

AUCE and ONA

The Time is Now

By Ruth Hainsworth, C.M.C.E., C.A.E.

You are the light of the world. . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.

Matthew 5:14, 16

Many people in the United Church of Christ are far more knowledgeable about the Open and Affirming process and the theology behind it than I. You may learn more about some of them and what they have to say on this critical matter in other places on this web site. This is one of those painful issues that we often sidestep rather than confront head on. This is because it asks us to push beyond the comfort zones of our usual conversations related to curriculum options, youth ministry strategies, and the latest suggestions for mission trips, for instance. All of these are important and central to what we do in our lives and ministries every day, but they are comfortable. And very safe.

Our proposed discussion and possible action on voting to make AUCE the United Church of Christ's first Open and Affirming professional association is most assuredly not safe. What AUCE is attempting to do is no less than forge new ground in the United Church of Christ - no easy feat to accomplish since the whole denomination is a "new ground" kind of institution. Nonetheless, we in AUCE do find ourselves in uncharted waters as we begin to try to discern just exactly what it will mean for an organization to pursue the Open and Affirming process. How we do that is a question we are attempting to discern and we welcome suggestions from each of you. What that process might look like and when it might conclude are yet to be determined. We do have clarity on the who of the process, though. That is each and every one of you. However we pursue this discussion, it will be a process in which we

seek to do what we educators do best - learn, and in the process, teach others as well as ourselves what is truth and what is fiction in this whole conversation.

The potential for this conversation to become awkward and difficult is very real. The potential that some of our membership will become angry that we are even doing this is very real as well. Some will no doubt ask, "Why are they doing this? What does it have to do with church school or youth group or adult Bible study?" Valid questions. Simple answer. Jesus teaches us to care for the least in our society. The poor, the sick, the marginalized. The Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender community of our society is most definitely and without question marginalized, moving rapidly in the direction of "target." If you doubt the validity of this statement, consider that the first act of our new United States Secretary of Education was to publicly attack a lesbian couple with children as an "unhealthy" family. Those parents then had to explain to their children why someone they had never met could say such hurtful things. As someone who also works diligently on behalf of the public schools and is married to a public school teacher, I can assure you that there are literally thousands of issues needing immediate and direct attention by the Secretary of Education. Yet this is what she chooses as her first public action. No wonder the suicide rate among GLBT teens is skyrocketing.

If you are still asking yourself why AUCE is going down this road, I have a suggestion for you to ponder. Look at any child or teenager in your congregation and realize that he or she might be gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender. It's very possible you wouldn't know because they wouldn't feel safe telling you. Imagine that child's face before you, and then imagine how you would feel if that child died at his or her own hands because they knew the world hated them just because of who they are. Or imagine how you would feel to find out that this child was beaten and left for dead because of who they are. Wouldn't you want to know more about why something so awful could happen and does hap-

pen every day? Wouldn't you want to learn everything you could about all the factors of this situation so that it could never ever happen again? That's really what the ONA process is all about - providing an opportunity to learn and discuss this issue and what it means in the life of the church.

Why AUCE? Simple. We are letting our light shine. The light of knowledge. The light of understanding and compassion. The light of truth. We don't know where all this will lead. We don't know what will ultimately happen. We hope we will at least engage in thoughtful and prayerful conversation in the hopes of discerning God's will. And we hope that you will be a part of this conversation.

Ruth Hainsworth is a Certified Accredited Christian Educator in the United Church of Christ and serves as the Commissioned Minister of Christian Education at Newman Congregational Church, UCC in Rumford, Rhode Island.