grows, so does the proclamation of God's wondrous, inclusive love!

10. In our ONA statement, may we welcome persons in regard to other identities in addition to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression?

The short answer is: yes.

Given the ongoing, often bitter struggles around LGBT concerns in church and society, it remains clear that there is need UCC settings to be specific about their inclusion of LGBT persons. This is the primary focus of the ONA movement.

However, the misinformation, stereotypes, and prejudices which fuel heterosexism, sexism, racism, ageism, , ableism, etc. are numerous and interwoven in our society. Thus, a setting's welcoming persons in regard to color, age, abilities, economic situation, etc., and expressing commitment to continually work against all oppressions are encouraged, in the name of God's extravagant welcome. Knowing that the many aspects of who we are welcome in church life enables all of us to bring our whole selves to the worship and service of God. (Such a wide welcome involves, of course, ongoing education, prayer, and advocacy about the spectrum of who we are so that we may better understand one another's experiences and help shape a world that is just and respectful of us all.)

11. Is the ONA program the only one of its kind?

No. It is one of the ecumenical "Welcoming Church Programs," networks of churches and other settings in eleven denominations in North America. Their work is strengthened by the participation of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches and there are also "Affiliates" of the Welcoming Church Programs, which share their commitment to a LGBT-affirming Church (e.g., The Shower of Stoles Project) For more about the ecumenical efforts of the Welcoming Church Movement see the Institute for Welcoming Resources (a program of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force) at www.welcomingresources.org. Also refer to our [list of weblinks](#) to other organizations.

12. Whom should I contact for more information and resources?

There are many people in the UCC whose ministries include support and education about human sexuality, relationships and family life, LGBT concerns, HIV/AIDS prevention and education, and Open and Affirming. Here are some key contacts. Also refer to our [resources page](#) and the [list of weblinks](#) to other organizations.)

The staff of the UCC's own [Office of LGBT Ministries](#) is well equipped to provide support around LGBT issues, as well as Youth and Young Adult issues and prevention of HIV and AIDS. The Coalition staff and board work closely with the UCC national offices and the Executive for Health and Wholeness is an ex officio member of our board of directors.

The UCC's [Minister for Sexuality Education](#) as another important resource through the denomination's national offices.

The [UCA Coalition staff](#) is available as a resource for general LGBT concerns, resources, and networking, as well as issues relating to the ONA process. But there are also [many local ONA consultants](#) around the country who would be excited to hear from you.