

From LGB to LGBTQQIAA+:  
Helping Open and Affirming Churches  
Offer Extravagant Welcome!

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## **Abstract**

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Open and Affirming (ONA) Churches commit to offering extravagant welcome to all of God's people, specifically those who are LGBTQ+. Churches often go through an extensive discernment process before voting to become Open and Affirming, thus ensuring that they are ready as a community to make this commitment. After taking the vote, many churches neglect to stay informed about changes within the various LGBTQ+ communities as they relate to identity, vocabulary, and belonging. Churches thus unintentionally become obsolete in their welcome and are not able to fully embody their commitment to being Open and Affirming.

This paper explores the process by which churches can engage with LGBTQ+ members of their congregation and the wider community, thus learning directly from them what they need in a church to experience God's extravagant hospitality.

A local congregation was used as the context for this research, but the process can be replicated in any ONA church. The ways in which churches change their ministries to be more welcoming of LGBTQ+ people will vary depending upon the needs expressed by the LGBTQ+ people in their local church and wider community.

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Candler School of Theology, DMin, 2025

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## Introduction

The Open and Affirming Movement of the United Church of Christ was started in 1985. When a church votes to become Open and Affirming, it means that they are committed to welcoming all people, but specifically LGBTQ+ people, into the full life and ministry of the church. The first fifteen churches were certified Open and Affirming (ONA) in 1987. Over the past thirty-seven years, the social, religious, and political landscape surrounding LGBTQ+ issues has significantly changed. The United States military enacted its “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” policy, and that same policy was rescinded, allowing LGBTQ+ people to openly serve in the military. Marriage equality also became legal across the country. In addition to these legal changes, society’s attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people have changed. Not only do people overwhelmingly think that LGBTQ+ people should have the all the same rights and privileges of heterosexual people, but they also think it is morally acceptable to be LGBTQ+.<sup>1</sup> We have seen a sea change in Christianity, with mainline denominations including Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church adopting policies allowing LGBTQ+ people to serve as clergy and officiate same-sex weddings.<sup>2</sup> The categories, vocabulary and communities of LGBTQ+ people have evolved drastically, now including people who identify as gender queer, gender non-conforming, and non-binary. Suffice it to say, a lot has changed in the past thirty-seven years.

It is imperative for churches to see the Open and Affirming certification as a starting line, not a finish line. The vote is the beginning of a long-term commitment to continually offer

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<sup>1</sup> “Accelerating Acceptance 2023: A Survey of American Acceptance and Attitudes Toward LGBTQ Americans,” GLAAD, effective March 18, 2025, <https://glaad.org/publications/accelerating-acceptance-2023/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Affirming Denominations,” Gaychurch.org, effective March 18, 2025, <https://www.gaychurch.org/affirming-denominations/>.

extravagant welcome to LGBTQ+ people, including them in the full life and ministry of the congregation. This necessitates continually evaluating their ONA ministries, shoring them up where necessary, so that a church's ONA identity is not reflective of a fixed and receding moment in time, but is responsive to our society's ever-changing social landscape.

When I began this project, I believed that churches needed to engage in continuing education so that they could offer informed and educated hospitality to LGBTQ+ people who come through their doors. The UCC Open and Affirming Coalition oversees the ONA process for local churches in the United Church of Christ. They offer ample resources for churches that are discerning becoming ONA. They do not yet offer substantive resources for churches that have been ONA for five, ten, or fifteen years. Additionally, I had a conversation with Rev. Dr. Katrina Roseboro-Marsh, the Executive Director of the Coalition, and she confirmed that the Coalition has room for improvement in terms of offering continuing education resources to congregations. For these reasons and based upon my own anecdotal experiences with ONA churches, this paper started from the assumption that churches do not have the resources they need to engage in continuing education, thus preventing them from embodying their ONA commitments to the best of their abilities. The research question was: What continuing education resources do Open and Affirming UCC Churches need so they can continually offer informed and extravagant welcome to LGBTQ+ people?

Through the course of my research, I discovered that my hypothesis was misguided. The assumption that all churches need continuing education was incorrect. Staying true to one's ONA covenant looks different for each congregation, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, churches need to engage in a continual process of self-evaluation, thus allowing each church to identify its shortcomings or areas of improvement and opportunity. This process must begin by

receiving feedback from the LGBTQ+ members of the congregation. After listening to their perspectives, the church needs to pursue courses of action based upon what they hear from those stakeholders. The congregation may need continuing education, but it may not. The church should be responsive to the needs identified by the LGBTQ+ members of the congregation. As a result of my findings, the research question has become, what do the LGBTQ+ members within a local Open and Affirming congregation need so that they feel God's divine hospitality in their faith community? The evolution of the research question will be elaborated upon in the Evaluation and Assessment section of the paper.

This paper begins by reviewing the current literature in the fields of LGBTQ theology and hospitality. Then, it outlines and reviews the original research that was conducted. Using a local congregation as the context for the research, the process centered the voices of LGBTQ+ people and asked them what they wanted the church to know about them and their lived experiences. They were also asked what the church was doing well in terms of living out its ONA covenant, and how it could improve. This paper summarizes the programmatic initiatives that were organized in response to the data collected, and how the process helped the church strengthen its commitment to its ONA values. The context for this research was Naples United Church of Christ (Naples UCC), in Naples, Florida. The researcher was the Minister for Congregational Care at Naples UCC until December 2024, when she left the church for another ministerial position. Her role included pastoral care, as well as the church's justice, environment, and missions and outreach ministries.

Finally, the paper explores how this research could be expanded and impact more congregations. Ideally, the model of data collection and education can be used by other ONA churches as a means of staying faithful to their ONA covenants.

## The Value of LGBTQ-Affirming Churches: What's at Stake

The main foci of this paper are Christianity, LGBTQ+ people, and hospitality. Christianity offers a way for people to understand the world and their role in it.<sup>3</sup> Through Christianity, practitioners can come to know what is real, how they know what's real, and their place in the world.<sup>4</sup> For LGBTQ+ people, religion, Christianity or otherwise, can be a source of meaningful self-understanding or oppression.<sup>5</sup> This section will review the current literature about the Christian landscape as it relates to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people, and what is at stake for Christians who identify as LGBTQ+. I will also locate Naples United Church of Christ (Naples UCC) within its geographic and cultural Christian context and explore why it is imperative for Naples UCC to be intentionally welcoming of LGBTQ+ people.

According to a survey done by Barnes and Meyer, approximately 90% of survey respondents describe present-day Christianity in the United States as anti-homosexual.<sup>6</sup> Across the country, gays and lesbians in committed relationships are only allowed to be members in 37.4% of churches, they are only allowed to be leaders in 18.6% of churches and only 5.7% of churches have formal welcome statements. That number is even lower in the South where only 3.7% of churches have a welcome statement that specifically includes LGBTQ+ people.<sup>7</sup> This study was conducted over ten years ago, so the numbers have most likely trended up, especially

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<sup>3</sup> Jodi O'Brien. "Making Sense of Queer Christian Lives," *Interpreting Religion: Making Sense of Religious Lives*, 1st ed.: 21, <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781529211634.003>.

<sup>4</sup> O'Brien, "Making Sense of Queer Christian Lives," 21.

<sup>5</sup> O'Brien, "Making Sense of Queer Christian Lives," 19.

<sup>6</sup> E. McCann, G. Donohue, and F. Timmins. An Exploration of the Relationship Between Spirituality, Religion and Mental Health Among Youth Who Identify as LGBT+: A Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Religion and Health* Vol. 59, (February 2020): 838, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-00989-7>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, "Religious Organizations and Homosexuality: The Acceptance of Gays and Lesbians in American Congregations." *Review of Religious Research* Vol. 55, No. 2 (2013): 305, 308, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43186210>.

in light of the 2015 Obergefell vs. Hodges Supreme Court decision legalizing same sex marriage legal across the country. Churches, especially smaller ones and those in the South, are still overwhelmingly unwelcoming of LGBTQ+ people.

A person's LGBTQ+ identity can have a significant impact on their mental health, not because they are a sexual minority, but because of how they are treated due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. According to the 2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People conducted by The Trevor Project, 41% of LGBTQ+ young people seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, 14% of LGBTQ+ young people attempted suicide in the past year, and fewer than 40% of LGBTQ+ young people described their homes as LGBTQ-affirming.<sup>8</sup> Because of the political, social, and religious climate, many LGBTQ+ youth in the United States are struggling with mental health concerns, many going so far as to consider taking their own lives. The church, depending on its stance on LGBTQ+ matters, can exacerbate or mitigate these tragedies.

Religion has a role to play in shaping the values and norms of a community. Congregations consistently influence more Americans than any other voluntary social institution.<sup>9</sup> Historically, there have been two options for people who find themselves inhabiting the dual identities of queer and Christian. They could write off religion altogether and leave their faith, most likely sacrificing belonging and important relationships along the way, or they could stay in the faith

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<sup>8</sup> "2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People," The Trevor Project, accessed May 31, 2024, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/>.

<sup>9</sup> Whitehead, "Religious Organizations and Homosexuality: The Acceptance of Gays and Lesbians in American Congregations," 297.



and remain closeted while wearing a cloak of shame reinforced by the Christian narrative that homosexual acts are a sin.<sup>10</sup> This paper explores a third way.

Churches have the power to be places of love, affirmation, and belonging for LGBTQ+ people. In fact, a literature review done by Edward McCann, Gráinne Donohue, and Fiona Timmins found that 71.2% of studies report positive outcomes between religious or spiritual involvement and mental illness, including depression, substance use, and suicide, among the general population.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, when youth are part of affirming religious communities or are exposed to affirming religious beliefs, this has been shown to be a protective factor in counteracting harmful stressors among LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>12</sup> Maurice N. Gattis, Michael R. Woodford, and Yoonsun Han found that the harmful mental health impacts among LGBTQ+ youth affiliated with denominations that support same-sex marriage were significantly less than those among peers who were part of denominations that oppose same-sex marriage or who were secular.<sup>13</sup> In other words, young people who identified as LGBTQ+ and were part of an affirming denomination reported fewer depressive symptoms than their peers who were part of a denomination opposed to same-sex marriage as well as their peers who reported no religious affiliation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James Hudnut-Beumler, *Strangers and Friends at the Welcome Table: Contemporary Christianities in the American South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018): 223 and O'Brien, "Making Sense of Queer Christian Lives," 21.

<sup>11</sup> McCann et al, "An Exploration of the Relationship," 829.

<sup>12</sup> McCann et al, "An Exploration of the Relationship," 830.

<sup>13</sup> M.N. Gattis, M.R. Woodford, & Y. Han, "Discrimination and Depressive Symptoms Among Sexual Minority Youth: Is Gay-Affirming Religious Affiliation a Protective Factor?," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* Vol. 43, (August 2014): 1589. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0342-y>.

<sup>14</sup> Gattis, Woodford and Han, "Discrimination and Depressive Symptoms," 1595.

This evidence shows that churches have the power have a significant positive or harmful impact on the mental health and overall well-being of their LGBTQ+ members. These correlations are important, in part, because they impact so many people, 50% of LGBTQ+ people in the United States identify as Christian.<sup>15</sup> While more churches are unaffirming than affirming, several variables affect a church's likelihood to fully include LGBTQ+ people into its life and ministry. Congregations with a higher percentage of young people are more likely to be inclusive, congregations in the South are less likely to be inclusive, and congregations in urban areas are more likely to be inclusive.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Southern LGBTQ+ affirming churches tend to be small to midsize.<sup>17</sup>

Naples UCC, the locus for this study, is an affirming church which defies all the odds stated above. Its average age is 72 years old, so it skews older, it is in the South, and with approximately a thousand members, it is considered large among mainline Protestant churches. Naples UCC is in a unique position, culturally and geographically, to extend extravagant welcome to LGBTQ+ people in an area where they are unlikely to find many, if any, other affirming churches. We know that an affirming church can have a positive influence on the spirituality and mental health of LGBTQ+ people, especially youth.<sup>18</sup>

In an era in which so many LGBTQ+ youth struggle with mental health, and some consider or attempt to take their own lives, the stakes are very high for all churches, but especially ones that are in an otherwise arid desert of affirming churches. Naples UCC has the

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<sup>15</sup> Hudnut-Beumler, *Strangers and Friends at the Welcome Table*, 239.

<sup>16</sup> Whitehead, "Religious Organizations and Homosexuality: The Acceptance of Gays and Lesbians in American Congregations," 301-302.

<sup>17</sup> Hudnut-Beumler, *Strangers and Friends at the Welcome Table*, 227.

<sup>18</sup> McCann et al, "An Exploration of the Relationship," 842.

potential, and the responsibility, to care for the LGBTQ+ people of all ages in its congregation and its community. This care can not only help heal people, it can literally save lives.

### **What It Means To Be ‘Welcoming,’ and the Pitfalls of ‘Hospitality’**

There is a difference between simply asserting that all are welcome in a sacred space, and intentionally creating that space such that it responds to the specific needs of the people the congregation is trying to minister to. ‘Welcoming,’ and ‘friendly,’ are ostensibly two characteristics that most Christian congregations in the United States would use to describe themselves. While some religious traditions are not evangelistic, Christianity is, at its heart, a religion which engages in the ongoing work of encouraging people to be part of its ranks. This is one reason why churches strive to be intentionally welcoming of newcomers. However, there can sometimes be a disconnect between intent and outcome. This section of the literature review will summarize the recent research that has been done regarding churches and the effectiveness of their efforts to be welcoming and hospitable. More specifically, it will explore how churches welcome people who have historically been ostracized from the church. Finally, this section will conclude with a conversation about Naples United Church of Christ and its efforts to welcome LGBTQ+ people, and how the demographics of the congregation impact its ability to offer authentic extravagant welcome to LGBTQ+ people.

In order to feel welcomed in a church, one has to feel that they belong there, that there is a space in the life of the congregation that they specifically can occupy. In 1995, Baumeister and Leary’s research argued that this sense of belonging is a basic human need.<sup>19</sup> This belonging is

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<sup>19</sup> Juan Carlos Hughes and Steven V. Rouse. “Everyone Belongs Here: How Affirming and Non-Affirming Church Messages and Imagery Cause Different Feelings of Acceptance in LGBTQ+ Christians,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* Vol. 51, Issue 4 (July 2023): 523, DOI: 10.1177/00916471231185811.

defined as unconditional social acceptance which helps to sustain our biopsychosocial wellbeing.<sup>20</sup> In order to feel like they belong, one must feel loved, liked, and cared for. The impacts on one's mental health when they do not feel a sense of belonging can include stress, depression, and suicidality.<sup>21</sup> As noted earlier, LGBTQ+ people are at greater risk of experiencing these mental health concerns because many of them do not feel this sense of belonging anywhere in their lives.

Hughes and Rouse found in their study that it is not sufficient for LGBTQ+ Christians that churches use generic language about being welcoming. Because so many churches adhere to non-affirming theologies, it is important to LGBTQ+ people that churches are explicit in their extravagant welcome such as displaying a pride flag, publishing explicitly affirming welcome statements, using inclusive pronouns, participating in LGBTQ+ events in the community, and/or having LGBTQ+ representation in church leadership.<sup>22</sup> In her research of congregations within the United Church of Christ, Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi found that worship and sermons are the most formative church-related experiences for individuals, followed by service/mission opportunities, choir/hymn singing and Bible and other studies.<sup>23</sup> This is a salient reminder that local churches need to be explicitly welcoming to LGBTQ+ people through the Sunday morning experience, as this is the most important way for people to connect with a local congregation. Congregants may receive mixed messages if a church has LGBTQ+ mid-week programming, but they never hear about the importance of being Open and Affirming in Sunday morning liturgy or

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<sup>20</sup> Huges and Rouse, "Everyone Belongs Here," 523.

<sup>21</sup> Huges and Rouse, "Everyone Belongs Here," 524.

<sup>22</sup> Hughes and Rouse, "Everyone Belongs Here," 531.

<sup>23</sup> Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, "National Listening Campaign on Christian Faith Formation and Education." *Review of Religious Research* Vol. 54, No. 4 (December 2012): 555, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41940808>.

sermons. This hierarchy of engagement must be taken into consideration when churches are evaluating how they communicate and embody their Open and Affirming values.

Congregations which have voted to become Open and Affirming also run the risk of decoupling their commitment to being ONA from explicitly welcoming LGBTQ+ people. Scheitle, Merino, and Moore studied how churches' ONA identities can become diluted such that they place an equal emphasis on welcoming *all* people and thus their commitment to welcoming LGBTQ+ people becomes ineffectual.<sup>24</sup> They found that churches which voted to become ONA earlier had more explicit welcome of LGBTQ+ people than those which voted to become ONA more recently.<sup>25</sup> If a church is to truly be hospitable towards LGBTQ people, their ONA statements cannot merely be general nondiscrimination statements. They should serve as an explicit commitment to welcoming people of all gender identities and sexual orientations into the full life and ministry of the congregation, at all leadership levels.

Intentional and explicit welcome of LGBTQ+ people is important messaging for people looking for such a church, it is also a valuable reminder to the church of its primary reason for being ONA. Good intentions get lost over time, but if the words, "sexual orientation," and "gender identity," are in the welcome statement, the church is more likely to stay committed to its original intentions. Additionally, an explicit welcome statement is an acknowledgement by the church that they are willing to be changed as a community, as a result of having LGBTQ+ people in the congregation. The relationship is reciprocal. Dr. Gabrielle Thomas has done extensive research on Receptive Ecumenism and how different Christian traditions can be in

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher P. Scheitle, Stephen M. Merino, & Andrew Moore, "On the Varying Meaning of 'Open and Affirming'", *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 57, Issue 10 (2010), 1232, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2010.517064>.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher P. Scheitle, Stephen M. Merino, and Andrew Moore, "On the Varying Meaning of 'Open and Affirming,'" 1231.

mutual relationship with each other. Receptive Ecumenism maintains that churches have gifts to receive from other traditions, wounds that need healing which others can help heal.<sup>26</sup> It also requires repentance on the part of the participating churches, realizing that they are not reflecting the love of Christ as well as they could, thus asking themselves, how might another tradition's gifts help us heal?<sup>27</sup> For ONA churches, there is much repentance to be done regarding the fact that they have historically excluded LGBTQ+ people and that pain still lives in the hearts and bodies of those who were excluded. Following that admission, churches then need to ask themselves, what gifts, skills, and wisdom do LGBTQ+ people have to offer the life of our congregation precisely because of their sexual orientation or gender identity? What has God blessed them with, that by sharing with us, might help us more fully reflect the image of Christ in our midst?

This mutuality and reciprocity, giving and receiving of gifts, is a way for churches to ensure that they're being truly hospitable, creating a safe place of belonging or LGBTQ+ people, rather than merely entertaining guests in their midst.<sup>28</sup> Christine D. Pohl studied the importance of the social location of the host in creating a hospitable environment. She argues that hospitality should include "recognition, community, and the possibility of transcending social difference," and this requires hosts who are somehow on the margins of society's dominant norms, values, and structures.<sup>29</sup> This allows for mutuality such that strangers are not only in need of welcome, but the host understands the experience of being a welcome stranger as well.

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<sup>26</sup> Gabrielle Thomas, "A Call for Hospitality: Learning from a Particular Example of Women's Grass Roots Practice of Receptive Ecumenism in the U.K.," *Exchange: Journal of Contemporary Christianities in Context* 47 (2018): 336, doi:10.1163/1572543X-12341498.

<sup>27</sup> Gabrielle Thomas, "A Call for Hospitality," 337.

<sup>28</sup> Gabrielle Thomas, "A Call for Hospitality," 341-343.

In a way, everyone who is part of Naples United Church of Christ is on the margins of society. Naples UCC is a progressive church in an overwhelmingly conservative county, in a conservative state. The City Council Members, School Board Members, and County Commissioners are overwhelmingly Republican. While the church is politically diverse, the majority of people who are part of Naples UCC would describe themselves as socially progressive. Naples UCC has been defined as a blue island in a sea of red. Some members of the church drive from as far as forty-five minutes away because they want to be part of a church which reflects their values, and Naples UCC is the closest one. A significant number of its members hold values which run counter to those of the elected officials and those reflected in the media. The church's tagline is, "A Traditional Church for Progressive People," to a certain extent, it has identified itself as set apart from the prevailing social norms and values of its context. Again, this generalization does not reflect the entirety of the congregation, as there are conservatives within Naples UCC, but broadly speaking, the membership skews towards being progressive. Those people who feel like political outsiders in Collier County can draw upon their experiences of being on the margins, such that those feelings inform how they might be more effective in their welcome of LGBTQ+ people, who are also outsiders.

Open and Affirming churches have a responsibility to be explicit in their welcome of LGBTQ+ people. They need to make sure that welcome is reflected in their church life and programming, but more importantly, in the Sunday morning worship experience. This will help LGBTQ+ people feel that they are not only welcomed, but that they truly belong, that they matter, and they are loved and cared for. ONA churches also need to understand that hospitality

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<sup>29</sup> Christine D. Pohl, "Hospitality From the Edge: The Significance of Marginality in the Practice of Welcome," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 15 (1995): 124, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23559674>.

is a two-way street, with the guest and the host both having things to offer one another so that together, they work to build a more just and equitable world. This mutuality is more easily achieved when the host has also experienced marginality and can appreciate what it is to be a stranger in a strange land.<sup>30</sup> LGBTQ+ people need not be part of a local church because they are broken and the church can fix them, but because the historical exclusion of LGBTQ+ people has harmed the church as well, and through repentance, reconciliation, and mutuality, ONA churches can thrive, with LGBTQ+ people playing a critical role in their transformation.

In a traditional power dynamic, the guest assimilates into the host's environment, but French philosopher Jaques Derrida upends this hierarchy. Writing extensively on hospitality, he argues that the host is liberated by the guest, for whom they have anxiously waited. For both Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, the happiness of the host is dependent upon the guest and through their meeting, the host's home (or in this case, church), is transformed.<sup>31</sup> The church has been waiting for the arrival of LGBTQ+ people, working to make itself a place of hospitality. As a result of those efforts, it must allow itself to be changed by the arrival of the very people it has longed to welcome.

### **A Scriptural Defense of Hospitality and LGBTQ+ Inclusion**

As Christians, the locus of our faith is the Bible. Churches long to be welcoming of others because it is a biblical mandate. Many scriptures encourage Christians to welcome the foreigner among us, and welcome the stranger in a strange land.<sup>32</sup> Regrettably, Christians do not

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<sup>30</sup> Christine D. Pohl, "Hospitality from the Edge," 128.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida. "Hospitality," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* Vol. 5, Issue 3 (December 2000): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09697250020034706>.

<sup>32</sup> Genesis 23: 3-4 and Leviticus 19:34



follow the scriptures by exclusively showing love and hospitality to others. Christian individuals and denominations have weaponized certain scriptures to justify their disapproval and exclusion of various people groups throughout Christian history. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the exclusion of LGBTQ+ people. Naples UCC, as an Open and Affirming congregation, understands and interprets the biblical scriptures in such a way that they affirm all loving relationships between mutually consenting adults. However, this is not a forgone conclusion among most Christians. The majority of the Christian churches in the United States do not interpret the scriptures this way. In their defense of their exclusion of LGBTQ+ people from the full life and ministry of their congregations, clergy and members of unaffirming churches will often cite scripture or otherwise refer to the Bible as the justification for their exclusionary beliefs and practices. The insinuation is that affirming churches are willfully ignoring the will of God and what the scriptures say about homosexuality. In reality, much textual criticism has been done by biblical scholars which has resulted in multiple schools of interpretation coming to the conclusion that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality as we understand it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Because there is such a diversity of perspectives around what the scriptures say about homosexuality, this section of the paper serves to explain how the ONA movement reconciles its beliefs with the Christian scriptures. This explanation will summarize the scholarship of queer biblical interpretation, which is the interpretive lens through which the theology of the Open and Affirming movement was created.

Additionally, while the biblical interpretation of hospitality is less controversial than that of homosexuality, hospitality is a significant focus of this paper. And, this paper is written through the lens of Christianity, a religion made known to us through the Holy Bible. For these

two reasons, this section will explore what the scriptures have to teach the modern church about the theology of hospitality.

To interpret the Bible is to decide how one gives the text its power. Biblical literalists will argue that they do not interpret the Bible, they take it at face value. The Bible, written over thousands of years, translated into many languages, is layered with theological, political, historical, and cultural influences. Every sentence can be understood in different ways depending on the reader's language, values, priorities, and biases. There is no objective or neutral reading of the Bible.

Joshua H. Miller argues that there is no static or one 'true,' method for interpreting texts. Instead, readers must choose a particular method and lens for approaching scripture, and that decision impacts how the texts are interpreted and used to shape local church communities, justifying action and exclusion.<sup>33</sup> Every mode of biblical interpretation accepts certain assumptions about the Bible while rejecting others, and these assumptions often project the readers' own presumptions onto the text. Miller outlines three perspectives of biblical interpretation: dominant, moderate, and radical. In the case of dominant readers, this means reading the Bible through a literalist lens, in essence, they read the words of the text at face value.<sup>34</sup> Moderate interpreters find biblical passages which contextualize the meaning of other passages, and they rely on historical evidence for their interpretations. For example, historical evidence shows, "Leviticus condemns cult prostitution, not consensual same-sex relationships."<sup>35</sup> The prohibitions are a condemnation of sex for conquest and power, for the perverse pleasure of

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<sup>33</sup>Joshua H. Miller, "'Until Death Do We (Queers) Part': (Queer) Biblical Interpretation, (Invented) Truth, and Presumption in Controversies Concerning Biblical Characters' Sexualities," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* Vol. 4, No. 1 (2017): 44-45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/qed.4.1.0042>.

<sup>34</sup> Miller, "Until Death Do We (Queers) Part," 47.

<sup>35</sup> Miller, "Until Death Do We (Queers) Part," 48.

debasement of another man.<sup>36</sup> And as for contextual understanding, in his letter to the Galatians, instead of decreeing that God made male and female, the Apostle Paul's alternation of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, leads readers to believe that Paul is communicating that relationships no longer need to be opposite or for the purpose of procreation.<sup>37</sup> Radical interpreters proactively search the Bible for new passages and meanings that affirm queerness.<sup>38</sup> Through this lens, the stories of David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi are examples of same-sex romantic and erotic relationships.<sup>39</sup>

Dominant, moderate and radical methods of biblical interpretation all focus on plumbing the depths of specific biblical passages or stories. Elizabeth Edman reminds us that it is incumbent upon the reader to take a step back and look at the overarching narrative of the texts. She argues that Christian ethics, inherited from Judaism, is deeply informed by the awareness that the Christian community is a kind of family, and the dominant characteristic of this family is supposed to be love.<sup>40</sup> Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another," and Paul emphasized this deep commitment to each other in his first letter to the Corinthians stating that love, "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things."<sup>41</sup> The Bible can be used to heal or to harm. Individual passages which are not in accordance with the overarching narrative to love one another should not be cherry-picked and weaponized

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<sup>36</sup> Miller, "Until Death Do We (Queers) Part," 49.

<sup>37</sup> Miller, "Until Death Do We (Queers) Part," 49.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, "Until Death Do We (Queers) Part," 47.

<sup>39</sup> Miller, "Until Death Do We (Queers) Part," 51-52

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth M. Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know about Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity* (Beacon Press, 2016), 25.

<sup>41</sup> Edman, *Queer Virtue*, 25.

against others in the community. This literalist method of interpretation undermines the strength of the argument because it is inconsistent. It cannot be applied to every passage of the text, and therefore, when it is employed, it speaks not to the intent of the biblical authors, but to the bias of the interpreter.<sup>42</sup>

While these debates may seem esoteric, Kevin J. Burke reminds us that the ways in which Christians choose to interpret scripture have significant impacts on the lived experiences of people in the pews. He tells a story about a homily he heard given by a pastor who was asked to bury a deceased gay man by his brother. The brother said that the family had been unable to bury him in a Catholic cemetery, “The anger and anguish of the man on the altar were riveting, although his delivery was plaintive. How, he asked, can we treat each other like this? How can the church treat its gay children this way? It can’t if it is to continue.”<sup>43</sup> Many biblical scholars and lay Christians understand that the dominant modes of interpretation no longer serve the whole of the Christian family. The fields of apologetic interpretation, queer liberation theology, relational interpretation, and social constructionist interpretation all serve as methods of disrupting normative biblical understandings of sexuality, some aspects of each of these stands inform the theology of the Open and Affirming movement in the UCC.<sup>44</sup>

While we may be familiar with the text of 1 Corinthians 13 from hearing it read at weddings, Paul’s directive in his first letter to the Corinthians for us to love one another was not a call for Christians to engage in an overly sentimental kind of love. Instead, he implored the earliest Christians to do what the ONA movement is trying to do, to put love in practice in such a

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<sup>42</sup> Miller, “Until Death Do We (Queers) Part,” 54-55.

<sup>43</sup> Kevin J. Burke, *On Liking the Other: Queer Subjects and Religious Discourses* (Myers Education Press, 2022), 48.

<sup>44</sup> Miller, “Until Death Do We (Queers) Part,” 43.

way that it transgresses ethnic and cultural ties and extends to those throughout the world.<sup>45</sup> One way of living out this love is by practicing extravagant hospitality. Before going further, it is worth noting that hospitality can be relegated to only welcoming the ‘stranger,’ or the ‘least,’ but in fact this definition excludes all the ways in which churches welcome those in the wider community. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus primarily on how churches are called to welcome those they define as, ‘other,’ but that is not the only means by which churches can offer hospitality in their communities.<sup>46</sup>

The New Testament emphasizes offering welcome to, “the least.”<sup>47</sup> In Matthew 25: 31-46, Jesus personally identifies with the least, or the stranger. In Luke 14: 12-14, he told the hosts to offer hospitality to the marginalized, the poor, the injured, and the blind. The emphasis was on welcoming those who needed the most help and support, not those who were kin or could offer repayment.<sup>48</sup> In her work on biblical hospitality, Gabrielle Thomas argues that Jesus ministers in such a way that hospitality becomes a means, or an expression of holiness.<sup>49</sup> In his parables about the hemorrhaging woman and the Samaritan man, both in the Gospel of Luke, he teaches the hearer to go forth and show mercy to those outside their traditional social mores.<sup>50</sup> Repeatedly throughout his ministry, through his teachings and his actions, Jesus instructs his followers that it is an act of faith to offer hospitality to anyone in need, and it is an abomination to do otherwise. This is another example of why scriptural interpretation through the lens of the

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<sup>45</sup> Edman, *Queer Virtue*, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Gabrielle Thomas, “A Call for Hospitality,” 342-343.

<sup>47</sup> Christine D. Pohl, “Hospitality from the Edge,” 128.

<sup>48</sup> Christine D. Pohl, “Hospitality from the Edge,” 128.

<sup>49</sup> Gabrielle Thomas, “A Call for Hospitality,” 347.

<sup>50</sup> Gabrielle Thomas, “A Call for Hospitality,” 348.

overarching narrative is so important. Regardless of how isolated texts within the Bible may or may not be interpreted to condemn homosexual acts, Jesus never says anything about homosexuality, but he does tell us repeatedly to love one another. Scriptural interpreters would be well-served by viewing the text through this lens, the lens of love, and the myriad ways Jesus shows us how to do that.

### **Ministerial Innovation**

An important expression of Christ's love is to truly listen to one another with the aim of better understanding people's lived experiences and perspectives. The ministerial innovation of this paper consisted of engaging in a process of listening to LGBTQ+ people at Naples United Church of Christ through one-on-one interviews. Listening to another's pain requires us to accept the responsibility of responding to it. Therefore, after listening, the innovation continues with the evaluation and implementation of the wisdom offered by the LGBTQ+ people of Naples UCC. This section of the paper will review the data collected, what was learned from the data analysis, and how the data was used to craft a ministerial program at Naples UCC.

The research centered the voices of the LGBTQ+ people in the Naples UCC community, so that they could share firsthand what the church's ONA designation meant to them, including what the church is doing well in terms of living out that commitment, and how it can improve.<sup>51</sup> Some members of the church who are LGBTQ-adjacent asked if they could participate, for example, one couple has a grown child who is transgender, and they wanted to share their experiences. Their child does not live locally and will never attend the church aside from occasional visits. I told them that I would be glad to meet with them as their pastor to hear their

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<sup>51</sup> See Appendix for the questions used in the interviews.

story, but for the purposes of the research, the scope of participants was limited to those identify as LGBTQ+ and who attend our congregation. I serve a church of approximately one thousand people, had the participant pool been expanded to include everyone who has a loved one who is LGBTQ+, that could have been a significant percentage of the church and beyond the scope of this project.

I interviewed nineteen people, twelve men and seven women, ranging in age from 53-71 years old. Most interviews took place in my church office, while some were on Zoom. Most were one-on-one, although there were a few situations in which couples wanted to be interviewed together. The age range is representative of the congregation, as it has an average age of seventy-two years old. However, there are more women active in the life of the church than men, but when it comes to LGBTQ+ people, a majority of them are men, and this is reflected in the demographics of the participants. There are actually a few more gay men in the church who did not offer to participate, so if *all* the LGBTQ+ people had participated, perhaps the percentage of men would have been even higher. One of the questions asked in the interviews was, “Is there anything else NUCC can do, or is there anything you wish NUCC was doing, to be more extravagantly welcoming of LGBTQ+ people?” In response, a female participant said, “The church draws a lot of gay men, I don’t know how this happens, but not a lot of outwardly gay women. Now there may be gay women that I don’t know who are not out, but it doesn’t seem to draw a lot of women. What we have found here in Naples, we have [female] friends who don’t come to our church, but we wish they would.”<sup>52</sup> She was expressing a desire for the church to consider doing more outreach to LGBTQ+ women in the area or to at least consider why more LGBTQ+ women do not attend our church.

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with church member, June 2024.

The consensus from the participants was that they are overwhelmingly happy with how the church is living out its ONA values. There were some suggestions for programs or events the church could sponsor, but there was no great sense of dissatisfaction.<sup>53</sup> I realize that the participants were a self-selected group of people who are members of the church and if someone was unhappy, they might not be part of the church anymore or might not have any desire to be interviewed. One interesting theme that came up multiple times was the fact that LGBTQ+ people do not want Naples UCC to become a ‘gay church.’ They’re not interested in drawing too much attention to themselves, one person even said, “We’re coming to church for the same purpose as everyone else. No group needs to be singled out for anything... We don’t put on airs, we don’t wear [pride] stuff, we don’t want to draw attention to ourselves.”<sup>54</sup> Another respondent said, “NUCC doesn’t need to do anything else to welcome us. And people who are not LGBTQ+ might start to feel excluded. If there’s too much emphasis placed on it, it can backfire.”<sup>55</sup> One more respondent said, “Adults go there because it’s a traditional and affirming church, not because it’s a gay church.”<sup>56</sup> One participant was concerned that our Pride Sunday had low attendance because some church members did not want to attend such a worship service. He suggested calling it ‘ONA Sunday,’ instead because, “Pride is still represented by drag queens and flamboyant people.”<sup>57</sup>

What was concluded from all these sentiments was that the LGBTQ+ members want to be treated just like everyone else, they don’t want to stick out. They want their family respected

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<sup>53</sup> See Appendix B for specific suggestions offered by participants

<sup>54</sup> Interview with church member, June 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with church member, June 2024.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with church member, June 2024.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with church member, June 2024.



like any other family. They want to be cared for and loved like anyone else is. They don't want more of the airtime or more of the congregation's energy than any other group. That being said, some participants did express gratitude for the intentional ways the church embodies its ONA identity. A few participants mentioned an appreciation for the fact that we have an annual ONA or Pride Sunday in June. Another participant liked hearing about LGBTQ+ people in the sermons and in the prayers. Some also acknowledged the church's participation in Naples Pride Fest and want the church to continue that community ministry. Naples UCC has struck a good balance between being intentional and visible in its welcome without allowing its ONA designation to completely shape the church's culture and identity.

In the interview responses, I noticed a contradiction: participants do not want to stand out in the congregation, but they do want to be deeply understood. On the one hand, LGBTQ+ church members do not want to be the center of attention, but on the other hand, they do want the wider church to understand their lived experiences, to know that it can be challenging to be LGBTQ+. The participants want to be treated like other church members, they do not want targeted ministries or special treatment, but they do want their community to hear their struggles. In this way, the wider church will have a greater appreciation of their reality and how they navigate challenges and problems that someone else may never even conceive. They want heterosexual people to understand that while they have the same hopes and dreams as anyone else, that their reality is different. One participant summed up the contradiction by saying, "We are just a family like any other family. At the end of the day, we like strip mall Mexican like everyone else, but we are asking to be treated like everyone else because so often we are treated like we're different."<sup>58</sup> Churches walk a fine line between communicating to their communities

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with church member, June 2024.

that LGBTQ+ people just want the same things as everyone else while at the same time holding sacred space for them to share their painful stories of exclusion and discrimination. The problem is that by creating that sacred space, allowing for those stories to be shared, the church is drawing attention to LGBTQ+ people in a way that some LGBTQ+ people themselves might not be comfortable with.

One of the questions asked to participants was, on a one through ten scale, with one being, “I do not care if the church is ONA,” and 10 being “It’s a dealbreaker, I have to be part of a church that is ONA,” how important is it to you that the church you are part of is ONA? The median response was 9.5. It is clearly critically important to people that our church retains its ONA identity. In wrestling with how to reconcile people’s desire to blend in and be treated as ‘normal,’ as well as their desire to be truly known, and their commitment to our church’s ONA covenant, I came up with a strategy to meet each of these goals.

I determined that the best way to thread these different needles was by offering a presentation to the wider congregation about the research and offer a formal training about LGBTQ+ topics. The church Moderator asked me to give the presentation in March when the majority of the congregation will be in town (Naples UCC is a very seasonal church). The program was to include data, but also stories, anecdotes, testimonials taken directly from the interviews. All of the materials would have been shared anonymously with no identifying information. What I gleaned from the interviews is that our LGBTQ+ members want to be known and understood, to have their life experiences appreciated so people can understand why LGBTQ+ advocacy and ONA visibility matters. At the same time, they do not want to be the ones to share this information perhaps because they don’t want to make it about themselves as individuals, they don’t want the information to have a detrimental impact on their relationships

in the congregation, and for some, I suspect it would just be too hard to make themselves that vulnerable in front of the congregation. But if I shared the data anonymously, it would have met the needs of getting the information to the church, which the LGBTQ+ people want, without putting specific LGBTQ+ individuals in the spotlight in potentially uncomfortable ways.

Additionally, it was only one program. My hope was that this would make the congregation more understanding and empathetic towards LGBTQ+ people and their experiences without completely reshaping the church's ministries or culture or making LGBTQ+ concerns the sun around which the church revolves.

I also coordinated a Safe Zones training for our church about LGBTQ+ topics. This opportunity arose because one interview participant disclosed that he used to teach Safe Zones trainings in his workplace and would be glad to offer it at the church. Safe Zones is an educational program about LGBTQ+ people which encompasses symbols (e.g. various pride flags and gender symbols), and vocabulary, with the goal of creating a common language around LGBTQ+ topics. It is also a safe space for people to ask questions without fear of being judged or criticized. This program served the purpose of educating our congregation about very basic LGBTQ+ topics so that the congregation had a baseline education from which we could then be in dialogue with one another. I realized this would be a self-selected group of people, and it probably would not drastically shift the church's culture, but I thought it would be very beneficial for those who opted in. I have heard expressed desires for such a program from heterosexual congregants over the course of my ministry at Naples UCC. Some of these requests have specifically come from people who have loved ones who are LGBTQ+, as they want to be better supporters or allies of their family members. Requests have also come from other members of the congregation, which is not surprising. Our congregants like to learn, they like to

be informed, and they appreciate it when the church creates educational opportunities which are rooted in our faith. I created a context for the program such that it is our calling as a church to offer extravagant welcome to LGBTQ+ people, and one way of living that out is by having basic understanding of the different gender identities and sexual orientations.

After reviewing the interview data, it became clear that there was sense in which some participants wished we did not have to have an Open and Affirming designation. This continues the sentiment of wanting to be treated like everyone else, they do not want to have to have a category which singles out welcoming LGBTQ+ people. However, there was consensus that the ONA designation is still needed. One participant shared that they cannot just walk into any church in Naples holding hands, in fact, in most churches, they would probably get a lot of stares if they did that. Another person shared that she went to other churches, and people assumed her wife was her sister. She was so relieved when she came to Naples UCC and did not have to explain her relationship, people just got it. Another participant shared about how they went to another church locally and heard very homophobic sentiments preached in sermons and were very uncomfortable. So, until every person in every church just gets it, until LGBTQ+ people can feel comfortable walking into any church in Naples holding hands, until the reality of homophobic sermons is a distant memory from bygone years, the Open and Affirming designation is still needed. It is needed so that people who are LGBTQ+ who are looking for a church home, can rest assured that they will be welcomed into the full life, leadership, and ministry of Naples UCC regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Likewise, after having participated in the Naples Pride Fest for two years, it was important to the participants that the church continue its participation in that annual event. Even those who do not attend say they are very glad our church has a booth at the festival, so that

people who are looking for a church home know that NUCC is an affirming congregation. At a festival that often attracts over 10,000 people, NUCC is typically one of only a few churches represented. We have had people start attending the church because they saw our table at Pride Fest, so there is some evidence that our participation is serving its intended purpose. The church's participation in Naples Pride Fest was initiated by the church's Justice Committee. They are planning to participate again in June of 2025, and I believe they have every intention of being part of Naples Pride Fest for the foreseeable future.

Our church also has a Pride or Open and Affirming Sunday each June. Multiple participants shared how important this service is to them, one person even suggested that it incorporate more testimonials from LGBTQ+ people. I spoke with our church's Senior Minister, and we are committed to continuing our annual Open and Affirming worship service.

One other ministry idea that surfaced multiple times was the idea of organizing a LGBTQ+ social group. One participant suggested a monthly support group or get together, while someone else suggested a monthly diversity or ally club.<sup>59</sup> The ideas of brunch after church or a mid-week social hour were raised. I encouraged participants who raised the idea to pursue it, and that I would be glad to help support and promote any LGBTQ+ groups or outings that they wanted to initiate. As of writing, there has been no progress on this idea, but it remains something a church member might spearhead in the future.

While other ministry ideas were suggested by participants, the themes mentioned here are those that emerged from multiple interviews.<sup>60</sup> My ministry innovations were the Safe Zones training, as well as educating the broader congregation about the information I learned

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with church member, June 2024.

<sup>60</sup> See Appendix B for other suggestions.

throughout this process. I hoped these events would serve the purpose of raising awareness and understanding of LGBTQ+ people without drawing attention to any specific person.

### **Evaluation and Assessment**

The ministry innovations were a result of the interviews I conducted. This section of the paper will review the research question I started with, how it evolved through the course of the interviews, as well as the effectiveness of the ministerial innovations.

The research question I started with is: What continuing education resources do Open and Affirming UCC Churches need so they can continually offer informed and extravagant welcome to LGBTQ+ people? Through the process of conducting my research I found that my research question was biased. I incorrectly assumed that all Open and Affirming Churches specifically needed continuing education resources. What I discovered through the interviews was that congregations do not exclusively need continuing education; they primarily need whatever the LGBTQ+ people in their church are asking for. If they do not have any LGBTQ+ people in the congregation, that warrants having a conversation with a community partner such as a local pride center. I had a vision of creating a curriculum for ONA churches to engage with, so they could stay current about LGBTQ+ vocabulary and identities. The research showed that churches do not need a one-size-fits-all model and that the ONA identity looks different in each local congregation. This identity is shaped by the members of the congregation, their backgrounds, the LGBTQ+ people in the congregation, their needs, as well as the social context in which the church is located. Naples UCC is in a conservative area and while it does have LGBTQ+ members, these members often represent a more traditional family model, two married adults living together. Most of the LGBTQ+ members are of a generation in which the identities of

lesbian and gay are sufficient, with some curiosity around gender identity. They are not asking for a broad understanding of bisexual or queer identities.

As a result of the church's makeup, the LGBTQ+ people who participated in the interviews were not clamoring for more education for the church members, they were, however, hoping to be more deeply understood. They wanted the congregation to understand that their lived experiences are not the same as people who are heterosexual. They have had frightening experiences in Naples. They have had to negotiate how much to disclose about their identity both in their personal and professional lives. Being LGBTQ+ involves a lifetime of calculated decisions which people have to make as a matter of self-protection. Those decisions differ based on a person's family of origin, the religion of their upbringing, where they were raised, who their partner(s) are/were, their career choices, and many other variables. This type of strategic decision-making is one that heterosexual people do not have to navigate, but the participants wanted the broader congregation to understand this reality.

This desire to be known is why I planned the all-church presentation. I planned to share with the church many of their (anonymized) stories, so we could know, and therefore love each other better. In the middle of my project, my plans changed as I took a new call to be the Senior Minister of Pass-a-Grille Beach, Community Church, United Church of Christ, in Pass-a-Grille Beach, Florida. Because of this change, I was unable to share my project with the whole congregation of Naples UCC. I did, however, do a modified version of my presentation to the Church Council on December 7, 2024. The Church Council consists of about twenty members of church leadership. At that meeting, I gave an hour-long presentation of my research findings, and then asked people to participate in an activity. Since the LGBTQ+ people told me they wanted to be seen, and to be more fully known, I realized that creating a culture of hospitality at a church

means creating a place in which people feel known and seen, and loved, as they are. This applies to everyone, not just LGBTQ+ people. The Council members paired up and took turns speaking for five minutes about a hard decision they had to make in their lives. I have found that it is easy for us to share our joys, but when it comes to our concerns or sorrows, that is when many people feel deeply uncomfortable. Yet, in order to fully know one another, we must know both, what brings us joy, and what brings us fear. The workshop during the Council Meeting was intended to help the church leaders become more comfortable sharing their stories, so that they facilitate such honesty and vulnerability in the spaces in the church that they engage with, then slowly, one person at a time, the church culture can begin to shift.

In the interviews, participants shared what brought them joy about the church and where the church could do better. It was this second question which precipitated people sharing their fears, along with the struggles they encountered in the past. To be Open and Affirming is to be welcoming of *all* people, and that means creating a community in which everyone feels comfortable sharing of themselves, and it was my hope that this Church Council exercise would help the church leaders understand the importance of knowing and being known, and internalize why it is important for our church to be a safe place for people to express themselves.

The presentation at the meeting was well-received. Several people personally thanked me for doing the research and for helping them better understand our LGBTQ+ community. Two people asked me to do the presentation for the committees they chair before I left the church. Because time was so short, I was unable to do this, but it was significant that they asked. It showed that they saw value in the research and wanted it shared beyond the Church Council. In lieu of doing the presentation again, I shared my notes, the PowerPoint slides, and the Zoom recording of the presentation with the committee chairs. I encouraged them to use that information to share my



findings with their committees. I also reminded the whole Council that my thesis defense will be live-streamed. They are planning to organize a gathering at the church so people can watch it together and debrief it afterwards with the Senior Minister. In light of my departure, the church leadership are doing their best to incorporate my findings into the church culture and decision-making, for which I am grateful.

Several members of the Church Council commented that they appreciated the exercise I did wherein I asked people to share a hard decision they have had to make in their lives. The community of Naples is known for its wealth and keeping up appearances, this quickly becomes an exhausting endeavor for anyone who tries to keep up. By creating a culture of honesty and vulnerability, Naples UCC can be an antidote to the values espoused in the surrounding community. In so doing, it will become a safer place for all people, especially those who are LGBTQ+.

In the literature review, I argued that the church has been waiting for the arrival of LGBTQ+ people, working to make itself a hospitable community. As a part of those efforts, it must allow itself to be changed by the arrival of the very people it has longed to welcome. I believe the desire of our LGBTQ+ members to be seen and known was an invitation to all of us to be more present to one another, to be better listeners when we share, and to be more willing to share of ourselves. The exercise at the Church Council meeting was one opportunity for people to offer this hospitality for one another, sharing and listening, offering and holding sacred stories. The presence and participation of LGBTQ+ people in our midst is a gift and has created an opportunity for all of us to be more authentically ourselves within the Naples UCC community.

The Safe Zones training was held on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024, and approximately twenty people attended the afternoon session from 1pm-3pm. There were technical difficulties with the Zoom,

so some people who wanted to join remotely were unable to. We did make the PowerPoint presentation available to those who could not join the session remotely. Aside from myself, all attendees were fifty years old or older. Several couples attended along with some people who came alone. There was racial diversity in the group as well. The participants were engaged and asked substantive questions, it was clear that they were eager to really understand the information. The facilitator lectured minimally, and invited questions throughout the presentation. There were also a few activities which involved group participation. There were no hostilities or tensions within the group, that I could sense. The event was publicized in the church email newsletter and Sunday bulletin, and I did not receive any pushback about our hosting of the event. If there were any people who disapproved of our hosting a Safe Zones training, they did not express that to myself, the facilitator, or our Senior Minister.

After analyzing the data from the interviews and implementing the ministerial innovations, I found that my research question was incorrect. It should not have been, what continuing education resources do Open and Affirming UCC Churches need so they can continually offer informed and extravagant welcome to LGBTQ+ people? This presupposes that churches need continuing education, and that's not necessarily true for every congregation. Instead, the research question should have been, what do the LGBTQ+ members within a local Open and Affirming congregation need so that they feel God's divine hospitality in their faith community? The answer for Naples United Church of Christ is that the members need the congregation to understand and empathize with the life challenges they have faced as a result of being LGBTQ+. I believe that the Safe Zones training and the Church Council session began the work of broadening the congregation's understanding of their lived experiences, but there is more work yet to be done which will be explored in the following section.

## Conclusion

I am thankful for the participants who helped me realize that every Open and Affirming church has a different culture of belonging, and each congregation differs in terms of what it needs to do to stay faithful to its ONA covenant. The ministerial innovations (the Safe Zones training and the Church Council presentation) emerged as actions that I could take to help NUCC express and embody its ONA commitments. I found that the church is very amenable to more fully embodying its commitment to welcoming LGBTQ+ people.

While this research helped me begin to uncover the needs of LGBTQ+ people in the congregation, there are more opportunities for evaluation and improvement. If this research were to be continued, I would interview LGBTQ-adjacent people within the congregation. For example, one couple told me that their child is transgender, and that's a large part of the reason they are part of our congregation. I would like to interview people who have LGBTQ+ family members, and hear from them what they think the church is doing well in terms of living out its ONA commitments, and how it can do better. I would also survey the whole congregation, asking them what it means to them that the church is Open and Affirming, and how well they think the church is living into its covenantal commitment. This might also elicit responses from people who do not feel favorably towards our being ONA, which could open avenues for dialogue and greater understanding among people with diverse perspectives. This would be another opportunity for us to model what it means to be honest and vulnerable with each other, respectfully sharing different opinions, which, offered in the right context would hopefully facilitate deeper understanding and empathy across the congregation.

I would also like to interview people in the wider community who are LGBTQ+ who are not part of our congregation. This would be a difficult population to reach, but it would be

helpful to know if they are part of another congregation, and how it meets their spiritual needs. If they are not part of another congregation, why? Is there something they are looking for which they have not found? What are their spiritual needs, and where is the gap between what we have to offer, and what they need? The Naples Pride Center is a resource in the community which might help me connect with LGBTQ+ people who are not part of the church. The Naples Pride Center could also be invited to offer educational programming at Naples UCC for the church community. The topics for their programs could come from the all-church survey results.

As stated in the literature review, LGBTQ+ people have shared that it is important for them to feel a sense of intentional welcome in the worship service and, more specifically, the sermon. An additional area of evaluation and improvement could be the worship service. One could study the Naples UCC worship services over the course of the last one to three years, how many of them included mentioning LGBTQ+ people in the liturgy or the sermon? How could those who plan worship have a more intentional focus on extravagant hospitality as they prepare the Sunday services? Naples UCC records its worship services each week, so the data is available to conduct this historical research.

Lastly, if I were to continue this research, I would like to partner with the Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ. This is the governing body which maintains the list of all ONA churches and offers resources for churches that are going through the discernment process. I would write up the process for soliciting and implementing feedback from the congregation and make it available to other ONA churches as a resource. I could also make myself available as a consultant if local churches wanted to work with me to explore how to better embody their ONA values, how to identify community organizations and partners, and how to help spread the word about their extravagant welcome. Embedded within all of these

resources would be the foundational value that our goal is to offer God's divine hospitality to all people, which means our willingness to be changed for the better by LGBTQ+ people who become part of our local congregation.

To be Open and Affirming is to commit to welcoming all people into the full life and ministry of the congregation, specifically those who are LGBTQ+. The reason for this designation is because LGBTQ+ people have historically been denied the opportunity to fully participate in the life of the local church without hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity. The goal of the ONA movement is that eventually the day will come when the designation is not needed anymore because all churches welcome all people into the life and ministry of the congregation regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Until that day arrives, it is imperative that ONA churches continually engage in processes of self-evaluation and improvement, centering the voices, opinions and perspectives of LGBTQ+ people with their congregation and the wider community.

I am thankful to the people of Naples UCC for their willingness to participate in this research, especially the LGBTQ+ people who I interviewed. I am thankful to the leadership who want to use these findings to be more extravagantly welcoming, and I am grateful for everyone at Naples UCC who believes in the church's commitment to being ONA. It is my hope that this project served as an example for other ONA churches, showing them that the process of evaluation and improvement is not daunting. In fact, it is manageable, and necessary, if we are to truly offer Christ's divine hospitality to all people. This is our Christian calling, may we accept the responsibility, because lives depend on it.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Final Project Interview Questionnaire**

Date:

Participant(s):

**Question 1: What brought you to Naples UCC?**

**Question 2: When you hear the words, “Open and Affirming,” what does that mean to you?**

**Question 3: On a Scale of 1-10, 1 being, “doesn’t matter at all,” and 10 being “I would not go to a church that was not ONA,” how important is it to you that the church you’re a part of be ONA?**

**Question 4: Can you mention any ways that you feel specifically welcomed or included at NUCC?**

**Question 5: Is there anything else NUCC can do, or is there anything you wish NUCC was doing, to be more extravagantly welcoming of LGBTQ people?**

**Question 6: Do you think there’s any education that our church members need to help them be more welcoming of LGBTQ people?**

**Other:**



## Appendix B

Some suggestions from the interviews:

- Hosting a table after church at fellowship time for LGBTQ+ people and their allies, it would also educate newcomers about the church's ONA ministry.
- Flying a rainbow flag or painting a rainbow on the church sign. This suggestion stemmed from the concern that while our church has a sign that says, "Open and Affirming," people might not know what that means.
- As it relates to Naples UCC's robust music ministry, the church choir could participate in Naples Pride, or the church could start a gay men's chorus.
- Organizing monthly gatherings for LGBTQ+ people and allies
- Reaching out to the local university, Florida Gulf Coast University, in case there are college students looking for an affirming church home.