

Living the Welcoming Congregation
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
February 7, 2010

[Note for context – In this service, four members read poetry or spoke about what it was like to be gay or lesbian and part of this congregation.]

Quite a few years ago, this congregation went through an educational process regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender issues. This was followed by a congregational vote to welcome people of every sexual orientation and every gender identity. We are proud to be a Welcoming Congregation. This congregation is about to embark upon taking its “welcome” to the next level.

A few weeks ago, Board president Dick Olson and I were casually discussing future projects that might enhance the congregation’s ability to thrive and to make a difference in the world. I forget which one of us mentioned it first, but we shared a desire to revisit a more sophisticated, updated Welcoming Congregation process. Lo and behold, it exists. The earlier program was called “Welcoming Congregation.” This one is called “*Living the Welcoming Congregation*” in recognition that aspiration is one thing, and reality is sometimes another.

Over the next year or so, we will move through a process of more nuanced learning about how to more fully welcome people of any sexual orientation and any gender identity. This process will be anchored by 13 meetings, with dates and location to be determined (watch the weekly Announcements for details). I am hoping that 15 to 25 people will be regular participants. Each of us has circles of influence. The active involvement of a small and committed group of people will have a positive ripple effect.

We will come to a three-way fork in the road after session number 9 of the 13 sessions. The core group of participants will decide among three alternatives for sessions 10 through 13. One choice is to focus on themselves as individuals in seeking to become more welcoming. A second choice is to focus on this congregation as a whole and to guide it toward becoming more welcoming. The third option is to focus on the community outside these walls and to help the community to become more welcoming. I am delighted to see these options in the *Living the Welcoming Congregation* program. It is not a cookie cutter, one size fits all program.

I conclude with why this project matters to me personally. The original Welcoming Congregation program was fine in many ways. However, from my perspective, it did not

encourage people to understand bisexuality very well. I believe that by going through the *Living the Welcoming Congregation* process, we will have greater appreciation for queer culture and the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender people who nurture it day in and day out.

It should come as no surprise that there is so much more to queer culture than advocating for same-sex marriage. Sadly, the emphasis of religious liberals on same-sex marriage over the past 10 years is correlated with a retreat to private spaces for the most vibrant and dynamic expressions of queer culture. It is as if the public face of queer culture must be toned down so as not to scare voters. Fortunately, Unitarian Universalist congregations can be safe and celebratory spaces for nurturing queer culture. This congregation can be a safe and celebratory space for nurturing queer culture.

The emphasis on same-sex marriage over the past decade has had another unintended consequence. It has diverted liberal religious attention from the misuse of marriage. One example of the misuse of marriage is the marriage-promotion program within TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), also known as welfare or public assistance. Why talk about poverty in this service, with its theme of *Living the Welcoming Congregation*? Poverty is a queer issue because most queer people are less financially well off than most straight people.

I was recently elected to the Board of Directors of the Alternatives to Marriage Project, and I agree with the organization's perspective regarding marriage promotion and the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program.¹ "Policies that aim to help children should support all the types of families in which children really live. It is wrong to use Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to pay for marriage programs. Government is literally taking money away from impoverished families and giving it to programs that tell them their families are not good enough. There is no proof that marriage programs ease the burden of poverty or make low-income children better off. Marriage should be a personal choice, not a government mandate. Congress should state that the purpose of TANF is to end poverty, not to promote marriage." Our government's proposed budget allocates 2.5% of the overall \$20 billion TANF budget to marriage promotion. As someone who advocates for singles and for people in non-traditional relationships, I do not want 2.5% of \$20 billion spent on marriage promotion.

¹ See www.unmarried.org/welfare.html.

I believe that the emphasis on same-sex marriage over the past decade also resulted an unintended consequence of de-emphasizing oppression of GLBT people outside the United States. For example, an anti-homosexuality bill is currently being debated in Parliament in Uganda. “This law reaffirm penalties for homosexuality, criminalize the "promotion of homosexuality," and create an offense of “aggravated homosexuality” punishable by the death penalty. This bill targets LGBT Ugandans, their advocates, and anyone else who fails to report them to the authorities whether they are inside or outside of Uganda.”²

This week in the U.S. Congress, two resolutions condemning the Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Bill have been introduced in the House and the Senate. Please contact your Congressman to support these resolutions, encouraging them to sign on as cosponsors. By truly *Living the Welcoming Congregation* commitment, we will not forget lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender people outside the United States. We will also more effectively support the development of a vibrant queer culture here at home. May it be so!

² See http://www.nclrights.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=74810 and <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/10/15/uganda-anti-homosexuality-bill-threatens-liberties-and-human-rights-defenders> .