

Keynote
Southwest Conference Annual Meeting
March 29, 2014
Phoenix, AZ

I want to begin by how proud I am to be part of this Annual Meeting. Since 1994, when the Coalition certified United Church of Santa Fe as Open and Affirming congregation #149, you've grown from one to 27 congregations—the highest percentage of ONA churches in any Conference of the United Church of Christ. Last year, the Coalition certified four new ONA churches from this conference. Over the years, ONA congregations like Rebel & Divine UCC have led the way in innovative ministries that are having an impact on the wider Open and Affirming movement in the UCC. All eyes were on New Mexico last year when ONA churches stood with their LGBT neighbors and witnessed for the dignity and moral value of our marriages. And the LGBT community is proud of ONA churches in Arizona, when you stood up as Christians against a bill that would have enshrined discrimination in the name of "religious freedom."

You are part of the largest and fastest-growing LGBT-affirming-church movement in the world: more than 1,100 congregations, and

growing fast. But this is not just about numbers. You are making a difference in the lives of countless lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians and their families. Whether you realize it or not, you are saving lives. So I'm proud and honored to be your guest today.

So why are we on this journey together? This may seem like an odd question to ask at a meeting like this. This is one of 17 Open and Affirming Conferences in the United Church of Christ. Thanks to many of you in this hall, barriers to the full participation of LGBT citizens in public life have already fallen in New Mexico, and they will fall in Arizona. One federal district court after another is ruling that state laws banning equal marriage are nullified by the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. Whether or not the Supreme Court affirms these rulings, the trajectory is clear: the era when the nation's laws—or the laws of any state—could be used to demonize and segregate the LGBT community is drawing to a close.

The country is changing. So it's understandable if some Open and Affirming congregations feel that we've reached the promised land. But that's not quite true, and I suspect I would not be here, and

we would not be having this conversation, if we didn't realize that the work of the Open and Affirming movement in the United Church of Christ is far from finished.

Now, the theme of this keynote is "Coming Out." And I'm going to share with you three coming out stories. The first is probably the most difficult: until about 15 years ago I was a marriage equality skeptic. It's true! In those days, not so long ago, many of us thought the right to marry was a utopian dream: a "maximalist" goal—that's a fancy way of saying "too much, too soon." The Human Rights Campaign, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and just about everybody else who counted believed that the definition of marriage as a relationship between a woman and man was so deeply embedded in our culture it would be a generation, at least, before we could even begin a conversation on the subject. Our goal was "civil unions," and in the church, "holy unions" and "commitment ceremonies." Give us most, or some of the rights and responsibilities of heterosexual marriage, we said, and that will be progress.

That's what I believed in 1998 when I said this in a paper defending the dignity of same-sex relationships:

It seems clear to me that the Jewish and Christian traditions set heterosexual marriage apart from all other covenants. We have to ask whether the conflation of marriage with other relationships can obscure the priority of heterosexual marriage in God's creative design and the Bible's orientation towards the marriage of man and woman as an analogy of God's passionate and faithful love for creation. And although I intend to argue that the church must grant equal dignity to same-gender relationships lived under vows, I am not yet convinced that "equal dignity" is the same as "objective equality." In other words, heterosexual marriage and same-gender relationships may not be objectively the same thing but each may have its own inherent moral dignity.

You can imagine that in the past few years I've tried to keep that paper under wraps. It's a pity, because it really was a well-crafted paper—but when you're wrong, you're wrong. Of course, I think I can be forgiven when the issue then was whether the church—and I was talking to a group of conflicted pastors—could even "bless" same-sex relationships.

Well, like President Obama, I've "evolved" on the subject of marriage equality. And so, I suspect, have many in this room. But it's important to understand how and why the leaders of the LGBT movement began to change their minds. If it was up to them, we'd still be talking about "civil unions" and that would have been the goal last year in New Mexico, and this year in Arizona. But this changed, and for a simple reason: lesbian and gay couples, who had been living for years in faithful partnerships, many of them taking responsibility for children, wanted to be married.

In other words, we are here because of families, and every family has a story. And the stories are about human lives, about parents and children: about a man who could not care for his dying husband during the last weeks of his life because the law did not recognize their relationship as a marriage, and therefore he had no hospital visitation rights; about a woman separated from her wife because she wasn't an American citizen, and was turned away at the U.S. border because their marriage had no legal standing.

It was the power of these stories that transformed the debate. And movement theorists began talking about a "paradigm shift," a change in the discourse about marriage equality away from "rights" to

“values.” And over time—it took about a decade, perhaps—groups like the American Family Council and the Traditional Values Coalition no longer owned words like “moral values” as their personal property.

I think the turning point was 2012 and early 2013—when Christians and other people of faith turned the tide in the four states that legalized same-sex marriage either by popular vote or in the state legislature: Maine, Maryland, Minnesota and Washington. And they turned the tide because they were willing to come out—to tell the stories of their relationships, their families, their values.

“Coming out,” you all know, is a defining moment in the life of a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person, but it can also be a defining moment in the life of a congregation. My own journey out of the closet began in 1993: I had just moved to Cleveland and celebrated my 40th birthday. A friend asked if I wanted to drive with him to Washington, D.C., to experience the “March on Washington”—the biggest-ever gathering of LGBT Americans and their allies. It sounded like an adventure, and I loved D.C., so I said yes.

We arrived late for the parade on the Washington Mall, and worked our way slowly through the crowd. When I reached the

sidewalk, delegations from every state were marching past. And at the head of each delegation were women and men in military uniform. For the first time, they were openly challenging the policy—which wasn't changed until 17 years later—that compelled gay and lesbian members of the armed forces to live in concealment as the price for a military career. I knew that each of those service members were risking their futures, and that they were willing to pay that price.

Well, I'm a bit of a straitjacketed New Englander and I don't cry easily, or often. But I couldn't hold back. And the feeling that overwhelmed me was pride, but also shame. Pride in these brave men and women who had overcome their fears. And shame ... shame that I had lived all my life in the shadows, afraid of my capacity to love and seek love in return.

This changed my life. I returned to Cleveland the following day and within two hours called and came out to everyone who was important to me: my best friends, my sisters, my mom and dad. I was exhilarated but I also knew that if I didn't seize the moment, it might be lost forever.

And there is a second part to the story. It's my mom's story, actually. My parents listened but didn't say much when their son

called out of the blue to announce he was gay. Two days later, I opened my mailbox and found a letter from my mom. I've kept it all these years. She wrote, "your father and I have survived this long because we've learned how to avoid stress. You must never again speak to us of this matter if you don't want to hurt us."

I had always been close to both my parents, and I knew I could always count on them. This was the first time my mom had ever shut me out. It felt like abandonment, and it was. And for two years there was silence between us.

That, thank God, was not the end of the story. Something happened to my mom. First, she began to grieve for the loss of intimacy and trust in our relationship. And second, she had an experience at a funeral that transformed her life.

My mom had been a schoolteacher and Phyllis was one of her closest colleagues and friends. Phyllis had a partner named Kate. For my parents' generation, when two women lived together they were called "companions." This was the cover that allowed them to be a couple without the risk of an open relationship.

But mom knew better, and at Phyllis' funeral she was ashamed by the family's indifference to Kate. "There was no one at that graveside who had more reason to grieve than Kate," she told me later, "and no one who was more neglected and alone than she was."

In a way, that was my mom's own coming out. From then on I was her son again, and she was my mom. You see, lives are changed when you come out. Those lesbian and gay soldiers who came out changed my life, and through me changed my mom and dad. And this is why every Oct. 11 we celebrate "National Coming Out Day"—because every story of coming out of the closet is also a story of minds and hearts that were changed. Every person who comes out—whether as a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person; or as a parent, or a friend—every person who comes out is bearing witness that LGBT people are not "them," but "us." That's true for congregations, too. When you come out publicly as an Open and Affirming church you are bearing witness in two ways:

One, you are reaching LGBT seekers who still may be surprised by the news that there are Christian communities where they and their families are safe, and

Two, you are disturbing the consciences of churches that still are unable to welcome their LGBT neighbors, and who need a spur to action.

For a congregation, "coming out" means leaving your comfort zone. You cannot assume that adopting an ONA covenant automatically connects you to the LGBT community. Too many of us have been hurt by our experience in other churches. We're suspicious of organized religion, as much as we hunger for a spiritual family. It's not easy to take that first step through a church door. You can't expect LGBT seekers to come to you: you have to leave the church and go to them.

So "coming out" also means "standing with." Stand with our families as we claim the equal worth of our married relationships. Show up at your community's Pride Day and bring a big sign. Call the local LGBT community center and ask how you can support them. Work with your public schools to create a safe environment for LGBT students. Welcome an LGBT asylum-seeker from a country where coming out of the closet means prison, or worse.

Be visible. Be public. Be proud. Don't be afraid to show your light.

Another word for this is "evangelism"—not as a forced show of piety, or spiritual arrogance, or moral superiority, but simply living according to the Gospel, living your lives as followers of Jesus Christ openly, and not in the shadows. In this sense, I believe, every Christian is called to "come out."

And, finally, be ready to defend your faith to those who misunderstand or malign you yet, as the apostle Peter said, "make your defense ... with gentleness and reverence." He wrote:

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. [1 Pet. 3:14-16]

And this, I think, is the essence of an ONA covenant—for a congregation or a Conference: not to fear what others fear, to remain confident in the face of intimidation that you have chosen the right path, to be ready to give an account of the hope that is in you, to live lives that sanctify Christ as Lord. My prayer for all of you is that you will always know that you have a story to tell, and that your story is hope for the world.