

Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of Open and Affirming at Danville Congregational Church (Third in a series of articles by Chris Rau.)

In a dramatic and engaging Ted talk entitled, “Love, No Matter What,” writer and clinical psychology professor Andrew Solomon shares remarkable stories of love involving people who would be labeled “different.” He opens with a discussion of homosexuality, and a shift in perception: from a 1966 Time magazine article that called homosexuality a “pitiably flight from life” to the year 2012, when then President Obama came out in favor of gay marriage. Dr. Solomon then posed the question that would set up the rest of his talk, “How did we get from there to here?”

How Danville Congregational Church got from there to here, as an Open and Affirming (ONA) church, was the topic of a highly attended second-hour session last month. Led by Dave Hill and Doug Leich, the session covered a lot of ground in less than an hour. As Doug pointed out early in the session, a stake in the ground was planted at the 1985 General Synod of the United Church of Christ. There, a declaration encouraged member churches to consider becoming “Open and Affirming.” Eleven years later, an ONA committee formed at DCC to look into that.

The committee recognized that educating DCC members about ONA was essential. So in the spring of 1997, the ONA task force sponsored three second-hour discussion classes dealing with homosexuality and the role of gay and lesbian people in a Christian church setting. Building upon that program, the ONA team then put together a fall class schedule based on the ONA Task Team of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ.

Led by Doug Leich, Chris Sonnemann, and other DCC church members, the 7-week fall program included the following study topics:

Session 1: Introduction – Getting to know the topic and the study group

Session 2: What’s At Stake? – Why this topic is crucial in the life of the church and acknowledging the feelings it arouses.

Session 3: The Messages of Scripture – Considering the message and meanings of Biblical texts related to this topic.

Session 4: Homophobia – Finding out what it is, what it does and how we might move beyond it in our churches

Session 5: AIDS – Learning more about this disease, the lives of those living with it, and the responses we might make as the church of Jesus Christ

Session 6: Where Do We Go From Here? – Planning a response to the call to be an Open and Affirming Church

Session 7: Class' Choice – A closing topic chosen by participants of the previous six classes.

These educational programs went a long way to raising awareness and recognition of ONA, but the dialog and educational programs did not stop here. More work needed to be done. So, in 1998, the ONA committee scheduled more second-hour discussions. That same year, Rev. Elizabeth Felts delivered a thoughtful sermon about ONA, "Moving the Conversation Along," which encouraged DCC members to continue their engagement over the issue. We'll take a closer look at that pivotal year's impact on ONA recognition at DCC next month.