

**Becoming a “Welcoming Congregation”
A sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss**

October 1, 2000

By most counts, I would say that that the Unitarian Universalist Church of Cheyenne is a welcoming congregation. In the broadest sense of the term, I believe we do our best to welcome everyone who walks through our doors. Unlike most churches, we welcome and are enriched by people with a full range of theological beliefs and philosophical bents. And we delight in welcoming folks who are most comfortable dressing for church in a variety of ways. We are much more concerned that each person be comfortable than that they think or look like their neighbor.

It is both my belief and my expectation that each one of you here this morning will feel welcomed as you are. It does not matter what your ethnicity is, how much money you make, what your educational background is, or whether or not you need physical assistance to get around. And we welcome you if you are on a particular diet or if you need to take certain vitamins or medications in order to maintain either your physical or mental well-being.

I feel confident that most of us feel enriched by the diversity that exists in this congregation. When we encounter someone with different life experiences, our first reaction is to be curious rather than to feel threatened. Most of us have had enough experience with diversity to know that we will benefit from the new perspectives that can only be shared by someone whose experience of life is different from our own.

I know that this expectation is true in relation to the varied theological perspectives one encounters in this congregation. And I think it applies to other differences as well, including the differences in sexual orientation found among our heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender members.

If my analysis is correct, then you might well wonder why the title of this sermon is on “Becoming a ‘Welcoming Congregation’”. Well, let me tell you. The Welcoming Congregation Program had its beginnings when, in 1988 the Unitarian Universalist Association Board of Trustees formed the Common Vision Planning Committee to create a program for congregations interested in becoming more inclusive of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender population who so often experienced being unwelcome in most church’s congregational life. The following year, delegates at our annual UUA General Assembly adopted a series of Commitments to inclusiveness and Actions for achieving those commitments that became the core of the Association’s Welcoming Congregation program.

Congregations are invited by the Welcoming Congregation Program to study and incorporate those commitments and actions into their congregational life. And when they have done so, and by

their own vote have declared their commitment to continue to be welcoming to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender population, they can then apply for recognition by the UUA as a Welcoming Congregation.

Many congregations within the UUA have pursued this recognition. And I think it is likely that in each one that has, the question has been raised, “Why a welcoming program specifically aimed at gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender folk? Don’t we want to be equally welcoming to everyone?”

The answer is that of course we do want to welcome everyone who agrees with our principles and who is open to our approach to encouraging spiritual growth. And there are numerous reasons why we need a program designed to speak to the needs of the GLBT folks among us.

A prime reason for a welcoming congregation program is that there is no other group in our society that is still subject to the amount of legal discrimination that is perpetuated against members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community. Our principles and purposes call us to attend to the prophetic words and deeds of women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. But attending to prophetic words and deeds is not as easy as it might seem.

Oh, it’s easy enough to celebrate the prophetic heroes and heroines of the past. We can praise Thomas Jefferson for his championing the cause of religious freedom without realizing that he was vilified for it at the time by many of his fellow citizens. Or we can look with pride to other Unitarians or Universalists, like Benjamin Rush who pioneered modern psychiatry, or Horace Mann with his emphasis on public education, or Theodore Parker whose stance for abolition was so strong that at times he carried a gun into the pulpit to protect the runaway slaves in his congregation, or Dorothea Dix who wore herself out advocating for humane hospitals for the mentally ill, or Clara Barton who fought to establish the American Red Cross, or Susan B Anthony who worked most of her adult life to secure the right of women to vote, or Wyoming’s own James Reeb who literally gave his life in the civil rights struggle of the 60s. We celebrate these prophetic folks from our past with ease without ever coming to grips with the fact that at the time, what made them so prophetic is that they were advocating for causes that were not accepted by their peers as being the just and sensible ways to behave which we now understand them to be.

If it seems odd to you that Unitarian Universalists can claim so large a percentage of the reformers of the last two centuries even though we make up a relatively small percentage of the population, all you really need to do is to think about the source of most of the support for the way things were. Whether one was defending the divine right of kings, or insisting that the mentally ill were possessed by the devil, or arguing that the woman’s place was in the home not anywhere near a ballot box, or defending the Biblical basis for slavery, or its modern equivalent, the Biblical case in favor of racial segregation, the status quo has almost always been defended on religious grounds.

Since Unitarian Universalists have had more permission than most to think outside of the traditional religious box, it is not surprising that we have been among the first to advocate for most of the causes that have increased the amount of justice, equity, and compassion which is actually practiced in human relations in this country.

It should not surprise you that the same has been true with respect to societies treatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folks. As early as 1970, just a year after the Stonewall riot in New York, the UUA's General Assembly passed a General Resolution to end discrimination against homosexuals and bisexuals, especially with regard to ending legal regulations against private consensual behavior among adults, discrimination in employment, granting of visas, security clearances, and citizenship. The resolution also called for congregations to develop sex education programs that promote healthy attitudes toward all forms of sexuality.

In 1971 we published *About Your Sexuality*, a curriculum for youth that promoted healthy attitudes towards all forms of sexuality. In '72 the award winning "The Invisible Minority" was published to give adults a forum for beginning to understand gay issues and by '73 the General Assembly was voting to establish a special office within the UUA to deal with gay concerns.

There had been openly gay ministers within Unitarian Universalism for some time, and by 1980 the UUA recognized the need to develop a program to assist with their settlement in congregations. In 1984 the General Assembly went on record as affirming the practice of Unitarian Universalist clergy who were performing services of holy union between same sex couples and requested that the Department of Ministerial and Congregational services develop and distribute supporting resources and materials. And the list of resolutions and UUA actions goes on ... including the development of the Welcoming Congregation Program, and the revised version, which was just published last year.

To some folks, this may sound like there's been a fair amount of "top down" activity on this issue until one realizes that General Assemblies are made up of delegates elected by congregations. It has certainly been true that our association of congregations has been taking prophetic stances with respect to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues for a number of years. This is true, I think, because once exposed to accurate information about sexual orientation, it is very difficult to keep from being passionately prophetic with respect to the injustices still promulgated within our society.

More than anything else, I think the "let's not talk about it" attitude towards all things sexual has delayed the implementation of welcoming congregation programs in some of our congregations. Many of us still suffer from an illusion incorporated when we were very young that almost anything, including tolerating injustices perpetuated upon our friends and neighbors, is better than having to talk

about sex.

In actual matter of fact, participating in a Welcoming Congregation Program involves very little talk about sex. If you are one of those folks who is looking forward to a forum in which to discuss sex, I would recommend that you let the adult education committee know that you would really like them to offer the adult section of the new Our Whole Lives sexuality curriculum sometime soon. OWL is a much better format in which to pursue a deeper understanding of our sexuality.

In the Welcoming Congregation Program what we do deal with are our feelings about the issue of sexual orientation. Believe me, that is work enough. No one I have met, including those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender, ... no one has grown up in this society without incorporating a certain amount of homophobia. Indeed, one of the reasons the suicide rate is so high among gay and lesbian youth is that too many youth have grown up hating everything associated with gayness so much that when they finally acknowledge to themselves that they are gay and know that they can't change that fact, they literally can't stand the idea of continuing to live as someone for whom they feel that much disgust and loathing.

What we learn in the Welcoming Congregation Program is the importance of affirming everyone's right to be who they are and that there are communities which are dedicated to dealing with their incorporated homophobia so that the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender members of the congregation will never have to deal with the brunt of prejudice alone.

We are making progress. Members of this congregation, as part of the larger journey towards wholeness program have decided to initiate the formal Welcoming Congregation Program so that we can seek certification as an official Welcoming Congregation. And we are making progress as a society. Increasingly, I see powerfully written newspaper articles and editorials supporting the rights of our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender brothers and sisters.

And we have a long way to go. I was disappointed to see the article about our local United Way continuing to support the Boy Scouts despite the group's decision to ban gay leaders. It was not the decision that disappointed me so much as the report from United Way that "All the calls we've gotten are 'We want you to continue to fund Boy Scouts.'" I guess I experienced it as a call to conscience as the UUA has been feuding with the Boy Scouts for years over this issue and I had not taken the time to register my views on the local level despite having strong feelings about it as a former scout.

But then my spirits were lifted by the excellent article in the Casper Star – Tribune last week.

Frank Edward Allen, wrote about why he and his son had returned their Eagle Scout badges. He noted that while the Supreme Court of the United States had upheld the right of the Boy Scouts of America to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, there is a big difference between a legal right and a moral imperative. The Supreme Court protects the legal right of free speech for the Ku Klux Klan, but such protection does not constitute moral approval of the KKK's hateful discrimination against Catholics, Jews, and Blacks.

Allen writes, "For almost a century, the Scout Law has inspired American boys and young men to develop good moral character. The Scout Law declares that all Boy Scouts should be Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent. But how does discrimination against boys and men who are gay uphold the Scout Law? What is loyal or helpful or friendly or courteous or kind or brave about prejudice? How does the teaching of discrimination and prejudice to boys and young men help them become trustworthy? How does it help them develop a sense of fairness and justice?"

"Finally, how does the practice of discrimination and prejudice show reverence? Aren't all children God's children? Didn't Jesus teach that we should love and respect our neighbors and treat them as we would want to be treated?"

Allen makes one other point in his article that is worth sharing. He notes that his son Zack, the third generation in Allen's family to earn the rank of Eagle, surrendered his Eagle Scout Award too. Zack has all the characteristics that are valued in scouting, except that he happens to be gay. From knowing his son, Allen has come to understand that being gay is not a "choice" or a "preference" or a "lifestyle." Being gay is an orientation. Like being left brained or right brained, right handed, or left handed, being gay or straight is a fundamental part of a human being's natural makeup.

Allen is convinced, as am I, that it is ridiculous to say that one person's natural makeup is more moral than another's. Morality is not concerned with who we are, but with how we treat one another and it is how we treat one another that is the subject of the Welcoming Congregation Program.

I encourage you to take advantage of workshops that will be offered as part of the Welcoming Congregation Program this spring. Having been an active participant in the Winchester, Massachusetts congregation's program for over three years, while I was serving as one of that congregation's ministers, I know how enriching it can be. I can almost promise that you will get out of the program even more than you put into it.

There is one other thing I want to do this morning as we close the service. I want to pass out some rainbow colored ribbons which you can wear today, and on Solidarity Sunday which happens to be October 8th, and/or whenever. They are pretty ribbons and I can imagine someone wanting to wear one just because you like the color, but if you want to put it on, I hope you will also take the Solidarity Pledge which is printed on the back of the card. It reads:

I pledge:

1. I will work for civil and human rights for all people, including gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders. **Civil rights are not special rights.**
2. I will seek to stop jokes and unkind language about anyone, including gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders when spoken in my presence. **Words that hurt and bigotry are not funny.**
3. I will speak out against any slander, debasement, lies, or dehumanization of anyone, including gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders, including when spoken by political or religious leaders. **Violent speech leads to physical violence.**
4. I will work to stop physical violence against anyone, including violence against gays, lesbians, bisexuals or transgenders. **Violence against any person is violence against all people.**

If you are in agreement with that pledge, then feel free to take and wear a ribbon.

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