

“Leading Cultural Change: An Ecclesiology of Hospitality Emphasizing LGBT Perspectives”

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### **ABSTRACT**

Hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives within Open & Affirming churches will enable ONA congregations to lead cultural change by better engaging those to whom it emphasizes welcome. This posture holds ONA churches accountable by insisting their congregations listen to and learn from the lived experiences that visit their church but might not feel fully included in its ecclesiological life. The research applies a spirituality of hospitality model to ecclesiology. From eleven interviews with LGBTQ people in Austin, Bryan, and College Station, Texas, this essay draws practical and ongoing conclusions about how ONA congregations move from welcoming to affirming LGBTQ people.

## Introduction

Friends Congregational Church, where I have served as pastor since September 1, 2005, is an Open & Affirming (ONA) congregation in College Station, Texas.<sup>1</sup> The adoption of an ONA Statement in 1996 ushered in new membership ranging from LGBTQ individuals and families to heterosexual individuals and families where parents desired to raise their children in a church environment that intentionally sought to include everyone.<sup>2</sup> Since the doors of Friends Church have been opened for the last two decades to a diverse body of Christ that does not (and to a large extent cannot) exist anywhere else in our community, as our faith leader, I am compelled to ask, “What purposeful actions are we taking to affirm and nurture that diversity?” In other words, “We’re ONA...now what?”

Exploring culture and ministry, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write, “The only way for the world to know that it is being redeemed is for the church to point to the Redeemer by being a redeemed people.”<sup>3</sup> If the community is not as hospitable as it is welcoming toward those it attempts to reach by the nature of its ONA identity, then those who come in response to an evangelistic invitation will likely not stay. A lack of hospitality that neglects to nurture the community culminating from our ONA Statement results in missed opportunities where we might have pointed to the Redeemer.

Hospitality is not an act or series of acts, but a perpetual discipline. Daniel Homan and Lonni Pratt suggest in their book, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love*, “It is a spiritual practice, a way of becoming more human, a way of understanding yourself. Hospitality is both the answer to modern alienation and injustice *and* a path to a deeper spirituality.”<sup>4</sup> The process offered in this paper, drawn from my D.Min. thesis, unpacks hospitality in terms of spirituality and then explains how this is applied to ecclesiology.<sup>5</sup>

The late Catholic theologian and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen explains hospitality by suggesting that we promote spaces where listening and learning are emphasized. He writes, “When we practice genuine listening, we avoid treating the other’s story as devoid of God’s grace.”<sup>6</sup> Such receptivity informs our perception and understanding of others, thereby deepening our spirituality:

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<sup>1</sup> ONA is the acronym used by the United Church of Christ to denote that a congregation within its denomination is “Open and Affirming.” This definition of ONA is taken from the UCC website at <http://www.ucc.org/lgbt/ona.html>: “To say that a setting of the UCC (a local church, campus ministry, etc.) is ‘Open and Affirming’ means that it has publicly declared that ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual’ (LGB) people (or those of all ‘sexual orientations’) are welcome in its full life and ministry (e.g. membership, leadership, employment, etc.). It bespeaks a spirit of hospitality and a willingness to live out that welcome in meaningful ways. Transgender people or gender identity and gender expression is increasingly included in ONA declarations, statements or policies.”

<sup>2</sup> LGBTQ stands for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer.’

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 94.

<sup>4</sup> Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Dan De Leon, “We’re ONA...Now What?: An Ecclesiology of Hospitality Emphasizing LGBTQ Perspectives” (Brite Divinity School, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> D. Mark Davis, *Talking About Evangelism: A Congregational Resource*, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 73.

When we are willing to detach ourselves from making our own limited experience the criterion for our approach to others, we may be able to see that life is greater than our life, history is greater than our history, experience greater than our experience and God greater than our God. That is the poverty of heart that makes a good host. With poverty of heart we can receive the experiences of others as a gift to us. Their histories can creatively connect with ours, their lives give new meaning to ours, and their God speaks to ours in mutual revelation.<sup>7</sup>

Seeking Nouwen's "poverty of heart," I conducted eleven interviews in offices, bars, restaurants, and coffee shops in Austin, Bryan, and College Station, Texas, with twelve individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. The experiences disclosed by the interviewees are recorded here as gifts offering vital insight on how ONA congregations might come to understand hospitality.

In her book on hospitality and early Christianity, *And You Welcomed Me*, Amy Oden writes, "At the very least, hospitality is the welcoming of the stranger."<sup>8</sup> The common thread throughout the ancient biblical texts regarding the stranger is that they are all vulnerable populations.<sup>9</sup> Oden writes, "Early Christians refer to 'the captive,' 'those in bonds,' 'prisoners,' and 'slaves' as vulnerable people in need of hospitality."<sup>10</sup> Homan and Pratt add, "Hospitality, as it has been practiced from ancient days, protected people from the dangers of traveling alone."<sup>11</sup> It is impossible for the church to be a utopian resource where and through which all human needs are met by some fabled welcome. However, Oden writes, "Taken as a feature of Christian life, hospitality is not so much a singular act of welcome as it is a way, an orientation that attends to otherness, listening and learning, valuing and honoring."<sup>12</sup>

Adopting an ONA Statement and supporting it with the vision of "offering God's extravagant welcome to all" gives each member of Friends Church a clear, unified understanding that we are devoted to inclusiveness and intentional welcome.<sup>13</sup> However, making an extravagant welcome secondary to extravagant hospitality charges a congregation to be orientated toward attending to otherness, listening and learning, valuing and honoring. Nouwen writes:

If we expect any salvation, redemption, healing and new life, the first thing we need is an open receptive place where something can happen to us. Hospitality, therefore, is such an important attitude. We cannot change the world by a new plan, project or idea. We cannot even change other

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<sup>7</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, (London: Fount of Harper Collins, 1997), 78.

<sup>8</sup> Amy G. Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Oden, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Oden, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Homan & Pratt, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Oden, 14.

<sup>13</sup> The Vision for Friends Congregational Church is stated on the website's homepage: <http://www.friends-ucc.org/index.php/>: "Our Vision: Offering God's extravagant welcome to all."

people by our convictions, stories, advice and proposals, but we can offer a space where people are encouraged to disarm themselves, to lay aside their occupations and preoccupations and to listen with attention and care to the voices speaking in their own centre.<sup>14</sup>

Hospitality is a feature of Christian life that is more orientated toward reconciling, nurturing, and strengthening community than are acts of welcome that are directed toward compiling community or gathering the faithful. In ecclesiological life, hospitality becomes a way by which the church seeks the abundant love of God. That way values, without compromise, the otherness of the stranger. This is perhaps the highest hurdle for churches to leap in how we are perceived by LGBTQ people.

### **Healing and Reconciliation**

Our culture is staunchly heterosexist, and, to a degree unattainable by even the most empathetic hetero people, this is vividly evident to LGBTQ people.<sup>15</sup> Tragically, this is also evident to LGBTQ people's perceptions of the Church. Consequently, the LGBTQ identity is the otherness lacking from the ecclesial outlook, which results in the Body of Christ suffering incompleteness and God's glory being withheld. Arthur Sutherland writes, "It seems entirely unlikely that anything short of the admission that all people are aliens and strangers to God will ever be able to bring about the reconciliation with one another that our world needs."<sup>16</sup> Hospitality that is attentive to our mutual estrangement from God and subsequent redemption by and to God would dismantle assumptions of hostility, offering reconciliation to the wounded perspectives of our LGBTQ neighbors.

Hospitality emphasizes healing. While this is a need experienced by everyone in varying degrees at different times in their lives, LGBTQ people are particularly in need of healing from multiple fears given their experience in our heterosexist culture:

Mental health professionals are now realizing the implications of homophobia because it jeopardizes the physical and psychological welfare of an individual and violates the human rights and civil liberties of this minority. These mostly psychological attacks instill in LGBT people the notion that the dominant heterosexual community sees them as abnormal and undesirable.<sup>17</sup>

This is not only a visible estrangement of LGBTQ people from the dominant heterosexual community; it is an inward estrangement that dismantles the identity of LGBTQ people with self-loathing. "Internalized homophobia is the outcome of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth internalizing society's negative ideology about sexual minorities."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nouwen, 52-53.

<sup>15</sup> A definition of 'heterosexism' according to Linda Goldman in *Coming Out, Coming In: Nurturing the Well-Being and Inclusion of Gay Youth in Mainstream Society*, (New York, NY: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 14: "Heterosexism is 'the discrimination or prejudice by heterosexuals against homosexuals' (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2006). It is a belief system that male-female sexuality is the only natural, normal, or moral mode of sexual behavior and this idea results in a reinforcement of stigma and power differentials associated with this belief."

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 37.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Goldman, *Coming Out, Coming In: Nurturing the Well-Being and Inclusion of Gay Youth in Mainstream Society*, (New York, NY: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 8-9.

Christine Pohl and Pamela Buck write in their hospitality guide, *Making Room*, “The most vulnerable strangers are those people who are disconnected from relationships with family, church, economy, and civic community.”<sup>19</sup> Given their disconnect from these relationships due to their identity, LGBTQ people are among the most vulnerable strangers in our culture, and LGBTQ people are more commonly exposed to danger in society than a majority of the population. Nouwen writes, “In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.”<sup>20</sup> Surely, LGBTQ people can testify to this estrangement in ways to which the hetero-founded, hetero-minded church is ignorant.

While the historical wounds of heterosexist ignorance run deep, the healing balm of hospitality is beneficial to the stranger as well as to our churches. Freddy James Clark writes, “Hospitality, as an ecclesiological practice and a public way of life, seeks to find commonality with the woefully disconnected ‘other,’ to develop a relationship where they are perceived as equals.”<sup>21</sup> Such reconciliatory equality is activated when congregations work to add the LGBTQ identity to ecclesiology’s narrative and outlook:

Hospitality shifts the frame of reference from self to other to relationship. This shift invariably leads to repentance, for one sees the degree to which one’s own view has become the only view...As communities become more hospitable they experience a de-centering of perspective: they become more aware of the structural inequalities that exist in and around them and repent.<sup>22</sup>

The church that is attentive to everyone’s experiences, including those of our LGBTQ neighbors, rectifies itself, relying on God’s grace, into a community that listens to and learns from the full humanity of each person responding to its welcome.

We must also be reminded that Jesus Christ is the liberator, reconciler and healer, not the Church; and “as Christians we must not and cannot speak for Christ but only and ever about Christ.”<sup>23</sup> If reconciliation and healing are to be found, if the afflicted are ever to receive comfort, the Church must acknowledge its own complicity with past and present injustices, and its own association among the comfortable whom the table-overturning Jesus would suggest must be afflicted. Then and only then can LGBTQ people’s lives be seen and stories be heard in the ecclesiological sphere. This must occur, for their lives and stories harbor the very presence of God. Karen Leqacqz underlines:

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<sup>18</sup> Goldman, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Pamela J. Buck & Christine D. Pohl, *Study Guide for Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids / Cambridge, 2001), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Nouwen, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Freddy James Clark, *Hospitality: An Ecclesiological Practice of Ministry*, (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books of the Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2007), 40.

<sup>22</sup> Oden, 15-16.

<sup>23</sup> Cheri DiNovo, *Qu(e)rying Evangelism: Growing Community from the Outside In*, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 23.

If justice begins with the correction of injustice, then the most important tools for understanding justice will be the stories of injustice as experienced by the oppressed and the tools of social and historical analysis that help to illumine the process by which those historical injustices arose and the meaning of them in the lives of the victims.<sup>24</sup>

Although I frame this in terms of afflicting the comforted, the lives and stories of our LGBTQ sisters and brothers are not ultimately received as collective affliction; rather, for the Church, LGBTQ lives and stories are received as reconciliation, healing, and good news. They are collective evangelism.

## Receiving Evangelism

Mark Davis defines evangelism as “the activity of sharing the joy and justice of the gospel.”<sup>25</sup> In practical theology, the question arises, “Who is the evangel?” For the Church to intentionally ask this question is the normative task of practical theology that interprets some of the most vital evangels in our context being LGBTQ people. Richard Osmer explains that prophetic discernment, the aforementioned discipline of listening and learning, is the Church’s tool for this normative task:

Christ Jesus is the full and unsurpassable revelation of God. We are not to look for other words from God alongside of or in competition with this Word. Prophetic discernment is the task of listening to this Word and interpreting it in ways that address particular social conditions, events, and decisions before congregations today. Such discernment is a matter of divine disclosure and theological interpretation in the face of popular or official theologies that may be leading the world toward disaster.<sup>26</sup>

If Jesus’ ministry is revealed primarily in, among, and through those most vulnerable and exposed to danger, and if that ministry points to the reconciling, healing presence of God, that sacred presence is found most evidently on the margins. This exercise in practical theology demonstrates that the Church is to be first the recipient of evangelism, not the bearer of it. Davis suggests:

Rather than adopting the position of the expert, we adopt the position of companion. Through genuine listening, we solicit the story of others, under the conviction that God is already redemptively present in their lives. Therefore, their story does not need to fit into a proper formula, any specific theology, or any religious language, because their story is not up for our judgment.<sup>27</sup>

Nouwen continues, “Old and New Testament stories not only show how serious our obligation is to welcome the stranger in our home, but they also tell us that guests are carrying precious gifts with

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<sup>24</sup> Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 150, cited in Clark, 66.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 135.

<sup>27</sup> Davis, 60.

them, which they are eager to reveal to a receptive host.”<sup>28</sup> The gifts we receive in our churches from LGBTQ guests are imperative lessons to learn for reconciliation and healing that might overturn centuries of the Church’s hostility toward God’s children who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer.

### **Priestly Listening as Shared Leadership**

Paul Tillich writes, “The first duty of love is to listen.”<sup>29</sup> Through cyber networks and word of mouth, I sought interviewees who identified as LGBTQ, who were not members of Friends Church, and who wished to share their opinions on the topic of hospitality and, more specifically, church hospitality. I received enthusiastic responses from people yearning for conversational space. One interviewee told me, “I have rarely met a pastor [where] I could sit down and present questions without them shutting me off and telling me I’m wrong...I was telling a friend of mine how I would love to find a church where a pastor would be willing to say the words ‘I could be wrong.’”<sup>30</sup> Hearing this opinion loud and clear, I approached each interview with great care and respect.

Although I did not come to the interviews in clerical garb, I was seen by the interviewees as the face of the church, the face of an institution that has oppressed and shut out LGBTQ people for centuries. In this capacity, my attempt at creating space for mutual conversation required more than care and respect; it required apology and humility.<sup>31</sup> As Proverbs 1:5 instructs, “Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.”

When applied to ecclesiology, listening is part of what Osmer calls the descriptive-empirical task of practical theology.<sup>32</sup> When the congregation engages this process, listening becomes priestly listening. “Priestly listening is, first and foremost, an activity of the entire Christian community, not just its leaders. It reflects the nature of the congregation as a fellowship in which people listen to one another as a form of mutual support, care, and edification.”<sup>33</sup> However, the congregation of Friends Church was not conducting the interviews with LGBTQ people, I was. My own priestly listening would be incomplete without bringing what I learned back to the congregation. Then Osmer’s descriptive-empirical task of practical theology could be engaged as an act of shared leadership, activating and empowering the priesthood of believers.

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<sup>28</sup> Nouwen, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Tillich, quotation from [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the\\_first\\_duty\\_of\\_love\\_is\\_to\\_listen/218174.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_first_duty_of_love_is_to_listen/218174.html), accessed 15 February 2011.

<sup>30</sup> James, face-to-face interview conducted in the pastor’s office at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 17 December 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Given that the interviewees were self-selected, and that they agreed to visit with a Christian pastor, I acknowledge the limitations of the interviews in this capacity. Surely, many LGBTQ people in the Bryan-College Station area would not agree to meet with me for a conversational interview on the grounds of my church representation, perhaps even if they were paid, which no interviewees were. Additionally, given that I did not have 100 percent of the LGBTQ community of B-CS from which to choose interviewees from the start, the overall perspective of LGBTQ people in B-CS is not wholly represented. For the reader’s benefit here, I also acknowledge this limitation not reaching the formal standard for social scientific research.

<sup>32</sup> Osmer, 31-78.

<sup>33</sup> Osmer, 35.

Some of the interviewees were enthusiastic that their answers might influence the church: “I find it excellent that you’re willing to question what you’re doing, and thinking about how you can better do that next time. That’s growth!”<sup>34</sup> The interviews served as a sounding board for LGBTQ voices to spark the ongoing questions needed to guide the congregation’s priestly listening. I argue that priestly listening leads to ecclesiological change that demonstrates authentic hospitality toward LGBTQ people and all whom the ONA church strives to welcome and affirm in the name of Jesus Christ and to the glory of God.

### **The Journey toward Authenticity**

In 2007, Joan was working as a youth minister in a Baptist church. She was aware of her sexual orientation, but given her church’s stance against homosexuality, Joan remained in the closet:

It was a real struggle because I wasn’t being authentic. Granted, I wasn’t dating anybody, but I didn’t feel like I was being true to myself...I said, “I can keep doing this ministry and be happy in that aspect of my life, but there’s this whole other side that’s twenty-four/seven.” Youth ministry was great, but I just was not happy because I wasn’t living the life I wanted to live.<sup>35</sup>

It was at this point that Joan met Liz. Joan resigned her youth ministry position to live more fully into her sexual orientation and her newfound relationship: “I said, ‘Let’s be authentic and see where it takes us.’”<sup>36</sup>

For LGBTQ people, the process of coming out is a journey toward authenticity. This looks differently for every LGBTQ individual. The details vary from person to person and story to story, but the journey toward authenticity is the consistent gift that LGBTQ perspectives bring to the church. M.R. Ritley, an openly gay Episcopal priest, testifies:

Each of the gay men and women who can stand up and say who they are is an icon for each of the other human beings who do not yet have the courage to be who they are, or who have the suspicion that they are someone other than they have been taught they are. This extends far beyond sexual identity. It’s a very scary thing to challenge the received wisdom of one’s entire culture, which is why we are both the terror and the envy of straight people. In a world in as much conflict as ours is, one thing that is desperately needed is the visible presence of people who are not afraid to challenge received wisdom, which is turning people into economic drones, destroying our environment, and pressing the vast majority of human beings to the margins because they have the wrong language, color, or gender.<sup>37</sup>

This queer gift of authenticity transcends binary categorization and empowers the entire congregation, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, to see themselves as made in God’s

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<sup>34</sup> John and Lance, face-to-face interview conducted at Village Café, Bryan, Texas, 17 January 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Joan, face-to-face interview in the pastor’s office at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 10 December 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Joan interview.

<sup>37</sup> L. William Countryman and M.R. Ritley, *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church*, (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), 70-71.



image, and to come out in all areas of their life as courageous disciples of Christ. Ritley adds this insight: “Our whole life experience, which includes our sexual orientation, has actually been the occasion of our faith coming awake and giving us life. We bring to churches a perspective that renews and revives the central message of the gospel, the good news that forms the foundation for everything that is legitimately Christian.”<sup>38</sup> To live according to the beatitudes, to work for the peace demanded by God’s prophets, and to love others as relentlessly as Jesus did is a radically countercultural and even dangerous existence; but this is what God requires of the Church if we are to live authentically. I offer this example from another interview:

Dan: In your opinion, how can we improve as a church?

Lily: Don’t be the one who is there to maintain the status quo. Don’t be the one who just maintains the mainstream social power, whatever it is. Don’t be the one who actually fosters people using those power structures.<sup>39</sup>

Voices like Lily’s loudly remind the Church of its gospel-rooted identity and implore that we be authentic by coming out for the sake of God’s justice, mercy, and love.

Paul is a part-time professional organist who had been playing frequently at a church when the news of his sexual orientation was disclosed:

Dan: When you were told you were no longer welcome, how was that conveyed to you?

Paul: The music director said, “We’ve been told [that you are gay], is that true?” I said, “Yes, that is true.” And he was trying to be friendly. He said, “Well, if it were just up to the pastor and me, it would be okay, but it’s really not, and people would be upset.” I thought, “You fucking moron. If it really was okay with you, then stand up for your principles. If it’s not, don’t lie to me.” So, that, apart from the content of it, the way it was conveyed I found very irritating.<sup>40</sup>

This exchange shows not only a lack of authenticity, but a lack of spiritual depth, because the degree to which a church offers hospitality reveals the depth of its spirituality.<sup>41</sup> Homan and Pratt add:

You can’t ignore people when God is looking out their eyes at you. In the tiresome, the invalid, the rebellious, we are faced with God. It is our own failures to love that we have to deal with when we talk of hospitality. Hospitality cuts through the sham of our excuses.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Countryman and Ritley, 5-6.

<sup>39</sup> Lily, face-to-face interview conducted in the pastor’s office at Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 28 December 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Paul, face-to-face interview conducted in his office at Seton Clinical Education Center, Austin, Texas, 30 December 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Alan Johnson, *Encounters at the Counter: What Congregations Can Learn About Hospitality from Business* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 41.

<sup>42</sup> Homan and Pratt, 5.

Perhaps the music director in Paul's story would not have so easily insisted that Paul resign if that music director's spirituality, rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, was deeper. Consequently, his hospitality might have been more extravagant, enabling him to stand up for his principles, for the least of these, for the presence of Christ standing right in front of him in the beautiful gift of Paul to that church. Homan and Pratt add, "The biggest obstacle to hospitality is not the state of the world. It is the state of our minds and hearts."<sup>43</sup> In his interview, James asserted:

If a church is not hospitable, not prepared to be welcoming, that's a symptom of something far worse, which is that the attitude of the body is in the wrong place. If the hearts of the body are in the wrong place then something's off. I don't think it's even possible for all of the other essentials to be there and hospitality not.<sup>44</sup>

Love is the gospel principle that compels the ONA congregation to do everything the aforementioned LGBTQ voices suggest we do in order to demonstrate authentic hospitality. Those deeds that attempt to show an extravagant welcome to all do not precede love; rather, love is the authentic core from which all acts of Christian kindness, generosity, and justice are derived. For Lily, this defines the true church:

One of the major themes of the Bible is to love people. If a church is being unwelcoming to people who are different—and putting this into context, these people are also being discriminated against in society—and the church doesn't give support that these people cannot get from anywhere else, that's not love. It's not love if you exclude people who are different. From my definition, this would not be a true church.<sup>45</sup>

Notice that for Lily inclusion is determined not by openness, but by affirmation. As Jane, a lesbian teenager, says, "Where are my allies? I don't need to know that you are my ally; I need you to *be* an ally."<sup>46</sup>

Patti was raised in the church, and ze recalls zir negative experience in that setting being constant:

I would hear this over and over at churches when I was growing up, coming from the pulpit, that when it comes to homosexuality, you can love the sinner, but hate the sin. I would think, "Well, on the one hand they're saying they love homosexuals, but really they hate who I am." That was always troubling to me.<sup>47,48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Homan and Pratt, 16.

<sup>44</sup> James, interview.

<sup>45</sup> Lily, interview.

<sup>46</sup> Goldman, 136.

<sup>47</sup> Because Patti identifies as "gender queer," Patti's preferred pronouns to articulate that gender are 'ze, zir, zirs.'

<sup>48</sup> Patti, face-to-face interview conducted at Murphy's Law, Bryan, Texas, 23 December 2010.

David Kundtz and Bernard Schlager implore:

Imagine living in a world in which what seems like your very being is questioned and found to be wanting—if not downright evil. Such a response would have a strong effect on anyone. The “closet” seems safe, quiet, and peaceful by comparison. The problem is that it is also dark, hidden, and can be lonely—and ultimately not a healthy choice.<sup>49</sup>

It is impossible to love the sinner and hate the sin, because embracing such a theology is a refusal of God’s gifts. Ritley offers this perspective:

We must understand quite clearly what is our problem and what is not, and politely but resolutely hand the heterosexual community its problem back. Our love, our desire, is not a problem, but a gift, one of the greatest pieces of God’s grace we can know. Being gay is not a sin, nor a sickness, but God’s gift to us.<sup>50</sup>

Given that church members are encouraged to share their gifts to strengthen the congregation and fulfill its mission, what would ecclesiological hospitality look like that understood sexual orientation and gender identity as God’s gifts?

### **Queering the Church**

Marcella Althaus-Reid writes, “Queer is a word which originally meant ‘transverse’ or ‘oblique’ and it is used in a positive way. Queer theory celebrates diversity, the crossing of borders and imprecise frontiers. It liberates the assumed reference of theology and therefore liberates Godself from assumptions and ideological justifications.”<sup>51</sup> The queer experience is not exclusively associated with LGBTQ people when it is held up to Jesus’ ministry of reaching out to the margins of society and there activating the love of God: “The queer experience...of being on the edge of acceptability if not wholly unacceptable could even be extended to the apparently most typical church member, a white, straight, married, psychiatrically normal male.”<sup>52</sup> An ecclesiology of hospitality that emphasizes LGBTQ perspectives, therefore, brings blessed queerness to the entire body of Christ. As a clergy mentor who is gay once told me, “You don’t have to be gay to be queer.”

Hospitality breaks down the barriers of our humanly crafted binary divisions and demands that the church let go of hostility to embrace its own ecclesiological queerness. This is the repentance that enables the Church to find queerness in the very identity of God. Seeing God as queer floods the human heart with an ability to see one’s neighbor as equal, as bearing gifts from the Divine, and as beautifully made in God’s image:

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<sup>49</sup> David J. Kundtz and Bernard S. Schlager, *Ministry Among God’s Queer Folk: LGBT Pastoral Care*, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 54.

<sup>50</sup> Countryman and Ritley, 28.

<sup>51</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 2004), 143.

<sup>52</sup> DiNovo, 129.

God comes out from heterosexual theology when the voices from sexual dissidents speak out to the churches, daring to unveil sexual ideologies from theology, and daring to love with integrity in a world where love has also become a commodity. In fact, in every community of excluded people and in every inch of the struggle for sexual and economic justice, the Queer God manifests Godself with full glory, power and grace.<sup>53</sup>

The spiritual hospitality that expands space to accommodate all people translates into ecclesiology by proclaiming that the ONA congregation is a community of queer people. When the Church recognizes this revelation, our communal identity does not look like the world around us.

Our world thinks in terms of normal and abnormal, but in the church where we proclaim the equality and uniqueness of every individual, we refuse to accept that anyone is abnormal. We are new creations in Christ Jesus. Our identity in Christ transcends the barriers that once divided us, including gender identity and sexual orientation. In our newness, we are all one, and we are all queer.

### **Addressing the Whale in the Middle of the Room: A Queer Approach to Scripture**

The Book of Jonah offers timeless lessons on a multitude of topics constantly jabbing at the human condition: the folly of our preconceived notions and judgments against our fellow humanity, mustering the willpower to rise to unwanted challenges, grappling with what might be perceived as the sadistic nature of God, and so forth. Jonah is a rich story about a man with adamant principles forced out of his comfort zone and into the turbulent unknown. He travels begrudgingly to Nineveh by way of being thrown from a boat bound for Tarshish, swallowed by a great fish, and then vomited onto dry land. His interaction with sailors out of Joppa, his desperate prayer from the belly of a fish, his encounters with a nation of supposedly wicked people, and his dialogue with God all intersect with our life experiences in convicting and hope-filled ways. There is so much to be found in Jonah, but when we think of that awe-inspiring book, what comes to mind is that Jonah was swallowed by a whale because he refused to obey God. That trumps everything else, and what a shame.

Why do the few verses in Jonah that account for a great fish swallowing God's wayward messenger overshadow all the others? That is how the story has been commonly told, and that is the only message taken from Jonah as a result. The ONA congregation, however, has the gift of a queer lens through which to revisit this text. In her essay, "A Queer Reading of the Book of Jonah," Sharon Bezner writes:

The traditional meaning and interpretation of the book of Jonah is one that has been established by the prominent theologians of the last two hundred years: white heterosexual middle-class Anglo-Saxon men. One can only wonder how the text would be interpreted by other groups of people...What would it look like for gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered (queer) people to read and interpret the book of Jonah?<sup>54</sup>

Revisiting these texts through a queer reading affirms LGBTQ perspectives and becomes an act of ecclesiological hospitality.

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<sup>53</sup> Althaus-Reid, 176.

<sup>54</sup> Sharon Bezner, "A Queer Reading of the Book of Jonah," in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, eds., Robert E. Goss and Mona West, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 162.

What does it mean to read through a queer lens, or to utilize a queer reading of the Bible? Would not someone need to identify as LGBTQ to be a queer reader? Remember that in the ONA congregation, we are a Christ-defined, gospel-rooted community. This ecclesiological identity requires that we show hospitality to one another that affirms the entirety of our being, listening to LGBTQ perspectives and incorporating them into our shared life of faith. Affirming LGBTQ perspectives brings mutual queerness to the ONA congregation where the cultural divisions of straight and gay, normal and abnormal fall away.

Inherent in this communal identity of queerness is the power to revisit and reclaim texts that have been used to oppress and exclude. The queer reader actively searches for those messages, narratives, and voices that have been silenced by a narrow interpretation of the Bible. In the case of Jonah, the ONA congregation is called to take up a queer reading of the text to address the whale that has swallowed the fullness of the story and consequently robbed LGBTQ people of their God-given connection to that message.

Scripture has been manipulated as a weapon against LGBTQ people far more than it has been shared as a message of God's love. In his interview, Carlos said, "The worst part of it is the abuse of the Bible."<sup>55</sup> A handful of texts that have been hurled at LGBTQ people (Gen. 19:1-28; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Rom. 1:26-28; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10) are often called "clobber passages," because they are used to promote homophobia and violence against them.<sup>56</sup> Borrowing Phyllis Trible's term, Robert Goss calls them the queer community's "texts of terror."<sup>57</sup>

Recently, our congregation hosted an event on immigration reform. To promote the event and to challenge narratives of racism and territorialism, our church's Social Justice Class placed a message on the marquee: "Treat the foreigner as a native. —Leviticus 19:33."<sup>58</sup> The class felt that without the biblical citation the message would not be adequately convicting. However, when one of our lesbian church members drove into the parking lot, her reaction was not what the Social Justice Class intended.

Seeing the word 'Leviticus' gave this church member a chilling reaction that felt to her like a symptom of PTSD. Leviticus 18:22 flashed in her mind. Suddenly her own church, where she felt safe being who she was, was now showing messages that made her feel unwelcome. The 'Leviticus 19:33' portion of the marquee's wording came down promptly. When the Social Justice Class got word of this, however, they reached out to this church member explaining why they included the Bible reference on the sign. 'Leviticus 19:33' was placed back on the marquee, but a feeling of unease remained.

Tragically, Lev. 18:22 is the androcentric whale that has often swallowed the entire book. Leviticus in its entirety is perceived as a damning tirade against LGBTQ people because the patriarchal, hyper-masculine whale of unchallenged hermeneutics has devoured the fullness of its message. The name Leviticus is one not to be uttered in the ONA congregation's house; but just as

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<sup>55</sup> Carlos, face-to-face interview conducted at Village Café, Bryan, Texas, 12 December 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Robert E. Goss & West, Mona, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>57</sup> Robert E. Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 90-94, cited in Goss & West, 3.

<sup>58</sup> This translation of Leviticus 19:33 is derived from Eugene Peterson's version of the Bible, *The Message*. In the NRSV translation, Leviticus 19:33 reads, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien."

surely as Jonah is a broad story that offers more than a tale about a great fish swallowing God's dissident, the revelations Leviticus has to offer are extinguished when the manipulative translation of one verse is heralded as the book's summation.

When I asked Joan if she had any favorite stories in the Bible, she said, "Noah's Ark," but her interpretation of that story is the gift of a queer reading:

Joan: My favorite part is what happens after the flood, where he gets drunk and passes out in his tent. He's obedient to God in His ridiculous request, yet he's still flawed and it's okay. It's interesting to me that that's the part of the story that's never told. Isn't that equally significant to the great act of obedience? It's great to be obedient, but to be flawed and for God to know that all this stuff is going to happen? "He's going to go crazy after the ark lands. He's going to go on a bender." God saw all that beforehand, and instead of saying, "I don't need this guy! He's going to screw up anyway," God didn't. I like it. It's a good story.

Dan: Why has this stuck with you as your favorite?

Joan: I used to be a youth minister. I wasn't out at the time. I was very respectful of the rules, but when I decided that I wanted to start dating someone, there's that very real moment when you go, "I'm not going to be welcome in my church." So, it resonates with me because it's what this Baptist church that I went to would call my great act of disobedience, which I would call living an authentic life. It doesn't negate everything else, which I think a lot of people would disagree with. So, while I don't go on benders all the time, I get Noah, you know? I get it.<sup>59</sup>

By being able to revisit and reclaim the story of Noah for herself based on her experience, Joan embraces the Bible as a friend that does no harm. She gets it, and that clarity empowers her to have no fear in being her authentic self.

A queer reading of Scripture asks, "Who is being denigrated in this text? Who benefits from their being denigrated? Who is being left out?" Hearing queer interpretations of Scripture compels the ONA congregation to ask questions of its own hospitality toward LGBTQ people: "Is our hospitality authoritarian? Are we exhibiting control over we welcome? In our preparations to receive others, who is being left out?" Cheri DiNovo suggests: "The church needs to be called back to faithfulness, a faithfulness to its own scripture from which it has strayed at the behest of modernism and of the world's powers. Perhaps in this century the church is the object of an evangelization process initiated by God and carried out by the queer."<sup>60</sup> If the ONA church is unwilling to revisit sacred texts in which its identity is grounded with an incorporation of LGBTQ perspectives, hospitality toward LGBTQ people is half-hearted. Such passivity does disservice to the congregation's efforts at hospitality and its desire to seek the fullness of God's Word within the Bible.

Does queer biblical criticism illuminate the authority of Scripture in the same way that an evangelical or fundamentalist interpretation would? Not necessarily. A queer reading of the Bible disrupts and exposes the false pretenses of authority itself. Just as history is written by the victors in a particular setting and time, the pages of the Bible are written by men who would benefit from the

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<sup>59</sup> Joan, interview.

<sup>60</sup> DiNovo, 102.

message they penned. Our ecclesiology proclaims that the authors of Scripture were divinely inspired; yes, but also humanly flawed by and limited to their own perspectives. Queer biblical criticism does not question the authority of the Bible itself; rather, queer reading prods the so-called authority of modern hermeneutics that do not take into consideration, let alone question, the androcentric, hyper-masculine vantage point of Scripture's original authors.

An examination of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount reveals queering at the heart of the Gospel message: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17). A sermon delivered on this text at First Baptist Church, Austin, preached, "Jesus makes it very clear that while he has not come to do away with the law, he has come to breathe new life into it. He has come that we might get a fresh understanding of how to live this out in the world."<sup>61</sup> Applying queer criticism to biblical interpretation is essentially viewing Scripture through the lens of Jesus. Informed by the very identity of Jesus, the act of queering does not shove tradition aside for the sake of some radical alternative; rather, it reencounters tradition to reclaim and pronounce its vitality.

Althaus-Reid writes, "There are basically two kinds of readings: the one which interprets to legitimize structures of power, and the one which questions the interpretation and the power itself."<sup>62</sup> Jesus certainly does not legitimize the existing power structures of his day, but he does not avoid them either. Like the Palm Sunday Jesus riding into Jerusalem on an unlikely donkey instead of in a mighty horse-drawn chariot, queer biblical criticism does not tiptoe around widely accepted scriptural interpretations, but instead directly confronts their validity by questioning their origins and the legitimacy of their power. Liberated from the restrictions of exclusivist interpretations, the Law and the Prophets are revitalized with new life that surpasses previously accepted views of Scripture that omit the queer other.

### **Practical Suggestions for Ecclesiological Hospitality**

Nouwen writes, "The church is perhaps one of the few places left where we can meet people who are different than we are but with whom we can form a larger family."<sup>63</sup> I argue that emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives in our hospitality toward one another within the ONA church authenticates the welcome extended to LGBTQ people outside the church. Expanding the space that liberates all people from the world's hostility nurtures a healthy ONA church family while leading cultural change in the societal context in which that congregation is planted. To enact this movement, I offer here practical suggestions for ecclesiological hospitality that seek to emphasize LGBTQ perspectives within the ONA congregation.

Observe an ONA Sunday: Forming a worship service whose liturgy, music, theme and message revolve around the church's ONA identity is a reminder to the congregation of the history that has formed its diverse (queer) body of Christ, and of its call for that unmistakable body to be scattered for ministry in the world. Testimonies might be offered from LGBTQ church members that share with the congregation what the church's ONA identity means to them and their life of faith. Hetero family members of LGBTQ people could speak to what the inclusiveness and support of the ONA

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<sup>61</sup> Roger A. Paynter, "The Genius of Jesus: An Invitation to the Real World: Creating Righteousness," delivered at First Baptist Church, Austin, Texas, 13 February 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Althaus-Reid, 17.

<sup>63</sup> Nouwen, 58.

church mean to their family that does not meet the assumptions and prerequisites of heteronormative society. The sermon could address the so-called clobber passages that are manipulated against LGBTQ people, so as to redefine and reclaim them through queer hermeneutics. Furthermore, worship services that thank God for the gift of being an ONA church help educate our children and youth about the importance of fully welcoming and including all of God's people in our congregation, and the transformative power that such inclusion yields in our lives.

Provide queer Bible studies: The exercise of disrupting Scripture and discovering refreshing interpretations of the Word of God is an exciting proposal to the church. Forming small group Bible studies that utilize a queer reading of the story of God and God's people empowers the ONA congregation to revisit and reclaim the texts that have divided us, one from another, on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. Asking each other dialogically who is missing from the text, who is being denigrated and for what purpose, draws our shared perspectives of marginality into the Bible study, and it encourages us to advocate as the body of Christ for the voice of the marginalized "other" in Scripture. It informs our understanding of and thanksgiving for the gospel of Jesus Christ, which in turn informs our identity as a congregation. As Edward Farley asserts, "Gospel is—and this is its prophetic element—disruption, an exposure of corporate oppression and individual collusion, and, at the same time, an uncovering of redemptive possibilities."<sup>64</sup>

Connect with and provide services and/or referrals for the LGBTQ lived experience: Kundtz and Schlager remind us, "Full social and cultural acceptance of LGBTQ people will not be achieved by legal and legislative remedies alone. Only when other important social institutions open their doors to enlightened discussion will some of the final obstacles to full equality really disappear."<sup>65</sup> The ONA congregation seeking to provide hospitality that attempts to connect with these lived experiences might ask: Is there a need for legal services that are not easily obtained by LGBTQ people, such as preparing a will or handling child custody issues, and would our congregation be able to assist in such matters? Are there heteronormative social events in the community that are never offered for LGBTQ people? If so, what are they, and can the church be an environment to fill that niche? Maybe our congregation could be intentional in creating LGBTQ intergenerational fellowships, given the lack of such opportunities in the community. As Kundtz and Schlager point out, "Bringing together young and old LGBTQ people is the challenge. What better place than church?"<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

I offered a series of phrases to which I invited the interviewees to respond with their initial reactions. One of the phrases was, "We're open and affirming." What does the ONA Statement mean to LGBTQ people in our community who are not members of Friends Congregational Church? James shared:

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<sup>64</sup> Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 81.

<sup>65</sup> Kundtz and Schlager, viii.

<sup>66</sup> Kundtz and Schlager, 49.



For me that phrase is associated with GLBT people because I have most commonly heard it and most commonly used it among the GLBT community. So, for me it is a signifier that a church body or leadership is open and affirming to the experiences of and the faith walks of GLBT people, and they are willing to minister to them without trying to fix them.<sup>67</sup>

The tagline of James's response here has to do with ex-gay ministries, where churches receive LGBTQ people under the condition that they be "fixed" or converted into heterosexuals. These ministries breed internalized homophobia, and they promote the ongoing heterosexism consumed by society in general.<sup>68</sup> Given that internalized homophobia increases suicide rates among LGBTQ people, and that internalized heterosexism leads to parents disowning their LGBTQ children—25 to 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBTQ based on conservative rates, those being conservative due to many LGBTQ youth being afraid to disclose their orientation or gender identity—this is certainly not a Christ-centered approach to ministry.<sup>69</sup> It is reassuring to know that a church's ONA identity is not lumped in with ex-gay ministries by perception. However, that perception interprets what the ONA church will *not* do; it will *not* "fix" LGBTQ people.

Patti hears the ONA Statement as a church saying, "We've thought this through and we really mean this."<sup>70</sup> Hearing, "We're open and affirming," Paul responds, "I think churches that use that language have had a thoughtful approach to it; whereas 'all are welcome here' is more saying that we haven't really thought about what it means and who we're actually welcoming."<sup>71</sup> It seems that Patti and Paul are underlining the question for the ONA congregation, "We're ONA...now what?"

Thad heard, "We're open and affirming," and his immediate feeling was, "Prove it."<sup>72</sup> He did not expand on what he meant, but Joan did: "I think it's confusing. It's like, 'Okay, what does that really mean?' You're open and affirming...Is that as far as it goes? What are you trying to tell me when you say that?"<sup>73</sup> Thad and Joan need to be able to walk in the door of an ONA church and see what we are trying to tell the world when we say, "We're open and affirming."

Kundtz and Schlager write, "We need to develop social spaces or safe zones for each and every individual to be able to externalize characteristics of his or her gender identity or sexual orientation without stigma."<sup>74</sup> In our ONA church, are there pictures that represent the diversity of people in our congregation visibly displayed in common areas? In those displays and in our church directory, do we have pictures of LGBTQ people alongside hetero people, gay and straight couples, LGBTQ and hetero individuals and families? Are there Bible verses, mission statements, or testimonial quotes articulating the church's full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the worship bulletin

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<sup>67</sup> James, interview.

<sup>68</sup> Kundtz and Schlager, 26.

<sup>69</sup> Goldman, 70.

<sup>70</sup> Patti, interview.

<sup>71</sup> Paul, interview.

<sup>72</sup> Thad, face-to-face interview at Village Café in Bryan, Texas, 5 December 2010.

<sup>73</sup> Joan, interview.

<sup>74</sup> Kundtz and Schlager, 29.

or on the website? Are there LGBTQ-friendly pastoral care resources available and prominently displayed? Are there LGBTQ social events or small groups, and are they announced from the pulpit and advertised in the newsletter? Perhaps the most vital question for the ONA church to continually ask is: “Are LGBTQ people present and actively participating in the ministry of this church?”

Concerning her difficulty as a transgender person in finding her niche in church life, Michelle commented, “Hospitality is hard to find unless you have a group to get together with.”<sup>75</sup> While we strive to become a community that celebrates diversity for the sake of becoming one in Christ, relationships are often sparked between like people in the congregation. Michelle’s needs to see people who look like her or who visibly relate to her experience in order to feel secure getting more involved in the church.

Acting on these discoveries from priestly listening, the ONA congregation might explore where and how it is serving God by going to the margins and standing alongside the LGBTQ lived experience. Where and how is the ONA church working to assure that LGBTQ people know their congregation exists and that it is a place of welcome for them? Is the ONA congregation involved in their local PFLAG chapter, and do they have liaisons who share news from that involvement with the congregation? Does the church make its congregation aware of LGBTQ-friendly businesses to support? Does the congregation reach out to LGBTQ college students and youth, and how does the church create a free space for them?

I have argued that emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives and listening to the lived experience of LGBTQ people within the church strengthens the ONA identity, thereby leading cultural change by reinforcing that welcome to LGBTQ people outside the church. This is a cyclical dynamic wherein hospitality is placed before the welcome, proactive affirmation is authenticated before passive openness. This posturing molds an ecclesiology of hospitality.

More than anything, what is needed for the ONA church’s hospitality to be authentic in emphasizing the lived experience of LGBTQ people is for gender and sexuality to be valued and honored. It is not enough for the Church to be open and accepting of LGBTQ people. It is not enough for the Church to hold an ONA Statement at arm’s length by treating LGBTQ people with hospitality that views them as abstractions that fit into a heteronormative framework. It is not enough for the ONA congregation to allow same-sex marriage ceremonies, but to not be open to discussions about LGBTQ interpretations of covenant, life-planning, and envisioning the future. It is not enough for the Church to take joy in its ONA Statement while the surrounding community looks on with a shrug and assumes, “How kind of them to take in LGBTQ people despite their abominable flaws.” Essentially, it is not enough for the ONA congregation to rest on being open to LGBTQ people while remaining indifferently silent about affirming the fullness of their being. True hospitality that strives to lead cultural change by emphasizing LGBTQ perspectives must proclaim to the world that God loves our various gender identities and sexual orientations, and that the lived experience of LGBTQ people is vital to the body of Christ.

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<sup>75</sup> Michelle/Michael, face-to-face interview conducted in the pastor’s office of Friends Congregational Church, College Station, Texas, 30 January 2011.