

A UUA Perspective
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This morning's message addresses the Unitarian Universalist Association's historical relationship with GLBT people. GLBT is an acronym for gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people. Traditionally, the term homosexual was used to refer to gay and lesbian people and bisexual and transgender people were pretty much ignored. Current usage of GLBT is an effort to bring all four sexual orientations to an equal level of awareness.

Please do not confuse GLBT people within the Unitarian Universalist Association with the religious groups under our Association umbrella. GLBT is a sexual orientation, whereas, humanism, Buddhism or Christianity are religious groups. I believe that one chooses one's religious orientation but not one's sexual orientation.

When I lived in East Lansing, Michigan I was a member of an international men's group out of Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, Michigan with a local Lansing chapter that met weekly for about five years. It was not intended to be a group for gay men but there were three gay men, including myself, in the group.

One of the gay men was also a United Methodist minister in a small town just north of East Lansing. The minister was involved in an ongoing struggle with the United Methodist church regarding his sexual orientation. He shared his struggles with the United Methodist church in our group almost weekly during those five years.

The United Methodist church has a policy stating that homosexuals may be called by a church as a settled minister but they must remain celibate. In other words, they must stay in the closet. This man, after marrying, raising a family and getting a divorce, came out of the closet and was seeking a gay relationship.

He took care to keep this sexual orientation secret from his congregation and the denomination. However, members of the

congregation were suspicious. Since they could not prove their suspicions, they began to make complaints about a variety of minor things such as how communion was served in an effort to drive him out of their congregation.

They succeeded and he was placed in another congregation by the district superintendent. But the rumors preceded him to the new congregation and the complaints resumed. The last I heard he had abandoned the idea of parish ministry and had become a prison chaplain.

In another case, a new elderly member of the East Lansing congregation shared with me this story. She and her husband had been life-long members of the United Church of Christ in the small town where they lived. The United Church of Christ has traditionally been a liberal church, but a new minister was called who was very conservative and spoke out against homosexuality. As the couple's son was gay, they no longer felt welcome in their own church, terminated their membership and joined our East Lansing Unitarian Universalist congregation. Tears ran down her face as she told me her story, adding that they still live in the small town and feel lonely because most of their friends remained active in their former church.

As I listened to the trials and tribulations of a gay minister in the United Methodist church and of a former member of the United Church of Christ, I felt rather smug as a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing. We were a Welcoming Congregation. We had a lesbian minister, a lesbian president, a lesbian music director and many lesbian members.

But even our congregation was not a safe place for GLBT people. A long time member, who may have been mentally ill, began secretly posting anti-lesbian cartoons to the church bulletin boards. The uproar that followed nearly cost the congregation its minister, music director and some lesbian members. I am pleased to tell you that the perpetrator was discovered, banned from the church for a year and has since been accepted back into the congregation with no further problems.

constitutional amendments or other legislative acts that are difficult to reverse.

As always, one of our best tools to decrease homophobia and increase the compassion, love and support for GLBT people is to serve as role models. Demonstrate by our actions that we are indeed a gentle loving accepting people.

We can begin by examining our congregation. According to the recent committee on the ministry survey, of the 155 responses, no one identified themselves as gay and 7% identified themselves as lesbians. We are a Welcoming Congregation, should that number be larger? Are there people out there who are seeking a faith community like ours who do not know about us?

Is our Welcoming Congregation program still functioning and fulfilling its original mission? If a GLBT person visits us do we make them feel welcome? What support system(s) do we have in place for GLBT people?

Finally, I leave you with this challenging question from this year's annual Unitarian Universalist Ministerial Association meeting. Would you hire a transgender minister for your congregation? Think about it. Your reaction and thoughts may surprise you.

May it be so.

In the 2008 General Assembly they will also address the issue of churches calling non-celibate gays to their ministry. That narrow yes vote by the committee doesn't engender much hope for the passage of any pro-gay statements in the General Assembly.

The Episcopalians are still fighting over the recent consecration of a gay bishop. The world-wide Anglican Communion is threatening to dissociate with the Episcopalians unless they promise to stop consecrating gay bishops. A special committee voted to issue another stronger apology for the consecration of Bishop Robinson of New Hampshire. But the Archbishop of Canterbury is calling for them to go further and agree to not consecrate more gay bishops and to not bless same-gender unions.

We find three traditionally liberal denominations in danger of retreating on the gains that they have made towards sexual orientation equality or, at best, failing to move forward.

On the national scene, with elections approaching in November, we see the same-gender marriage issue being used by politicians to get out the conservative vote.

During my internship in Park Forest, Illinois the local ministerial association noted that most of the main line Protestant churches in Park Forest were losing members and would be calling new ministers. And it was likely that the newly called ministers would not be as liberal as their predecessors.

It has been brought to my attention that the fastest growing churches in the Rockford area are the conservative churches. Churches that are not very likely to support GLBT issues.

GLBT people are in danger of losing the precious gains they have struggled to achieve over the last forty years.

Despite the gains GLBT people have made, there are many people actively working to undo those gains. If we are not vigilant, we may find that we are not working just to convince people to support GLBT equality, but we may find that we are stymied by

We Unitarian Universalists are rightfully proud of our collective acceptance of GLBT people. But that acceptance is neither universal within the Unitarian Universalist Association nor is it long standing.

So, it came as somewhat of a shock to me to learn that Unitarian Universalists haven't always been accepting of GLBT people. In fact, it's taken about forty years for GLBT people to gain their current level of acceptance in the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The Unitarian Universalist Association was created in 1961, forty-six years ago, by the merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. To find out about the beliefs and attitudes of this newly formed Association a survey was commissioned in 1965. The results were made available in 1967. The survey revealed that:

- 80.2% of Unitarian Universalists believed that homosexuality should be discouraged by education
- 7.7% believed that it should be discouraged by education or laws
- 12% believed that it should not be discouraged by laws or education but should not be encouraged
- .1% believed that it should be encouraged.

We began our Association with a very strong view that homosexuality should not be encouraged. Instead, it should be discouraged by law or education. Transgender and bisexual people were not even visible on our radar at that time.

Two years later, in 1969, the Rev. James L. Stoll publicly revealed that he was gay. He was the first Unitarian Universalist minister to do so.

The following year, 1970, the General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the end of discrimination against homosexuals and bisexuals.

In 1971 the Unitarian Universalist Gay Caucus was created to lobby for an Office of Gay and Lesbian Affairs. And the AYS

(About your Sexuality) curriculum was created to teach a more positive attitude towards all forms of sexuality.

So, it was about nine years after merger that the denomination began an effort to address the concerns and needs of homosexuals and bisexuals. For the next seven years, slowly but surely, the Association put together the funding for an Office of Gay Affairs and hired its first director, Arlie Scott.

During this period an adult RE curriculum was created about homosexuality called *The Invisible Minority*.

In 1977 the General Assembly passed a resolution urging Unitarian Universalists to fight negative propaganda against gays.

In 1979 the first openly gay Unitarian Universalist minister was called to serve All Souls Church in Augusta, ME. That same year, the first retreats and conferences were sponsored for gays and lesbians.

In 1980 the General Assembly passed a business resolution calling for Unitarian Universalists, the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association to assist in the settling of openly gay ministers. Despite the combined efforts, it was still difficult to settle a gay minister in 1980.

In 1984, the General Assembly passed another business resolution affirming the practice of Unitarian Universalist Association clergy performing Services of Union between same-gender couples and requested that the office of Ministerial and Congregational Services assist in providing publications and materials to assist in the process.

After 1986 the Unitarian Universalist Association and the General Assembly took a more activist attitude regarding sexual orientation and AIDS/HIV issues. In subsequent years multiple resolutions were passed or actions were taken in support of GLBT people.

In the following years, the Welcoming Congregation Workshop was created to combat internal Homophobia. Resolutions were passed and action taken in opposition to legalized discrimination against AIDS/HIV and GLBT people. And a resolution was passed in support of same-gender marriage.

In 1997 efforts began to educate congregations about transgender people and action was initiated to protect them from discrimination. For the first time they began to appear on the Unitarian Universalist Association radar.

In 2004 the Unitarian Universalist Association launched the President's Freedom to Marry Fund to provide nationwide public witness and social justice work in support of same-sex marriage.

Today, 500 Unitarian Universalist congregations are Welcoming Congregations. But we have 1078 congregations so less than 50% of them have involved themselves in the Welcoming Congregation program. I find this to be a disappointing statistic.

Recently the Presbyterians, Episcopalians and United Methodists met in their equivalent of our General Assembly or in preparatory meetings. All of them took up the issue of sexual orientation.

The liberal branch of the Presbyterian Church (The Presbyterian Church in the USA) elected a more conservative leader, Rev. Joan Gray, who stated that she wanted all people to be respected but she said she "can't get [her] mind" around the idea that homosexuality is part of God's plan. Her predecessor was in favor of the ordination of gays to the ministry. This may denote a conservative tilt within the denomination which subsequently voted against the ordination of gays at their 2006 General Assembly.

In preparation for their 2008 General Assembly, a United Methodist committee has approved placing the statement that "marriage is between 2 adults" on the General Assembly agenda. But the vote was 358 yes and 356 no. It was passed by only 2 votes.