

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, June 26, 2016
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Open and Affirming (ONA) Covenant

This church declared itself to be “Open and Affirming (ONA)” on October 17, 2010. Here is how that statement reads:

Edina Morningside Church is an open and affirming Christian community, embracing the dignity and worth of every person. We invite into full membership and participation all people including, but not limited to, those of every race, ethnicity, age, physical or mental ability, socioeconomic condition, marital status, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, or faith background. We welcome all to share in the full life, leadership, ministry, fellowship, worship, sacraments, responsibilities and blessings of participation in our congregation.

It is truly a beautiful and inspiring statement. In the words of our instant choir anthem, it “Draws the Circle Wide”. It includes in its extravagant welcome: every race, ethnicity, age, physical ability, mental ability, socioeconomic condition, marital status, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation and faith background. I ask that all of us, today, review together some of the things that have happened and that have not happened for and within this community since this statement was passed - specifically around the impact of this statement on Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) persons and their welcome, connection and engagement in this community.

I suggest to you, today, that there may have been a missed opportunity to live out your ONA covenant during 2012. It is my understanding this community did not support or even engage in significant discussions about marriage equality at that time. This was even after one member “publicly” came out as bi-sexual in a letter to the congregation and asked for support. Her letter read in part:

I'd like to think that this is a faith community where someone like me could get married, no matter the gender of my partner. This is why I'd like to ask the question of what it means to be open and affirming at a time when our state is facing a permanent ban on same-sex weddings in our own sanctuary. When we say we welcome all into the full life and ministry of our church, does that include believing that same-sex couples are just as welcome to celebrate a wedding at Edina Morningside as straight couples? Are we called to act upon our faith at this time? Can we talk about it, as a faith community?

The person who wrote this letter is Caitlin Rogers and she gave me permission to share her experience with you today. Caitlin’s perspective is that her request was not addressed. Now, I recognize that there may be many perspectives of what did or did not occur.

For this community, and for the entire State of Minnesota, at that time, the issue of prophetic witness did become intertwined with politics. I believe that the political overtones – or at least the desire of this community to stay as far away from any possible

political engagement, did, in fact, limit the possible prophetic witness required – or at least hoped for – in the words of this ONA Covenant. My purpose in sharing this is not to dig into the past, but rather for us to learn from the past and to invite us, today, to grow into deeper understanding of the positive impact that this covenant has had and can have in the future. I rejoice in the fact that after the State of Minnesota legalized same-gender marriage EMC was likely the first faith community to perform a same-gender marriage. In this case, our prophetic witness followed the political action rather than preceding it.

During our Interim Ministry together, one member commented to me once on how hiring me as a minister who is an openly gay male, married to a man, was one of the first positive actions of EMC's ONA covenant. The insight that came to me as I wrote this message for today is that not only did being declared ONA give permission to the Interim Search Committee and Church Cabinet to hire me, but it also had a tremendously positive impact on me and my ministry together with you. If you had not declared yourself ONA and had I somehow still found myself to be in ministry with you, I would not have been able to so honestly, openly and authentically have been present with you with my whole self.

Just this past Spring Anthony Fantin chose to come out as transgender, first to the confirmands and to their parents, and then to the entire church. Anthony says that without the public declaration of EMC as ONA, he could not have been assured of this community's acceptance and support. I also never questioned the appropriateness of sharing this in worship on Confirmation Sunday and that would not have been the case without our ONA covenant. I praise this community for your compassionate understanding for Anthony and pray that this support and understanding will continue in the challenging years that may lie ahead for him.

Patty Strickler came to me after the horrendous mass killings in Orlando, Florida, at a gay club, and asked if EMC could do a service of peace and healing. Because of our ONA covenant, I did not hesitate to say yes. And the result was a powerful community service that felt to me, at least in part, as a "coming out" of EMC as ONA. Today's New Testament scripture says, *"No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar..."* (Luke 11: 33) Let us let the light of our ONA covenant shine more brightly today and into our future. Not just to bring in more LGBTQ members, but so that our light may shine into the darkness of a world, where LGBTQ people mostly feel oppressed by the Christian community, where many states continue to pass legislation embedding discrimination into law, and where LGBTQ youth commit suicide at a far greater rate than other youth. May we, in expression of our Open and Affirming Covenant encourage freedom from oppression, may we truly welcome all, may we courageously come out of the closet as ONA, and may we share the gospel of God's great love for all of God's children – even Adam and Steve. May it be so. Amen.