

All Are Welcome' isn't enough

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people of faith often experience emotional and spiritual injury in churches that condemn their capacity to love and seek love. Because they've learned that "All Are Welcome" usually doesn't apply to them, they can't assume that any church will be safe for them and their families.

A public welcome by an Open and Affirming (ONA) church sends a clear message to LGBT seekers that they have a home in the United Church of Christ.

A congregation's affirmation and support through an ONA covenant can be a life-changing and life-saving experience—especially for LGBT youth.

A public welcome to LGBT seekers helps churches grow. When new ONA churches attract new members, many of them are young straight couples starting new families: they identify with the values ONA represents, and want their children to learn the faith in a welcoming church.

By adopting an ONA covenant, a congregation is taking seriously St. Paul's admonition to "accept one another, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (Romans 15:7, NIV)



What it Means to be an Open and Affirming (ONA) Church in the United Church of Christ

LGBTQIA+ youth across America are still threatened by bullying and suicide, both inside and outside of faith communities. **In a 100% Open and Affirming church, UCC congregations speak up as advocates in their local community, pushing for increases to anti-bullying and suicide-prevention practices in local public and parochial school in their area. UCC congregations offer a safe space for LGBTQIA+ youth. Becoming a W.I.S.E. certified church can go hand-in-hand, learning techniques and best practices to serve youth and adults experiencing mental health challenges.**

Transgender citizens still struggle for respect, and the suicide rate among transgender Americans is higher than any other group. Additionally, transgender people are more likely to experience workplace discrimination, rejection from family members, and be harmed or killed because of the bias that leads to hate crimes. Unfortunately, in spite of these increased challenges, even fewer ONA churches are prepared to be 100% ONA to trans families. **In a 100% Open and Affirming churches, congregations welcome transgender seekers and stand with them when their rights or dignity are under attack.**

LGBTQ seniors often face abuse and neglect in retirement communities and nursing homes. At a time when they're physically and emotionally vulnerable, LGBTQ seniors too often are forced back into the closet. Many of them are looking for community, but don't know there are LGBTQ-affirming churches that will welcome them. **An Open and Affirming church reaches out to their older neighbors, and advocate for their safety and their dignity as they make decisions about their next steps.**



OUR FAITHFUL COMMITMENT TO EXTRAVAGANT WELCOME AND BEING AN LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE CHURCH

Because we affirm that the beauty and blessedness of God's creation is present in all people:

We make a conscious and deliberate decision to celebrate the diversity of creation as uniquely embodied in people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+). We honor the sacredness of people's lives through extravagant welcome and unconditional affirmation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

Because we confess that harm has been done to LGBTQ+ people in the name of God:

We renounce theologies, ideologies, and doctrines that oppress or exclude anyone of any sexual orientation or gender identity. We intentionally design church systems and structures that both include and amplify the voices of all LGBTQ+ people and center the voices of LGBTQ+ indigenous people and LGBTQ+ people of color.

Because we embrace the extravagant love taught by Jesus:

We celebrate LGBTQ+ youth and work to create a world where youth grow up in loving community. We preach prophetically, witness publicly, and act boldly to live lives of unconditional love.

Because we recognize the need for greater understanding of LGBTQ+ people within our faith communities:

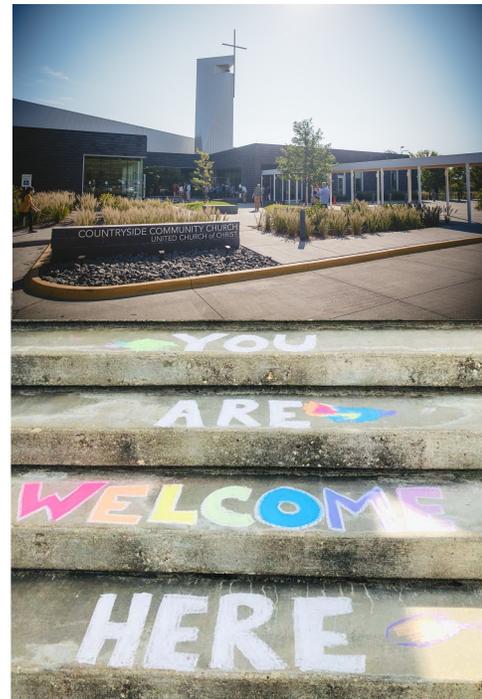
We support one another on journeys of claiming gender identities and sexual orientation. We follow the lead of LGBTQ+ persons and families in order to learn to be allies who actively resist and overcome systemic injustices of all kinds.

Because we look forward to the time when every church in our Conference, in the UCC, in our country, and in our world senses the movement of the Spirit, recognizes that all persons belong to God, and fully celebrates people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in its life and ministry:

We strive for justice and inclusion of LGBTQ+ people within all settings of the Conference's ministry, and we support our ministers and laypeople who protest and speak out, and who advocate for equity in access to housing, health care, education, banking, and all other social institutions that disadvantage LGBTQ+ people.

We create Brave Spaces in our Conference and dedicate time for the education, conversation, and discernment central to the journey of being an LGBTQ+ inclusive church, and we invite all congregations to create Brave Space specific to LGBTQ+ inclusion in their own communities.

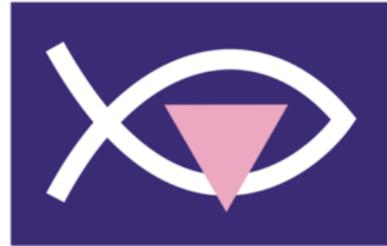
We hope for each and every congregation to one day prophetically and publicly commit to being an LGBTQ+ inclusive and Open and Affirming Church and to living out that commitment anew each day. We commit to BE Church together, live into God's extravagant welcome, and advocate for justice so that all people may know love, safety, belonging, and dignity.



WHAT IS THE NEXT FAITHFUL STEP?

In your discernment groups please consider if you think Countryside Community Church is ready to be committed to being an Open and Affirming (ONA) Congregation. Discern what roll you think the church has in our advocacy for LGBTQ youth, seniors and asylum-seekers. Are we ready to expand resources, and training programs to help work towards an ONA covenant in ways that build consensus, reduce conflict and resist attempts to roll back LGBTQ civil rights? Please see the information below if you have not signed up for a discernment group. You do not have to be a member of Countryside to join a discernment group.

**OPEN AND AFFIRMING
COALITION
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**



To see more information about the United Church of Christ and becoming an Open and Affirming Church go to openandaffirming.org.

A TIME FOR DISCERNMENT

As we begin to move forward and look for settled ministers, three questions have been formulated by the Church Council to help us begin the discernment process:

- 1. How do we want to be challenged spiritually and intellectually.**
- 2. What is our call to serve?**
- 3. What does it mean to be the Christian partner of the Tri-Faith Initiative?**

To get the conversations started, we will be offering:

Small group meetings which will take place in homes, on Zoom and at the church. They will be made up of 6-12 church members who, together, will meet and talk about their hopes and prayers for Countryside as well as answer the three questions (above).

Learning/listening sessions are another component of our discernment process. These will be opportunities to learn about the United Church of Christ, our leadership model and more about the United Church of Christ search and call process.

Congregational information meetings will be used as another opportunity to get involved and also to provide feedback from the small groups. Here is where you will receive updates and share in the search and call process for settled ministers

Lastly, we will provide feedback opportunities to respond to the output of our small groups and to allow for the most common themes to come to the surface.

To register for a small group go to:

countrysideucc.org/register