Welcoming Congregations in the African American Tradition

Congratulations. You have decided or are contemplating becoming a welcoming congregation. We are pleased to provide you with this guide to help you move your congregation forward as you continue to walk in spirit and in truth.

A welcoming congregation warmly accepts, affirms, and celebrates the presence and full participation of all walks of life into their congregations and into the life of their faith communities. This guide is designed to assist you in your ministry of inclusion to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Welcoming Christian congregations recognize that spiritual segregation does not foster the greater good nor does it serve the commission of Christ's message of hospitality. Therefore, we encourage the creation and sustaining of open and affirming, welcoming congregations.

> *"We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,"*
>
> **— Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Within Christian traditions, African Americans have historically been the shunned ones, the outcasts, the despised ones due to a perceived lack of divinity. False and damaging notions of racial superiority were supported by interpretations of certain biblical texts that deemed African Americans as a "cursed people," worthy only of servitude and contempt. This created an entire culture held captive to racial mythologies that harmed the soul and frayed the national fabric. We fought a civil war over this and are still involved in a civil rights movement for the rights of all people.

False and damaging notions of heterosexual superiority, supported by interpretations of certain biblical texts have relegated gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons to the classification of the outcast, the shunned, the despised ones due to a perceived lack of divinity, seemingly exiled forever from God's extravagant grace. This too, created a culture held captive to sexual mythologies that harm the soul and fray the national fabric. We are now embroiled in a culture war over this and therefore, still involved in a civil rights movement for the rights of all people. Consequently, congregations which seek to serve African Americans have specific challenges which we try to address in this guide.

Our belief is that welcoming congregations are aware of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ideas of a "Beloved Community." Welcoming congregations transcend institutionalized discrimination and bring new dimensions to the grace-infused, spiritual imperatives of justice work. Welcoming congregations employ a prophetic practice that brings dignity, healing, reconciliation and redemption to worship and through worship. It is a blessed sacrament to welcome all of God's children. We continue this rich dynamic and acknowledge its spiritual power with the words and actions of the clergy in this guide.

We pray that this guide will provide you with greater insights, helpful ideas and words of inspiration and encouragement as you continue to build a more beloved community.

Yours in the Struggle,

H. Alexander Robinson, Executive Director
Sylvia Rhue, Ph.D. Director
NBJC Religious Affairs Program

Faithful Call to Justice

National Black Justice Coalition

Faithful Call to Justice is a time we take every first weekend in June for congregations across the nation to acknowledge the contributions of and affirm their commitment to the inclusion of gay and same gender loving people in faith communities.

If we are to be prophetic as spiritual leaders we have a duty to bear witness to the lessons of history, democracy and justice, culture and the law. We must not shirk our civic and religious duties either by accommodating the anti-religious trends in American culture or by ceding the ground to those who would use religiosity to divide God's people.

It is high time to acknowledge the spiritual worth and valued service of our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender brothers and sisters. We believe that churches, synagogues and mosques must examine their attitudes toward gay men and lesbians and take actions that best serve justice and spiritual healing. Our faith journey has led us to believe that welcoming and affirming lesbian and gay families and friends is a faith-filled call to justice.

This is an opportunity to continue your work for a justice movement, a chance to make and create history and chance to stand for the right along with thousands of other people of faith.

Below is information about Faithful Call to Justice and how you and your congregation can participate. Please join us and fellow faith leaders as we challenge homophobia, raise consciousness about the inherent worth of our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender friends, and strive to create a more beloved community.

What do you have to do to participate?

Write Sylvia Rhue at srhue@nbjc.org to sign on to our "Statement of Affirmation."

"As faith leaders we acknowledge the spiritual worth of our gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and same gender loving brothers and sisters. We welcome their fellowship in worship, and we affirm their God-given rights to life, love, liberty, and equal justice under the law."

We offer diverse strategies of participation. These are not mandatory, just examples to spur your creativity:

Deliver a sermon that:

- Explains the spiritual harms caused by homophobia.
- Talks of the role of homophobia and the subsequent spread of HIV/AIDS
- Tells the story of your journey to the welcome and acceptance of same gender loving people as spiritual beings of worth
- Is a cautionary tale of demonizing groups of people to the detriment of their souls, society and democratic principles/why discrimination is immoral
- Explains Christ's call for hospitality which includes the welcome of everyone
- Speaks of the realities of basic, sacred human sexuality that is inclusive of lesbian and gay people
- Affirms Love as the fundamental organizing principle of life/not limited to heterosexuals
- Educates congregations about same gender loving heroes and their contributions to society (i.e., George Washington Carver, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Barbara Jordan, Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, Eleanor Roosevelt, Michelangelo, Da Vinci)
- Speaks of how transformative it is for people to experience equality, love, justice, fair play, acceptance and connection

Create a program that acknowledges the worth and contributions of LGBT people. Examples:

- Have an afternoon program that features music from gay composers, (i.e., Rev. James Cleveland, Handel, Shubert, Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Debussy, Grieg, Beethoven, Ravel, Copeland, Mahler).
- Design a program of interpretive dance that reflects attitudes towards gay people and the resolve to create a beloved community
- Have congregants testify as to their own journey of struggle with the issues of gay people and homosexuality
- Conduct a prayer meeting for families to reconcile with their gay family members
- Give an opening or closing prayer for gay people worldwide, asking God to give them strength for their journey

Church bulletins, acknowledgement:

- Place the Statement of Affirmation in your church bulletin
- Acknowledge Gay Pride Month
- Acknowledge the openly gay people in your congregation, have them stand, and welcome them publicly, extending them the hand of fellowship.

Letter of Welcome from Bishop Tonyia M. Rawls, Unity Fellowship Church Movement

Welcome to the *Creating Welcoming Congregations in the African American Tradition Guide*. We celebrate this step you have taken to understand more about the need to increase the number of congregations that welcome all, regardless of sexual orientation or any other dividing line. It is our hope that you will join us and the growing number of individuals and faith communities who have answered the call to provide space for truer expressions of God's unconditional love.

Throughout time, humankind has sought to define who was "in" and who was "out" of the circle of God's grace and love. In the last century alone, we have seen drastic shifts within Christendom sparked by divine revelation and growing enlightenment of Holy Scripture and science.

People of African descent were considered inferior in every measurable category to whites and thus relegated to the margins even in the house of God. It was illegal to teach a slave to read, so text had to be interpreted by their oppressors. Those interpretations, of course, often supported the inhumane conditions that these believers dwelt in. As Black folk began to delve into the Holy text for themselves, they saw that God's unconditional love and acceptance extended to them as well. An unholy alliance between science and religion colluded to institutionalize white racial superiority. It is taking many years to unlearn the lessons of racial inequality and the church, although slowly, is now opening its doors a bit wider and offering equal seats at the table.

Women are another group who have found themselves on the margins in terms of full acceptance in the House of God. At some point women began to pick up the Word and the call of God for themselves and proved through their service and witness that the prophet Joel was correct—God's spirit had fallen on All flesh without distinction. Many faith communities have now opened their doors wider and begun accepting women as leaders, Pastors and even Bishops.

Each time we, as believers, have sought to put limits on God's love, compassion, and spirit of inclusion, God has destroyed those walls and let us know that we are all equally welcome and accepted by the Living God. Whatever you understand God to be, God will always be greater. Whoever you believe God accepts, there will always be more.

It is my deepest desire that this guide provides light for those new to the journey of inclusivity, encouragement for those already on the path and added hope for those who for far too long have been relegated to spiritual homelessness by those not willing or able to see God bigger.

In the sentiments of noted theologian and humanitarian Howard Thurman, let us together, sisters and brothers, pull one more breath into our already exhausted lung, so that the walls within our faith communities and our hearts might expand and make room for all of God's beloved.

Yours In Love,

Bishop-Elect Tonyia Rawls



Rev. Dr. Kenneth L. Samuel
Victory for the World Church

1. **What is your definition of a welcoming and affirming church?**
   A 'Welcoming and Affirming Church' is a church where LGBT* persons are not only preached to in the audience; it is a church where LGBT voices are heard and valued as vital to the Christian Church's respect for and embrace of diversity. It is a church where LGBT persons are empowered to serve and to lead and to be fully who they are in the life of the congregation.

2. **What does a welcoming and affirming church look like?**
   A 'Welcoming and Affirming Church' looks like the African notion of the 'extended family'—where every individual is related to every other individual by a kindred spirit of solidarity and sacred purpose.

3. **What has been your personal journey towards welcoming and affirming communities of faith?**
   My personal journey towards leading my church into becoming more welcoming and affirming of all God's children has been volatile. Whenever the circle of church communion is broadened to include those who have been systemically and theologically left out, many persons who previously felt "established" within the circle feel displaced or discounted. Consequently, to be 'open and affirming' means to face virulent opposition from most of the established church circles and many of the strongest church members.

4. **How do you keep your congregation together while you are transitioning to a more welcoming faith community?**
   Consistent, clear, courageous Bible-based preaching is crucial to keeping a congregation together during the transitional process to becoming a more welcoming and affirming faith community. In addition, Bible Studies that teach believers to think critically about Scripture, and forums which encourage questions and candid dialogue are essential.

5. **How do you live progressively within the confines of a denominationally conservative environment?**
   Upon my embrace of liberation theology, I withdrew our congregation's participation in and financial support of the Southern Baptist Convention. Now, as an independent Baptist Church, we are affiliated with the United Church of Christ—one of the most (if not the most) progressive denominations in Christendom.

6. **What have been the greatest resistances to becoming a welcoming/affirming church? How have you dealt with it?**
   The greatest resistance to becoming a welcoming/affirming church has been bibliolatry—the fallacious belief that the words of the King James Bible are infallible. I have dealt with it by helping persons to understand that Jesus himself and a few Biblical writers give us the moral mandate to discern the true meaning of Scripture or to "rightly divide" it. I consistently point to the biblical inconsistencies and moral dilemmas created by bibliolatry.

* LGBT is a commonly accepted abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered.

7. **What do you consider to be some theological underpinnings of establishing a welcoming and affirming church?**
   In my estimation, the main theological underpinning for establishing an open and affirming church is the ability and the courage to exegete Scripture and to exegete one's context of ministry. Exegesis of Scripture that is dynamically related to an exegesis of one's sociopolitical context of ministry is vital for all work in every dimension of liberation theology. It is my hope that biblical exegesis and liberation theology will cause us to not only confront homophobia/heterosexism, but also patriarchy, blind capitalism, xenophobia, militarism, global warming and political apathy.

8. **What are some of the advantages of having welcoming and affirming churches? Do you have stories regarding this?**
   For me, one of the main advantages of having opening and affirming churches is that in these churches people understand that they do not have to sacrifice intellectual acumen, scientific validity or critical thinking capacity in order to be a devoted believer in Christ Jesus. I would like to think that most open and affirming churches engage life, Scripture and God in ways that invite and do not insult those who cultivate and value critical thinking. I believe that critical thinking is key to the survival of the Christian faith into the 21st century.

Biography—Doctor Kenneth Lee Samuel

Doctor Kenneth Lee Samuel is a native of Darlington, South Carolina. He has been the recipient of many scholastic and civic honors, including 'A Better Chance Scholarship', which allowed him to attend high school at the prestigious Delbarton School in Morristown, New Jersey. He graduated in 1978 from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut with a Bachelor of Arts degree in American History. He continued his academic pursuit by matriculating at the Candler School of Theology of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, where he received the Benjamin E. Mays Theological Fellowship Award among others. In 1981, he received his Master of Divinity Degree. In 1996, he received the Doctor of Ministry Degree from the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. His theological focus is in the field of homiletics and social ethics.

Doctor Samuel has served as an adjunct professor in the Religion and Philosophy Department at Clark Atlanta University, and has served as a Teaching Assistant in homiletics at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University. Doctor Samuel's first book, entitled Solomon's Success: Four Essential Keys for Leadership has recently appeared as the number one best seller under Pilgrim Press in The Christian Century. Doctor Samuel was licensed as a Minister of the Gospel on his 23rd birthday, August 5, 1979, at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, under the pastorate of the Reverend Doctor Joseph L. Roberts, Jr., and Pastor Emeritus, Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr. He was ordained in 1982 also at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta.

In March of 1987, Doctor Samuel organized the Victory for the World Church which has dual standing as an independent Baptist Church, and an active congregation of the United Church of Christ. Situated in a growing eastern suburb of Atlanta called Stone Mountain, the Victory Church seeks to address the total needs of the total person through a broad array of ministries and services which promote the spiritual development, educational enhancement, physical fitness and social empowerment of every child of God—regardless of race, gender, culture, class or sexual orientation.



Bishop Tonyia Rawls
Unity Fellowship Church Movement

1. What is your definition of a welcoming and affirming church?
It is amazing that we must ask the question, "What is a welcoming and affirming church?" Is not the very essence of the Gospel message that we create and work to maintain sacred space that is unconditionally welcoming and affirming for all of God's children? These two words – welcoming and affirming - constantly compel believers to move beyond difference and distinction, toward diverse community. It is when we rise to the charge to be warm, kind and gracious to the stranger and our foes, not friends and loved ones alone, that God is most glorified.

2. What does a welcoming and affirming church look like?
It is relatively easy to tell how affirming a church is by going to those who are the "least of these" or go to those considered "outcast" by society and see what their lived truth is within that environment. Many congregations consider themselves welcoming and affirming, but when you look around, everyone is dressed the same, they come from similar zip codes, their families all look alike, they attended many of the same schools, they travel to similar destinations for vacation. It is easy to welcome and affirm those with shared experiences. When a church is truly welcoming, the Gay couple with two young children feel as safe and affirmed as the Straight couple two pews behind them. The young exotic dancer working her way through school feels as safe as the young lawyer studying for the bar. When a church is welcoming and affirming it will find itself in constant engagement with the Holy Spirit as more and more of the "others" get the news that there is a House, whose light never goes out, and whose people are always standing with open arms ready to receive them. The leaders of such a church occasionally find themselves in uncomfortable spots as they press to see God bigger than they last understood God to be. What a glorious journey. What reward awaits those who dare take it.

3. What has been your personal journey towards welcoming and affirming communities of faith?
The Unity Fellowship Church Movement was founded in Los Angeles, CA in 1982 by Archbishop Carl Bean, who answered the cries of gay men diagnosed with AIDS and the people who loved them. At that time, as a young Baptist preacher, he could no longer sit by and see preacher after preacher, musician after musician, person after person, abandoned by a church that they loved and often served faithfully. He was one of the few ministers who would do hospital visits, perform homegoing services that did not turn into gay bashing fests, and console grieving families without leaving them with doubts about the status of their loved one's soul. That led to the formation of our denomination, which is dedicated to the furtherance of Christianity from the platform of Liberation Theology, and to the care of those on the margins of society and faith communities alike.

I planted our denomination's first church in the Bible Belt of the South. Some call Charlotte part of the buckle of the Belt, and that is not totally unfounded. Our journey as an already welcoming and affirming church is one of journeying with my sisters and brothers of various faith traditions, who often take very strong anti-gay positions in their witness. I have found that when I show up as my authentic self, that God just has a way of expanding that openness to others. So many of the stumbling blocks around creating welcoming space, is that so few people, particularly in hostile environments like the Bible Belt, are willing or feel able to say who they really are.

4. **How do you keep your congregation together while you are transitioning to a more welcoming faith community?**

   This piece can be tricky and requires a great deal of wisdom. What I have found helps in matters like this is to first "flatten" the process. Pastors and faith leaders are often called of God to do things that the congregation may not get at first, but as we trust God, the fruit of the effort confirms that it really was the voice of God. As God leads you to create a more welcoming and affirming environment, that is no bigger than another "yes Lord" put before you. Our faith walk and prophetic witness will always bring honor and Glory when we, as people of faith, can press past the prejudice and ignorance of the day and dare to walk in the marvelous light of God's unconditional love.

   While each environment is different, I recommend the following steps be considered:

   - Be unapologetic within your own heart and soul about the steps you are taking. Your ambivalence and confusion could make the journey more difficult for you and your people.
   - Speak to your leadership team first and get their buy-in. It will help if they have heard the vision and purpose from you directly. They can then support you later or have an advance opportunity to reflect.
   - Give people permission to journey. Everyone will not understand this step immediately, don't panic…the Holy Spirit does not have a communication problem. Your ministry and people will be blessed as God moves to open up their understanding and hearts to this broader expression of love.
   - Provide space for people to talk about their experience and ask them how you can support them in the transition.
   - Preach sermons and offer bible study lessons that support this move.
   - Consider partnering with organizations like The National Black Justice Coalition, The Balm in Gilead, The Human Rights Campaign, local HIV/AIDS organizations and others committed to openness and social justice issues. These partnerships can often offer resources and support for your local efforts.
   - Create a safe support system with a congregation or a pastor who has already been where you are going. The wisdom offered can be priceless as well as the safe space for you to share your joys as well as concerns.

5. **How do you live progressively within the confines of a denominationally conservative environment?**

   I was raised Baptist and spent 10 years in the Church of God in Christ, so I understand the complexities of walking progressively in conservative environments. What I have found over the years is that when God calls you to take certain stands within your conservative environment, it is important to note that you have already been equipped for the task. WISDOM is a key element here. Most of these environments have many places where the progressive voice can be heard and if presented properly, can have profound effects on the listener. Bible study class is a great place to present new thought. Revivals are times when people's hearts and minds are open to "a fresh word from the Lord". Training and development classes for staff and leadership provide space for dialogue about progressive issues. These are just a few examples of space God can provide for one who is seeking it. I believe there are those called to stay in the house and allow God to use them within. If you are one such person, you will know it and you can be assured that God's Grace and Mercy will be sufficient to help you stand as a champion for righteousness and justice for those who will never be given an audience.

There are, however, other times, when I also believe the only option is to leave the environment you are in and find a space that is able to receive your gifts and your witness with open arms. Jesus instructed the disciples to shake the dust off of their feet and move on when people were not willing to receive the message of Hope and Life that they offered. So it must be for us from time to time. Words like progressive and conservative are always challenging for me because we are rarely always one or the other. If you press to walk in authentic truth and find that those around you cannot accept, welcome or affirm that truth, then finding other space that can may be the best way to hold onto your spiritual integrity and grow your effectiveness for the Lord.

6. What have been the greatest resistances to becoming a welcoming and affirming church? How have you dealt with them?

I have found that traditionalism, careerism and fear are three of the greatest threats to creating a welcoming and affirming church.

- Traditionalism because churches often get stuck in yesterday's solutions, responses, beliefs and ways. In the process, they box God out and provide no space for broader enlightenment or expressions of God.
- Careerism because there are those who make decisions based on how it will affect church attendance or make them look before their general body meetings, verses making choices that are best for the members of the congregation and the communities they serve. Careerism is a dangerous thing, because while ambition in and of itself is not bad, if it is the driving force behind your decisions and walk, then you will always take the safe road, which is rarely where the Spirit of God dwells.
- Lastly fear, because it is at the core of most of the terrible things the church has done to those it was called to care for, build and protect. Most people have never really studied any of the texts that deal with homosexuality. If they had, they would see how often they are misrepresented at best and often interpreted in ways that had nothing to do with the original text. Laity and clergy alike often have a difficult time taking second, third and twentieth looks at certain scriptures. The same holds true for certain groups of people. Being in the South, I have Black members who really had issues with white folk because of their childhood memories around the injustice they and their families faced. Over the years other bad experiences reinforced those negative experiences. When white members began to join the church, some Black folk then were forced to take another look at this population that many had written off. Whether race, sexual orientation, gender or class, God has called us to press past the fear and discomfort that is often associated with difference, so that we can truly be the Church of Jesus Christ.

7. What do you consider to be some theological underpinnings of establishing a welcoming and affirming church?

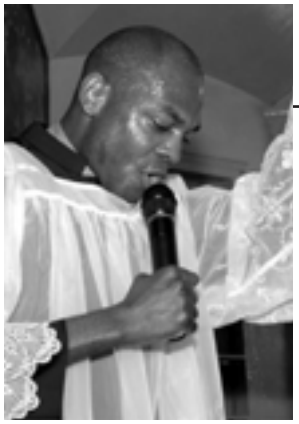
Mark 12 tells the story of Jesus' encounter with one of the teachers of the law who asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Jesus' charge in the 30th verse was to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and to love their neighbor as themselves. That has not changed. There is no greater call than the one to extend to our neighbor the same welcome, affirmation and unconditional love that was extended to us.

8. What are some of the advantages of having welcoming and affirming churches? Do you have stories regarding this?

The joy that comes to those who are welcome into the House of God after being alienated or harmed is a glorious thing to behold. My congregation is made up of individuals who drive as much as 4 hours one way for Sunday service AND Wednesday night bible study. Many of them are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. Most have not attended church for 5, 10, 15 and even 25 years because of the lack of welcoming and affirming space for them and their families. When "coming back home," these believers have shown a dedication and appreciation like I have never seen in all of the spiritual environments I have been in. They have risen to be great leaders in the community, they made the commitment and we purchased our own building three years after opening our doors, they have risen to positions of leadership in our national body, and are more excited than ever about what God has for them to do. Each of these giants in the Lord would have been left out in the spiritual cold with no space for their gifts and talents had a welcoming and affirming congregation not been available.

Biography — Bishop Tonyia M. Rawls

Bishop Rawls is the founding pastor of Unity Fellowship Church Charlotte and a member of the House of Bishops, of the Los Angeles-based Unity Fellowship Church Movement (UFCM). The UFCM was born out of the 1980s struggle for acceptance and support that many Gay African American's with HIV/AIDS experienced within the Black Church. UFCM provided a safe space that affirmed all, regardless race, gender or affectional orientation. Bishop Rawls' rapidly growing church is the first of the denomination's churches to open in the Bible Belt of the United States. She is a social, spiritual and criminal justice activist committed to the liberation of those who are on the margins of society. She has received numerous awards including the Equality Award from The Human Rights Campaign of The Carolinas and The Charlotte Business Guild's Don King Service Award. She is a graduate of Duke University and sits on the Religious Advisory Committee of the DC-based National Black Justice Coalition and on the national board of the Unity Fellowship Church Movement. She is cofounder of Black Clergy United Against AIDS, is cofounder of People United For Education which advocates for urban youth in the Charlotte school system and is Founder/Director of The Freedom Center for Social Justice. The Center's focus is wellness (physical, mental, social and fiscal), Education (youth and adult) and Empowerment (particularly for women, people of low wealth, youth, the LGBT community and immigrants). The initial program is a pilot tutoring and career development support program for at-risk high school students. It is designed to prepare them for college and post-high school. In addition to the aforementioned work, she is the former Director of Grassroots Leadership's Keeping Faith: A Religious Response to the Prison Crisis program. The focus of this program is to mobilize faith communities across the country in ways that address issues of over incarceration, prison privatization and criminal justice. She also cofounded the Washington, DC-based International Black Buyers and Manufacturer's Expo and Conference which was the country's first trade show dedicated to the development of the Black retail and manufacturing arena. Bishop Rawls is a noted national speaker and is one of the First women to be elevated to the post of Bishop in the Unity Fellowship Church Movement.



Elder Joseph Tolton
Rehoboth Temple Christ Conscious Church

1. **What is your definition of a welcoming and affirming church?**
   A church that welcomes people from all walks of life regardless of culture, gender, sexual orientation, and economic background. A church that, just as Jesus did, accepts people wherever they are in their life.

2. **What does a welcoming and affirming church look like?**
   At Rehoboth we often refer to the vision that Peter had in Acts 11:5 where he saw a large sheet being let down from heaven, it had all kinds of beasts on it. This is a representation of what God sees as His church...back in those days the Jews believed that God was only for them...but when God gave the Holy Spirit to the gentiles as well as the Jews they questioned Peter. The animals on the sheet represented humanity and God was saying to Peter do not call anything impure that God has made clean. This is what a welcoming and affirming church looks like…one that doesn't look at the outward appearance but cares for the soul and believes that everyone deserves to have a relationship with God.

3. **What has been your personal journey towards welcoming and affirming communities of faith?**
   Well, to be quite honest, we are still on that journey. I say this because those that come to our church are still searching for personal self-acceptance. We have been spiritually abused to the point where we have succumbed to the notion that "it still ain't right." So the challenge is first promoting self acceptance within the confines of our own church and once that is accomplished we can take that message out into the world.

4. **How do you keep your congregation together while you are transitioning to a more welcoming faith community?**
   Another interesting challenge as you can imagine. Back to the last point I made in the question before, it is a unique and different assignment that God has given to His people, I believe the bible calls it restoration. We have the duty and privilege of repairing those things that have been broken and the first phase is self acceptance. This is a cumbersome task due to the spiritual forces involved and the constant homophobia being distributed through various channels. However, it is rewarding as well when you see God working in the midst. First and foremost prayer, that is the weapon that we use against those dark forces that are entrenched in our everyday life. We have prayer every Wednesday and also tarry service once a month. The next thing is bible study. We are in the process of forming a study based on the "Traditional Doctrine on Homosexuality." We believe that once we approach the text objectively, instead of subjectively, we can then set the stage for a contemporary discussion. That will thus and I say this prayerfully, open up their understanding and see this doctrine that is being taught is not only unacceptable it is a lie. Lastly, we love to praise and worship the Lord with all our heart mind and soul. This helps bring us into one accord.

5. **How do you live progressively within the confines of a denominationally conservative environment?**
   Well, the core of our mission is being Christ Conscious, which is focusing on internalizing the mind and the heart of the Christ. He was living progressively during his time...healing on the Sabbath, not washing hands, etc. He was all about promoting change. So what we do is not worry about those obstacles that will come our way but to always know how to handle them when they come.

6. **What have been the greatest resistances to becoming a welcoming and affirming church? How have you dealt with them?**
   We're back to the people in the church. There has been division and strife amongst ourselves, as we know the devil is always busy! But that has probably been one of the greatest resistances. How have we dealt with them? Well what we like to do is address the issue immediately and then pursue to deliberate and squash the matter! Of course with respect to all persons involved.

7. **What do you consider to be some theological underpinnings of establishing a welcoming and affirming church?**
   At Rehoboth we strive to be a blend of spiritually rooted and deeply engaged believers committed to transforming the world. We believe the first fruit of the Church is a personal transformation. This individual transformation is profitable when it is used to then transform the world.

8. **What are some of the advantages of having welcoming and affirming churches? Do you have stories regarding this?**
   Well, the advantage is being TRUE to the entire communion of the Christ. We have had several people pass through our church and we have been able to help them with every resource that God has given us. We have fed the hungry, clothed the homeless, we have reached out to the youth, assisted the elderly, financed the poor, and so much more. We believe this is what God commanded the church to do.

   One Sunday morning a Jewish woman of affluence visited with us. She was so moved by the spirit of God that she found herself "dancing" in the holy ghost with us. As I observed her, I thought to myself this is what Rehoboth Temple is all about, making the joy and dynamism of the Pentecostal faith accessible.

Biography — Elder Joseph Tolton

Elder Tolton enjoys a three-faceted career serving the gay and lesbian community as a voice for spiritual freedom, social justice and economic empowerment. As a professional man of faith, Elder Tolton is the Founder and Pastor of Rehoboth Temple Christ Conscious Church, located in Harlem. His affirming ministry seeks to empower all people with the transformative power of the Gospel and to nurture disciples of Christ in the Pentecostal Apostolic tradition.
As a public advocate, Elder Tolton serves as Director of The REVIVAL Initiative, a spiritual forum purposed to advance the civil rights of gay and lesbian people in the African diaspora. The REVIVAL Initiative is a project endorsed by Gay Men of African Descent, The New York State Black Gay Network, Empire State Pride Agenda and Soulforce.
As an entrepreneur, he is the Managing Director of Blur Advertising. Since its inception in 2001, Blur, a full-service brand development and marketing communications firm, has been engaged by clients such as The Fashion Institute of Technology, The Turks & Caicos Board of Tourism, Hewlett-Packard, The Episcopal Church, The Vera Institute of Justice, B&B Cognac Liqueur, The Cayman Islands, The Evans Food Group, Diageo USA, Culture Hair Products, Carver Federal Savings Bank, Tanqueray, and Harlem Lanes.
Elder Tolton received his BA in religion from Vassar College and his MBA in management from Columbia Business School.



Rev. Deborah L. Johnson
Innerlight Ministries

1. **What is your definition of a welcoming and affirming church?**
   A church that is inclusive and embracing of all. Such a church appreciates individualized expressions while acknowledging our spiritual Oneness. While this term "welcoming and affirming" has been reserved for treatment of and attitudes toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people and their families, I believe that the term should have a broader context.

2. **What does a welcoming and affirming church look like?**
   A church where you see persons of all walks of life actively and visibly involved in all aspects of church life in a spirit of collaboration and compassion. No distinctions are made based upon gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, or family configurations. The face of the church is many sided.

3. **What has been your personal journey towards welcoming and affirming communities of faith?**
   I was born in the mid-50's in Los Angeles and raised in the Church of God in Christ, a Pentecostal, fundamentalist, evangelical Black Protestant denomination known for its "hell and brimstone" message. I never experienced an open and affirming church in my youth. As a lesbian activist, I was introduced to United Methodist, United Church of Christ, and Universal Unitarians, which had more liberal policies. However, culturally, these did not speak to my soul. I found full inclusion in the New Thought Movement, especially Religious Science where I trained. Whereas, some of them lack racial diversity, the denomination is good on LGBT issues. Its African-American leaders are generally good on both.

4. **How do you keep your congregation together while you are transitioning to a more welcoming faith community?**
   There was no transition for my spiritual community. I am the founding minister and an open African-American lesbian. The challenge is not one of transitioning from one type of church to another, but assisting new members in adjusting to the more inclusive environment. Most lack skills in interacting with such levels of diversity, especially with lesbians of color in positions of authority. We have formal diversity trainings and strict rules of engagement that require participation in cross-cultural conflict resolution, when necessary. We are firmly committed to both living and teaching inclusion. It's a particular challenge for heterosexuals to ward off negative comments from their traditional family members who criticize them for attending a church headed by a lesbian. Because I am gay, the entire church gets labeled as being gay. Straight people are taught how to be allies.

5. **How do you live progressively within the confines of a denominationally conservative environment?**
   My church is independent.

6. **What have been the greatest resistances to becoming a welcoming/affirming church? How have you dealt with it?**
   I don't experience resistance in my church. It's our mission. Those who are opposed self-select out or learn to be more open. There is resistance towards our church from other congregations. Our position is to keep loving, to love even those who don't love us in return. Spiritually speaking, we know that we are One with them, even though they may not know that they are One with us. It reminds me of being an African-American; it's a one-way recognition. Of necessity, we must acknowledge our mixed racial heritage, but White people rarely acknowledge our relationship to them.

7. What do you consider to be some theological underpinnings of establishing a welcoming and affirming church?

In the Christian tradition, the Love Ethic of Jesus is a mandate. He was no respecter of gender, religion, race, social status, nationality, or any other discriminating factor. He made both his person and his message accessible to all. He requires of his disciples to do the same.

> *"Any church that violates the whosoever will let him come tenet is nothing more than a mere social club with a thin veneer of religiosity."* — MLK Jr.

There are many examples from other faith traditions, to name a few:

Buddhism	–	Loving Kindness towards all sentient beings
Sufism	–	Passion for the Divine
Judaism	–	Justice
Wicca/ Earth Traditions	–	Respect for the feminine
Taoism	–	Appreciation of yin/yang energy and expressions

8. What are some of the advantages of having welcoming and affirming churches? Do you have stories regarding this?

Perhaps the greatest advantage is standing in spiritual integrity. The root word of integrity is "integer" which means whole. Living in an integrated state creates wholeness. Hearts open, walls come down. Loving relationships are established that might not otherwise have even been considered.

Two stories from today — A male/female African-American couple just gave birth to their first child. It was a cesarean procedure, so they have been in the hospital for a couple of days. Exactly a week before the birth, the young mother's own mother was removed from life support systems. About to deliver a child, she was not able to travel home to be by her side or to attend the funeral. The couple is from the East Coast and our church is on the West Coast. There has been a steady stream of seven African-American lesbians, one White lesbian, and one African-American bisexual woman who have been by the couple's side through 41.5 hours of labor and days of caretaking. The couple doesn't have family on this coast, and their East Coast family has grown to be grateful for the support of this new "gay" family in the wake of such distance. This is especially sweet since the new father is a preacher's son.

Our calling at Inner Light Ministries is to be "Pioneers of possibility living in Oneness." A couple of hours ago, a young White mother shared a story with me about her 8-year old son. The mother and the son attend our church along with the son's African American father. She told me that her son originally was going to be a pirate for Halloween last week. However, he announced that he was going to be a pioneer instead. She asked him what kind of pioneer he was going to be. He answered, "A pioneer of possibility." A new generation is being exposed to new values.

Biography — Rev. Deborah Johnson

Rev. Deborah L. Johnson is the founder and president of Inner Light Ministries (headquartered in Santa Cruz, CA). A dynamic public speaker, known for her ability to bring clarity to complex and emotionally charged issues, she travels the nation teaching, training, and consulting on cultural diversity. A life time civil rights activist, her work has been featured in numerous books, magazines, and television programs including appearances on the Donahue Show and ABC's Nightline. She is the author of The Sacred Yes and Living the Sacred Yes. She is founder and president of the Motivational Institute and a faculty member of the Holmes Institute of Consciousness Studies where she specializes in Bible Interpretation and American Theologies. Rev. Johnson holds a BA in economics from USC, an MBA from UCLA, and a ministerial degree from the Holmes Institute.



Rev. John Crestwell
Davies Memorial Unitarian Universalist Church

1. **What is your definition of a welcoming and affirming church?**
   This is a church that welcomes ALL regardless of race, sexual orientation, religious belief, or gender.

2. **What does a welcoming and affirming church look like?**
   It is multiracial/multicultural. Its worship reflects many cultures. The people come from many backgrounds but all in all you feel like you are in a good place that truly believes in the doctrine of loving all!

3. **What has been your personal journey towards welcoming and affirming communities of faith?**
   I looked at myself, my mistakes, shortcomings and found a way to forgive myself, so I always believe in forgiving others. I saw that the Universe is eclectic and diverse and therefore we as human beings are also similar but different in many ways. An example of this is our sexual orientation. I've learned from life experience and meditation that all are divine and even when we don't act like it, we have the capacity to manifest our greatness. So people are people, none better, none worse. Those who seem "bad" are just finding their way. We must be patient with all.

4. **How do you keep your congregation together while you are transitioning to a more welcoming faith community?**
   We have already transitioned to a welcoming church. I constantly remind them that the world is full of bruised, hurting people. Even those who lash out at others are bruised. Our work is redemptive—to assist folk in finding their divine spark so they can self-actualize and help to create a world of love and justice.

5. **How do you live progressively within the confines of a denominationally conservative environment?**

   My denomination www.uua.org is liberal, progressive and cutting-edge. This gives me strength to fight against the mountains of religious conservatives who have not perhaps studied the very writings they support which preach love, forgiveness, and mercy.

6. **What have been the greatest resistances to becoming a welcoming/affirming church? How have you dealt with it?**

   Our fight, when we became racially diverse, was difficult at first. It became easy when I reminded them of why it was right, just, and timely and shared the vision. A few strong leaders caught the vision and the fire spread! Now we are actively engaging in work around LGBT concerns and there is no opposition. They know now that injustice is injustice!

7. **What do you consider to be some theological underpinnings of establishing a welcoming and affirming church?**
   "Priesthood of all believers"
   "The Golden Rule"
   "Love"

8. **What are some of the advantages of having welcoming and affirming churches? Do you have stories regarding this?**
   If you profess as a church that you love all, that you are for all souls then you cannot have dogma and doctrine that is for some souls. This is hypocritical. But when one is authentic in his love, the spirit of truth moves, others catch it and a glimpse of heaven—the Beloved Community—is manifest.

Biography — Rev. John Crestwell

Rev. John T. Crestwell, Jr. serves as the minister of Davies Memorial Unitarian Universalist Church in Camp Springs, MD. www.dmuuc.org. He is a native Washingtonian. Rev. John earned his Bachelor's Degree in Mass Media Arts from Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, and earned his Master's Degree from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC.

Additionally, Rev. Crestwell is author of two books, "Conversations: The Hidden Truth That Keeps the World from Being at Peace," published in 2001; and "The Charge of the Chalice" his newest book which focuses on the growth and racial diversity of his church. Rev. John is also an adjunct professor at Potomac College teaching Comparative Religion and Public Speaking.



Bishop Dr. Yvette Flunder
City of Refuge Community Church, UCC

1. **What is your definition of a welcoming and affirming church?**
   A welcoming and affirming church is where all people are afforded mutual regard and mutual opportunity for participation.

2. **What does a welcoming and affirming church look like?**
   A welcoming and affirming church should usually represent diversity and community.

3. **What has been your personal journey towards welcoming and affirming communities of faith?**
   I have moved from a fundamental, evangelical pentecostal to being a justice oriented, Christo-centric theologian and pastor. That journey caused me to re-image and re-interpret scripture, and re-define the gospel message for today.

4. **How do you keep your congregation together while you are transitioning to a more welcoming faith community?**
   A welcoming faith community means to welcome people who are not the same. Almost all our (church member) kids are straight. We have to make the table of the Lord big enough to authentically welcome people who are very different.

5. **How do you live progressively within the confines of a denominationally conservative environment?**
   My denomination is not theologically conservative, but it is predominantly Euro-American and predominantly straight. I have a predominantly same-gender loving congregation. We seek to be present in all the places where important decisions are made, to be certain a minority voice is heard. We seek to educate our people in our denomination about experiences they would otherwise not be impacted by.

6. **What have been the greatest resistances to becoming a welcoming/affirming church? How have you dealt with it?**
   The greatest resistances are internalized homophobia. Creating community among chaotic people. The greatest struggle is what is going on with the people. Addressing the multi-level needs of marginalized people—poverty, mental health issues, substance abuse recovery, etc.

7. **What do you consider to be some theological underpinnings of establishing a welcoming and affirming church?**
   What is fundamental is giving a clear definition to the word “welcome”. Putting in your bulletin “all people are welcome”. You have to name it. You have to say it. We have to have representation of those who are most traditionally marginalized at every level of the church. We have to live out our theology, “Whosoever will, let him come.” What do we mean by “whosoever”? We have to enflesh and embody All of the welcome themes we preach from the bible with some sort of solid action.

8. **What are some of the advantages of having welcoming and affirming churches? Do you have stories regarding this?**
   When we really are welcome and affirming we really do epitomize the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Biography — Bishop Dr. Yvette Flunder
Senior Pastor, City of Refuge United Church of Christ
Presiding Bishop, Refuge Ministries/The Fellowship

Bishop Flunder founded the City of Refuge Community Church UCC in 1991 in order to unite a gospel ministry with a social ministry. City of Refuge is a thriving inner-city congregation that celebrates the radically inclusive love of Jesus Christ. Preaching a message of action, the church has experienced steady numerical and spiritual growth and is now located in the south Market area of San Francisco at 1025 Howard Street. In June 2003 Bishop Flunder was consecrated Presiding Bishop of Refuge Ministries/ The Fellowship 2000 a multi-denominational fellowship of primarily African American Christian leaders and laity representing churches and faith-based organizations from all parts of the United States and Africa. Responding to the needs of the AIDS epidemic, Bishop Flunder and her staff opened Hazard-Ashley House and Walker House in Oakland and Restoration House in San Francisco through the Ark of Refuge, Inc., a non-profit agency which provides housing, direct services, education and training for persons affected by HIV/AIDS in the Bay Area, throughout the USA and in three countries in Africa. The Ark provides HIV/AIDS education and prevention services targeting the African American and African faith community. The Ark also provides substance abuse intervention programs, transitional housing for homeless youth, mentorship programs and a computer lab and audio/video training for community youth. Bishop Flunder is much sought after as a preacher, educator, conference speaker and singer. She has been invited to minister and serve throughout the nation and many points abroad, and has received many awards for her work in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, with the elderly and youth. Bishop Flunder is also an ordained Minister of the United Church of Christ and a graduate of the Ministry Studies and Master of Arts programs at the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California where she now serves as a Trustee. She received a Doctor of Ministry degree from San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo California.



Rev. Loyce Newton-Edwards, M. Div.
Church of the Open Arms, UCC

1. **What is your definition of a welcoming and affirming church?**
   A welcoming and affirming church is open to, inclusive of, and authentically celebrates the diversity of ALL God's children. There is a message that is crystal clear that LGBT persons are welcomed and affirmed. In the Sunday bulletin of the church where I serve as the Assistant Pastor, Church of the Open Arms United Church of Christ, our mission statement reflects this definition: "We strive to follow in the reconciling ministry of Jesus, as an inclusive, justice seeking community. Gladly welcomes all persons regardless of color, ancestry, age, gender, sexual or affectional orientation, ethnicity, national origin, disability, familial status or political perspective."

2. **What does a welcoming and affirming church look like?**
   A welcoming and affirming church looks like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the "beloved community," which should exclude NONE, but would INCLUDE all persons. This church would include membership and leadership roles especially for LGBT persons and women who have been historically and systematically excluded because of religious bigotry. There would be room at the table for all of the "gifts" we bring.

3. **What has been your personal journey towards welcoming and affirming communities of faith?**
   My personal journey of faith, in search of welcoming and affirming communities, has been one of traveling down "religious" roads that lead to dead ends…theological waste lands (churches) that had no interest in being "welcoming and affirming communities of faith." As African Americans with a long painful history of racial discrimination, I'm motivated to help end any legacy of discrimination, as all of it is detrimental to our spiritual and emotional well being. I now serve a church where half of our members are LGBT and half are heterosexual, and this works well for us.

4. **How do you keep your congregation together while you are transitioning to a more welcoming faith community?**
   Although this is a challenge, Scripture reminds us that "we can do all things through him that loves us." Faith communities that are sensitive to and committed to being "sacred activists" take a leap of faith to stand up for those who are oppressed, and against those who would deny certain people basic human rights. In the process, in addition to much prayer, education is the key to helping people make that transition, and understand the need to be welcoming and affirming congregations.

5. **How do you live progressively within the confines of a denominationally conservative environment?**
   Although some are able to do that, I left such a church/denomination, because it was too spiritually draining for me.

6. **What have been the greatest resistances to becoming a welcoming/affirming church? How have you dealt with it?**
   Conservative theology is the primary reason I see for resistance to being radically inclusive churches. African Americans embrace Liberation Theology to eradicate racism, but reject it for eradicating Sexism, Homophobia, etc. As a Womanist Theologian, I have zero tolerance for religious bigotry, and see it as "theological injustice!" Dr. King reminds us that "an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.!"

7. **What do you consider to be some theological underpinnings of establishing a welcoming and affirming church?**
   The basic theological underpinning of establishing a welcoming and affirming church is that God loves all of us, and wants that love to be reflected in how we honor, accept and treat each other. The hymn writer says it well: Help us accept each other, as Christ accepted us…When we are clear about who we are…created in the image and likeness of an awesome God…and the mandate that we have to LOVE one another, we will move forward as disciples of Jesus. We will serve God, and one another in Spirit and in Truth, and everything thing else that needs to happen will fall into place like pieces of a puzzle.

8. **What are some of the advantages of having welcoming and affirming churches? Do you have stories regarding this?**
   The clear advantage is that we provide a safe "spiritual" haven for those who have been pushed to the margins of our society, wrongly rejected because they are LGBT persons. Welcoming and affirming churches represent "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors and, Open Arms to all of God's children! Not only do we welcome the stranger in, we welcome many of our friends and relatives who are LGBT people and terrified to be whom God has created them to be, for fear of being rejected.

Biography—Reverend Loyce Newton-Edwards, M. Div., M.S., B. S.

Rev. Loyce Newton Edwards is a 3rd generation minister, and a native of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. She received the M. Div. Degree (Theology Major) from ITC, The Interdenominational Theological Center, Gammon School of Theology, Atlanta, Ga. in 1997. At ITC, she received a Ford Foundation Fellowship under Dr. Jacquelyn Grants' Black Women In Church and Society Program.

In 1996, she was ordained by Bishop Dan Solomon of The Oklahoma Conference of The United Methodist Church, and was appointed from 1996-2000 to serve as Sr. Pastor of Clegg United Methodist Church, Oklahoma City, OK.

Rev. Edwards is delighted to be serving as the Assistant Pastor at Church of the Open Arms United Church of Christ, the Rev. Dr. Kathy McCallie is the Sr. Pastor. Her current ministries reflect the realization of a life long dream that God would "order her steps" to give leadership in diversity, including welcoming and affirming churches. Church of the Open Arms is the most diverse "welcoming and affirming" congregation in the state of Oklahoma.

In addition to her ministries, local and national, Rev. Edwards serves as an Adjunct Professor of Psychology (M. S., Counseling Psychology) at Rose St. College, Midwest City, Oklahoma. Other Adjunct positions have been at Oklahoma City Community College, and Langston University, Urban Center, both in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

One of her most passionate commitments is serving as President of PFLAG-OKC.



Pastor Ricc Rollins
Breath of Life Fellowship Church

1. **What is your definition of a welcoming and affirming church?**
   A church where the person is able to worship in his/her authentic self providing a spiritual haven for the individual to worship in spirit and in truth.

2. **What does a welcoming and affirming church look like?**
   You and me, us and them, all of the whosoever.

3. **What has been your personal journey towards welcoming and affirming communities of faith?**
   When I couldn't find one that resembled my worship experience, I started one. That journey has been interesting as the same-gender-loving community often runs from the "old school worship experience" seeking something accepting, but often refutes participation wanting only a spectators vantage point.

4. **How do you keep your congregation together while you are transitioning to a more welcoming faith community?**
   Much prayer... and presenting the vision plan of being an intentionally inclusive and radically hospitable, having respect.

5. **How do you live progressively within the confines of a denominationally conservative environment?**
   Finding others of the same path and bonding spiritually and sometimes socially.

6. **What have been the greatest resistances to becoming a welcoming/affirming church? How have you dealt with it?**
   Cooperation and participation from the community whom we diligently attempt to serve. Much prayer and then more prayer. Networking with others who live your story is also helpful.

7. **What do you consider to be some theological underpinnings of establishing a welcoming and affirming church?**
   Getting folk to realize this ain't Big Mama's Church or denomination and we may not do things the same way.

8. **What are some of the advantages of having welcoming and affirming churches? Do you have stories regarding this?**
   At Breath of Life, our motto is the "church where you can be YOUrself." That is the biggest advantage of the welcoming church is that we can be ourselves and begin the healing process and loose the shackles of shame that were bestowed upon us by our former pastors and churches. In the inclusive worship setting, we can now wholly embrace the spiritual mandate to worship in "spirit and in truth."

Biography — Pastor Ricc Rollins

Ricc Rollins is an author, advocate, actor, pastor, life coach, motivational speaker journalist and matriculated at Morehouse College where he majored in Business and now serves as Senior Pastor and founder of Breath of Life Fellowship Church, an intentionally inclusive and radically hospitable ministry in Tampa, FL. His widely read column, Let's Be Clear is featured monthly in Watermark, Central Florida's leading LGBTQ newspaper.

Previously, Ricc was a television talk show host and executive producer of both his own self-titled and award-winning, The Ric Rollins Show and UpFront with Ricc Rollins, the late night infotainment show where he interviewed such celebrities as Patti LaBelle, Yolanda King, Tavis Smiley and Angela Bassett.

Ricc is also the author of Like Breathing, Breathe Again and his forth coming novel, Bated Breath. In addition, he is the photojournalist of Phyne Art, the coffee table pictorial that garnered him the 2007 CLIK Honor for Visual Arts. He is also an award winning photographer with magazine and book covers to his credit.