



Answers to Commonly Asked Questions

1) What is a Reconciling Congregation?

A Reconciling Congregation is a United Methodist local church that makes a public statement welcoming all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, to participate fully in its congregational life. In addition to local churches, many campus ministries, annual conferences and other UM groups have adopted “reconciling” statements.

2) How do we become a Reconciling Congregation?

Most churches engage in study and dialogue about the concerns of lesbian, gay and bisexual persons in the church for a period of several months or years. During this time a group in the congregation drafts a “reconciling statement” to reflect the congregation’s intended welcoming stance.

This statement is adopted by the official decision-making body of your local church—the Administrative Board or Council. Many Reconciling Congregations choose to make this decision at a charge or church conference. (See Resource Paper #2, How to Become a Reconciling Congregation.)

3) Why should we single out lesbian, gay and bisexual persons?

Reconciling Congregations highlight the blatant discrimination which gay, lesbian and bisexual persons face in our church and society. In The United Methodist Church, lesbian, gay and bisexual persons are the only social group for whom participation in some aspects of general church life is barred by church law.

However, there are other persons and groups in our society with whom our churches must be reconciled. Most Reconciling Congregations adopt a reconciling statement that welcomes all persons, “regardless of age, gender, race, class, ethnic background, mental or physical ability, or gender/sexual orientation.” (See Resource Paper #3, Why Become a Reconciling Congregation.)

4) Why do we have to make a public statement? We already welcome everyone.

Many local church and Christian leaders are public about their antigay actions and statements. So Reconciling Congregations must be public about their desire to be in ministry with gay, lesbian and bisexual persons. The overwhelming perception within the lesbian/gay/bisexual community today is that they are not welcome in churches. A public statement is needed to overcome that reality. Remember Jesus’ statement about hiding your light under a bushel (Matt. 5:15). Rather than a decision to be kept quiet, the decision to become a Reconciling Congregation is an event to celebrate.

5) Sexuality is a personal, private matter. Why should we talk about it in our churches?

Our United Methodist tradition teaches that our sexuality is “God’s good gift” to be used responsibly and wisely. However, many of us have been raised to believe that it’s not appropriate to talk about sexuality in church. If we believe that our faith in Jesus Christ is all-encompassing in our lives, then we recognize that our faith touches our sexuality as well.

Becoming a Reconciling Congregation is about more than sexuality. It’s about our understanding of the Gospel and the community and ministry that arise from it. Lesbian, gay and bisexual persons face discrimination because their sexuality is

viewed as different. But the real issue is whether our churches are open to all persons.

6) Won’t this issue split our church?

Certainly issues related to homosexuality are highly-charged and can be divisive. However, the intent of the Reconciling Congregation Program is truly to be “reconciling.” It is expected that a congregation will use an open, consultative process in becoming a Reconciling Congregation. Care needs to be shown for persons who oppose welcoming gays and lesbians into the church. The intent of the Reconciling Congregation discussion is to recognize that it is OK to “agree to disagree” about homosexuality, but affirm that no one should be excluded from the life and ministries of the church.

Most churches have been able to reach a consensus (not necessarily unanimity) to become a Reconciling Congregation. Some have had a few members leave because of this decision. Most have had new persons join them due to their Reconciling status. All have found their community enriched and rejuvenated by the experience of grappling with a tough issue in a positive way.

7) Doesn’t the Bible say homosexuality is a sin?

Throughout church history much tradition of biblical interpretation has said that same-gender sexual behavior is sinful. However, this tradition has been profoundly challenged by many biblical scholars over the past three decades. Just as the church has changed its interpretation of the Bible regarding other social groups and practices over the centuries, so its interpretation of this matter is undergoing change today.

Recognizing that the Gospels are the nucleus of our Christian faith, it is notable that they do not mention homosexuality. Reconciling Congregations believe that the Gospel call to love and the example of Jesus’ ministry to all persons outweigh an exclusionary tradition built upon the interpretation of a few scattered Bible verses.

8) If we become a Reconciling Congregation, will we become an all-gay church?

There are now almost 1,000 Affirming (United Church of Canada), More Light (Presbyterian), Oasis (Episcopalian), Open and Affirming (Disciples of Christ or United Church of Christ), Reconciling (United Methodist), Reconciling in Christ (Lutheran), Supportive (Brethren/Mennonite), Welcoming (Unitarian-Universalist) and Welcoming & Affirming (Baptist) churches and ministries in the U.S. and Canada. The experience of these congregations has been that they have received some new lesbian, gay and bisexual members. However, they have received as many or more new heterosexual members who are attracted to an open, hospitable congregation.

9) Are we breaking church law by becoming a Reconciling Congregation?

No. Official United Methodist policy does bar the ordination and appointment of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” and bans national church agencies from funding any “‘gay’ caucus or group” or otherwise “to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.” However, these restrictions do not apply to local churches. In fact, our Social Principles specifically encourage

ministries with lesbian and gay persons (par. 65G) and advocate the protection of their civil rights (par. 66H).

10) What about the prohibition on “ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions”?

After adopting a “reconciling” statement welcoming all persons regardless of sexual orientation, it is the congregation’s responsibility to decide how to live out that commitment. Many Reconciling Congregations have struggled with how to recognize and affirm covenantal relationships of all of their members while being cognizant of the Social Principles’ prohibition on “ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions” adopted by the 1996 General Conference (par. 65C). Reconciling Congregations have come to different conclusions on how to live in this tension and carry out their ministry faithfully.

11) Didn’t the Judicial Council say that congregations can’t identify themselves as “reconciling”?

Decision #847 of the United Methodist Judicial Council in October 1998 stated that an annual conference or general agency may not “identify or label itself as an unofficial body or movement” such as Confessing, Reconciling, or Transforming. The Judicial Council has not stated explicitly that this ruling applies to congregations.

The Council’s rationale for this decision was that “such identification or labeling is divisive and makes the official bodies of the Church subject to the possibility of being in conflict with The Discipline and doctrines of The United Methodist Church.” However, the reason to be identified as a “Reconciling Congregation” is to enable lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons and their families and friends to locate a congregation where they will be welcomed and not excluded as they are in most congregations.

No matter how one interprets this Judicial Council decision, the basic activity of the Reconciling Congregation Program remains the same—a congregation publicly states that it welcomes all persons regardless of sexual orientation. A congregation could decide to adopt such a welcoming statement and register with the Reconciling Congregation Program, but not identify itself as a Reconciling Congregation.

12) What do we do after becoming a Reconciling Congregation?

The vote to become a Reconciling Congregation is only one step on a journey. It is expected that a Reconciling Congregation would incorporate ministries with lesbian, gay and bisexual persons into its ongoing ministries. The form this takes will vary from congregation to congregation depending upon the resources of the local church and the needs of the local community.

The congregation is also expected to have a liaison to the national Reconciling Congregation Program to assist in communication with other churches in the network and to interpret the national ministries to the congregation.

Finally, the congregation is encouraged to provide financial assistance to support the communication and resource ministries of the national program. An annual gift of \$250 is recommended, recognizing that some congregations can and do give more than that, and others less.

13) What does the national program offer to the local church?

The Reconciling Congregation Program provides a support and communications network to congregations who seek to be in ministry with lesbian, gay and bisexual persons. The program provides a variety of resource persons and printed materials to empower local church ministries, including *Still on the Journey*, an RC handbook; *Open Hands*, a quarterly magazine; and *Katalyst*, a bimonthly newsletter. National convocations every two years facilitate communication, training and fellowship in

the Reconciling Congregation movement. Incorporated as an independent nonprofit corporation, the Reconciling Congregation Program is overseen by a board of directors with staff in a national office in Chicago.

14) How will having gay members in our church affect our children?

Some persons may still equate homosexuality with sexual abuse of children. Pedophilia is a sickness that occurs in persons of all sexual orientations. Because our society is predominately heterosexual in behavior, the vast majority of sexual abusers of children are heterosexual.

Sexual orientation is determined very early in one’s childhood, if not at birth. Just as a lesbian adult knows that having heterosexual parents and teachers throughout her formative years did not change her sexual orientation, so we realize that having a gay teacher or bisexual adult friend will not alter a child’s sexual orientation.

Most Reconciling Congregations find that the presence of openly gay, lesbian and bisexual adults is really a blessing for their children and youth. Parents find that having a congregation in which human sexuality can be discussed honestly and in which there are respected gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults is a positive influence on their children.

15) How do transgendered persons fit into all of this?

“Transgendered” refers to different groups of persons whose emotional and/or psychological gender identity (male-ness or female-ness) does not necessarily fit their biological identity. Gender identity/orientation is different from sexual orientation (affectional desire for one’s own or the other gender).

Transgendered persons, who also face extreme ostracism in most churches, have come to Reconciling Congregations seeking to find a church home. The experience of getting to know and welcoming transgendered persons has been an illuminating and enriching experience for these congregations. Many Reconciling Congregations now intentionally include “gender orientation” in their “reconciling” statement.

16) What about “ex-gay” or “transforming” ministries?

There are some United Methodist churches which have declared themselves to be Transforming Congregations, i.e., they encourage persons to change from homosexual to heterosexual. There are at least two significant problems with this position.

First, these churches seem to require that changing one’s sexual behavior is a condition for acceptance into the church. There is no other instance in our tradition of a particular behavior barring one from church membership.

Secondly, there is no evidence that anyone has changed their orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. There are some examples of persons changing their behavior and many more examples of personal pain and trauma for lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons who have diligently tried.

The more we study human sexuality the more we discover its mystery—how much we do not know about it. You may find it helpful to arrange for a professional to speak to your church about what we do know and don’t know about sexual orientation.

For a free copy of this paper, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: **Reconciling Congregation Program**
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