

# Some Thoughts on AUCE and Open and Affirming

By Dr. Timothy J. Brown, Commissioned Minister

The Coordinating Committee of AUCE has decided to begin an Open and Affirming (ONA) Study Process as a denomination-wide organization. To me, there are two significant reasons why this is an important undertaking.

The first of these is the importance of our own members to know that this organization of church educators, of which I have been a member since 1998, is open to including everyone as members, regardless of affectional orientation or gender identity. My suspicion is that I am not the only open gay man who is a member of AUCE. As an often-marginalized community, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-gender people have come to learn that "all are welcome" means everyone but us. When a community states a welcome to everyone, and is willing to name who everyone might be, the message is clear. While many of my AUCE colleagues are very open, a self-designation by an organization is a stronger statement and much less ambiguous.

The second vitally important reason for AUCE to become Open and Affirming is because of the communities with which our members work. Church educators work with children and youth throughout the United Church of Christ. All children and youth in the denomination should have access to age-appropriate sexuality and gender identity education, regardless of their own individual sexuality or gender identity. A self-designation by church educators in the United Church of Christ would encourage many of our members to become more intentional about inclusion in their work.

In the book, *Queering Elementary Education*, a compelling argument is presented for the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in

the classroom, that easily can be extended to the religious education activities in which so many of us are involved. The writers show that stereotypes and biases may develop early in life. We must therefore be willing to allow ourselves to be visible - even with children - in the same way that straight people do, so that these stereotypes do not develop. Straight people need to treat lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-gender people as normalized. The writers state:

"What children could know about being gay or lesbian is related to their present and future families. Every child is a part of a multi-generational family, in which elders, the child her- or himself, and/or the child's future offspring may be gay or lesbian. Imagine Sally. As a child, she may have a gay or lesbian parent. Or when she grows up, Sally may be a lesbian and live with a partner, and together they might rear a child who grows up to be straight. Or Sally might marry and raise a son who grows up to be a gay man. Maybe Sally's sister is a lesbian and Sally is straight. These are only some of Sally's putative family configurations that include gay or lesbian family members. Letting a five-year-old Sally and her classmates know that gays and lesbians are part of our world will help her understand the current and later experiences with people in her family, and beyond it." (Letts, William J., IV, and James T. Sears. *Queering Elementary Education*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999. ISBN 0847693694.)

Curricular inclusion, however, as the excerpt implies, is not enough. Approximately 10% of the children in our Sunday School classes and youth groups who will grow up to be LGBT are often growing up in a damaging environment. Another writer states, "Long before they have any real understanding of what the word means, gay children have already been instilled with the belief that to be gay is something terribly unnatural and shameful." (Baker, Jean M. *How Homophobia Hurts Children: Nurturing Diversity at Home, at School and in the Community*, Haworth Press, 2001. ISBN 1560231645.) An intentional church educator can do much for the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of children and youth. Studying Open and Affirming issues as a denominational organization will, I suspect and hope, create positive changes in our church environments for sexual and gender minority youth.

No other denominational organization, aside from the UCC General Synod, has yet declared itself "Open and Affirming." The General Synod vote took place twenty years ago in 1985. AUCE is the first to begin this sort of journey, and it is perhaps fitting to begin the process in this anniversary year.

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