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Tomorrow Even Better Than Today

A Look at the Open and Affirming Process

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During our first congregational workshop exploring the Open and Affirming process, the thoughts running through many people's minds were: "Aren't we already a welcoming church? Why do we need this whole bothersome process to say something that everybody already knows about us – that we are now and have always been a welcoming church. Isn't this a large effort for no real benefit? Of course all people are welcome here – and they know this without any drawn-out process, new acronym, or signage."

Of course, our church would never even consider erecting a sign on the church lawn proclaiming:

EVERYBODY WELCOME ...except gays, lesbians, Asians, Hispanics, unmarried couples, people with loud children, poor people, African-Americans, young people, old people, and casually dressed people.

Yet the tragic reality is that there actually are far too many Christian churches in this country where, even if the physical sign is missing, the sentiment expressed above is there. Visitors who do not conform to a very narrow profile are truly made to feel unwelcome. The task of "unwelcoming" may be as passive as simply ignoring the visitor during worship and fellowship. It can also take the form of a more active process in which an unofficial spokesperson will make it his or her business to say something to make sure the visitors gets the message that they are not welcome *as they are and who they are*.

The reason for a formal ONA process is that a hurting soul looking for a church in

which he or she can experience the love of God in shared worship, service, and fellowship with other people does not know from the outside ***what kind of congregation we really are***. Warm or chilly? Critical or accepting? Too many people — the unchurched and the formerly churched — have had too many bad experiences with other congregations. The result of all this past hurt and rejection is they need some explicit guarantee that if they come to our church it will be different here. A recent book title captures this sense: *They Love Jesus but Hate the Church*. We may know what kind of church we strive to be, but too many potential visitors and potential members do not know it.

The Open and Affirming process has several facets. One goal of the process is to equip our congregation to identify itself publicly and proudly *to the world beyond our congregational family* as committed to the concept of welcoming all people without regard to sexual orientation, lifestyle, race, gender, marital situation, language, and background. People who are shopping for a church will not have to wonder if they really and truly will be welcome here. We are making a strong, public commitment and promise that they will be assured of a sincere welcome *as they are and who they are*.

The second objective of the Open and Affirming process looks *within our congregational family*. It encourages us to be more open to each other's differences, struggles, and individual quirks and that we affirm that we are all God's children, each with our individual flaws. We have all

heard the saying, “charity begins at home.” This holds equally true for openness and affirmation as well. The more open and affirming we are with each other the more welcoming we must, inevitably become, towards other people.

The process of becoming an Open and Affirming congregation is about saying to each other that we are looking to the future and that we want tomorrow to be better than yesterday. Despite times in the past when we might have failed to live up to the Gospel’s standard of loving our neighbor as ourselves, we want to embrace a different attitude going forward from this day onward. We want to say that we want to be open to everyone....and this means looking into our own hearts to find where, honestly, we might have trouble being open to others. It may be that – to be really honest with ourselves – we might have difficulty being open to people who are so much older or younger, richer or poorer, more liberal or more conservative, thinner or heavier, gabbier or more taciturn, more or less

educated. Openness, ultimately, is simply how our view of the world is shaped by our faith in the God who created us *all*, the God who redeemed us *all*, and the God who sustains us *all*.

To become more open and affirming is really an ongoing spiritual discipline. It is not just for potential visitors of our church; it is for us. Scripture speaks frequently of the gifts of the Spirit and if we can become more open individuals and more affirming individuals in all aspects of our lives – with our families, with each other, and with strangers – that will be a true blessing for us all. Paul cites the gifts of the Spirit as patience, humility, mercy, and unity while Thomas Aquinas expanded the list to include wisdom, understanding, fortitude, reverence, wonder and awe. These are all wonderful gifts and each and every one of them comes from God. Genuine openness to new possibilities for ourselves and openness to diversity in other people is certainly also a gift of the Holy Spirit. Let us open ourselves up to God’s gifts.