

Welcoming
&
Open
Congregations



Changing Attitude



Welcoming and Open Congregations

Many individual members of congregations already support the work of Changing Attitude. Some congregations would like to express their support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians by openly declaring their welcome for LGBT people as full members of the Body of Christ and equally eligible for all forms of ministry in the Church of Christ.

Becoming a **Welcoming and Open Congregation** is a practical way of making your support for LGBT people visible.

W&O Congregations are listed on the Changing Attitude web site [www.changingattitude.org.uk] where anyone can search for a church where they can be guaranteed a welcome as a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person. Changing Attitude **W&O churches** are sent posters suitable for display on church notice boards proclaiming that they welcome LGBT people.

We ask parishes to undertake **five things** to be listed as a W&O congregation

- 1 Discuss the proposal at a Parochial Church Council meeting
- 2 Pass a PCC resolution agreeing to be listed
- 3 Complete and return the registration form [downloadable from the web site]
- 4 Appoint a person who enquirers can contact for information about the church and services
- 5 Maintain your entry on the CA web site

There is no charge for registering but Changing Attitude encourages you to make an annual donation as a sign of your commitment to our work and the importance of changing church attitudes to human sexuality and LGBT people in particular.

If you would like to discuss the scheme first, please contact Changing Attitude. We would be very happy to come and meet your PCC to explain the scheme further.

What would a Welcoming and Open Congregation look like?

No set of guidelines can address the diverse needs of the wide-ranging traditions of Church of England Congregations. The following ideas may help your congregation identify what you need to do to become welcoming and open for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered Christians. Please remember that these guidelines are not a precise blueprint, but rather a suggested road map for congregations beginning a journey towards becoming truly inclusive.

1. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** is inclusive and expressive of concerns for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons and their partners and families at every level of congregational life - in worship and on social occasions, welcoming not only their presence but the unique gifts and particularities of their lives.
2. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** does not assume that everyone is heterosexual. The vocabulary used in worship reflects this perception; worship celebrates diversity by inclusivity of language and content.
3. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** will incorporate the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons will be incorporated in the preparation of members for baptism, confirmation and church membership.
4. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** may engage in out-reach into the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community, both through its own publicity and by actively supporting other lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered Christian and secular groups.
5. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** offers congregational and clergy support for services of blessing following Civil Partnership registration and memorial and funeral services for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people.
6. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** celebrates the lives of all people and welcomes same-sex couples, recognising their committed relationships; and equally affirms displays of caring and affection without regard for sexual orientation.
7. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** seeks to nurture ongoing dialogue between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and heterosexual persons, to create deeper trust and understanding.
8. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** encourages the involvement of its members in a Changing Attitude Diocesan LGBT Support Group and advertises and reports the work of the group.
9. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** affirms and celebrates lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered issues and history during the church's year (possibly including the local Gay Pride Festival, most likely to be held in July or August).
10. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation**, as an advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people, attends to legislation affecting LGBT people and works to promote justice, freedom and equality in wider society. It speaks out when the rights and dignity of LGBT people are at stake.
11. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** celebrates the lives of all people and their ways of expressing their love for each other.
12. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** might display a poster in the porch, a statement on the Sunday pew sheet, and/or in the church magazine indicating that it openly welcomes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people and includes them as full members of the church with equal access to ministry and sacraments.
13. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** might choose to wear a rainbow ribbon as a visible sign of their commitment to the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people in the church.
14. A **Welcoming and Open Congregation** may commit itself to and publish a statement of inclusivity as a declaration of faith and a pledge to take action. The statement might include any of the following pledges:

To recognise the need for change

To recognise sexual diversity in the church and in creation

To recognise the prejudice and homophobia present in the church and experienced by LGBT people

To ensure the possibility of full participation in the life of the church for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people

To accept clergy regardless of their sexual orientation

To study Biblical and theological teaching about same-sex relationships

To offer same-sex services of blessing and covenant

To work for legal protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation

To support Church of England policies, practices and actions which strengthen these commitments



Welcoming and Open Congregations - Case Studies

Case Study 1

Jane

It was in a gay club, when I was 18, that I first saw two girls kiss. It was an incredible moment for me. I felt the unbelievably powerful desire for that kind of intimacy which was never to leave me.

When I was 18 I left home and moved north to university. I found myself drawn to a local evangelical church - they seemed like a nice bunch of people. I had always had a faith in God and they did too, though they were rather more enthusiastic than I was used to! I began to go regularly and before long was being drawn into the life of the church. I was invited to meals and was never short of friends.

Then, the axe fell. It became apparent that they were against homosexual practice. Up to this point I was probably very naïve. I wasn't sexually active myself, but to have a relationship with another woman was very much part of my inner desires. When I discovered what my new-found Christian friends thought, however, I accepted their view without question. The group dynamic was so powerful and the sense of belonging engendered among this group so close that I accepted their view as right.

It was also indicative of where I was - what I wanted so much I also feared deep down. During those first weeks I had powerful experiences of God that changed my sense of self. I loved myself for the first time in my life. I felt happy. I could look at the world and feel good instead of feeling I had to hide. So, when I heard their views on homosexuality I thought that this was what God wanted me to do - reject my sexuality and choose him instead. Perhaps this was my cross and I had to bear it.

Just before leaving university I struck up a friendship with Michael, a gay man. We started having a relationship. I thought I had fallen in love with him. So, this was how God was going to heal us! Marriage was on the horizon, but fortunately he had the courage to call it off.

I moved south and got involved with a big evangelical church. I was seen as someone who was concerned for evangelical orthodoxy. But I kept falling in love with women and the desire for intimacy with women remained strong. I felt as if there was still a gaping hole in my life. Then, when I was nearing the age of 30, my world came crashing down. I became seriously depressed, feeling almost suicidal at times, and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital.



Welcoming and Open Congregations - Case Studies

Case Study 2

Barbara and Mary

Barbara and Mary are both Anglo-Catholic by background, from very traditional families. They met at university several years ago and fell in love. They were extremely close but kept their sexual relationship a secret. Both had to work hard to make sense of their relationship and to overcome the feelings of guilt which were strong from the beginning. Both had strong feelings of self-rejection - gut feelings which felt at odds with how they felt intellectually about their relationship. But the more they read about and thought about their sexuality, the more convinced they became that what they had been taught by the church was wrong, and the more comfortable they felt with their relationship.

When their parish priest discovered that they were lovers, he recommended that they undergo psychiatric treatment in order to solve their 'problem'. They considered whether it might not be easier to at least pretend that they were no longer lovers, but decided that that would be a betrayal of themselves.

Instead they left the church and moved to a new town to set up home together. As they searched for a church congregation where they could feel welcome, they realised how deeply hurt they had been by the church. The institution which had promised unconditional love had betrayed them by withdrawing that love, simply because of who they understood themselves to be. Eventually they settled in a church where they seemed to be welcomed and valued as a couple. Having discussed the idea at length, they have decided they would like to have their relationship formally blessed by the church, following the registration of their civil partnership. They are planning to ask the Vicar if he will conduct a ceremony to which all their friends at the church and their relatives and friends will be invited.



Welcoming and Open Congregations - Case Studies

Case Study 3

Phillip and Michael

Phillip is active in his local evangelical church as a youth leader. He has recently come to realise that he is gay, and recognises his sexuality is his God-given nature. A new member, Michael, has recently started coming to church, and Colin has fallen for him. The feeling is mutual. Though they have slept together a few times, Colin feels guilty about it, and isn't sure it is right. Michael has no qualms about their sexual relationship and wants Colin to move in with him, but Colin feels that he can't. He suspects that other Christians in the church would throw them out of the fellowship if they knew the truth about their relationship. He therefore feels that he is in an impossible position because his work with the youth group is very important to him. The conflict is putting a strain on their new-found friendship.



Welcoming and Open Congregations

Questions to use with the Case Studies

Choose one or two of the case studies and use the questions relating to each study, or ask the general questions about your feelings, thoughts and what you might say or do given below.

Case study 1

1. What issues do you think are raised for Jane in trying to maintain her faith according to the practice of her evangelical church or following her deep feelings about her sexual identity?
2. If Jane had married Michael, would God have healed her? Give reasons.
3. What advice as a Christian would you give to a lesbian or gay person who was feeling seriously depressed about themselves and their sexuality?

Case study 2

1. What issues arise for Barbara and Mary in distrusting what they had been taught by the church about their sexuality and their relationship?
2. What might be the implications for Barbara and Mary with their parish priest's recommendation that they should undergo psychiatric treatment?
3. Is it reasonable for the church to promise that God loves lesbian and gay people unconditionally when many Christians believe the Bible teaches that God condemns same-sex relationships?
4. How would you feel if your Vicar had agreed to bless Barbara and Mary's relationship?

Case study 3

1. What might be the implications for Phillip if he should tell the leaders in his church the truth about his relationship with Michael?
2. Do you think Phillip should move in with Michael? Give reasons.
3. Phillip's church discovers that he is gay and living with Michael. Do you think they should ban him from continuing as a youth leader? Give reasons.

Case study 4

1. What might have helped John's first congregation be more understanding and positive towards his decision to seek female to male gender reassignment?
2. How could John's first vicar have handled his own reaction better?

Case study 5

1. How might you have felt if you saw Julia walking into church for the first time wearing women's rather than the men's clothes you had become used to seeing her in?
2. How could the elderly members of the congregation who won't speak to Julia and avoid her in the street be helped to understand her better?

Or choose one case study and ask the following questions:

1. How do you feel about the situation described?
2. What do you think about it?
3. What you do or say when called upon to give advice?



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Case Study 4

John

John has been a member of his congregation for six years and working in the same job for 10 years. Over a period of four years John underwent Female to Male Gender Reassignment. He continued going to the same church. His workplace handled his transition well and there were no problems. However, his congregation did not and there were many problems. His vicar had no previous knowledge of trans people and seemed unable to cope with the issues involved.

At work he had a meeting with his whole department where he explained what he was going to do and why. He also explained what physical changes would eventually occur and told his colleagues that these would be gradual with no immediate effects. He also stated clearly that from then on he wished to be known by his male name and referred to as he. There was complete openness about what was going on and people knew what to expect. The Personnel Officer was at the meeting and, as well as supporting John, stated that he was available to answer any questions or concerns that anyone else might have relating to John's Gender Reassignment. The leadership at work publicly supported his transition and at the same time offered support to those people who had issues arising from it.

His colleagues at work had the same disadvantage as the people at church - they had to get used to John's new name and the change of pronoun his change of gender entailed. For a couple of years his appearance didn't change. Because of the lack of understanding and openness in his congregation, John decided to leave and began worshipping in a different church. He now had a beard and his head was bald. Even though many had known John in his previous female identity before Gender Reassignment, the congregation easily relate to him as a man. John and his partner, who is now his wife, were later married in the church in the presence of most of the congregation.



Welcoming and Open Congregations - Case Studies

Case Study 5

Julia

I was very active in my local Anglican parish church (Anglo Catholic and very liberal) when I first started really looking for myself, many years ago. The first person I told was my good friend, the churchwarden. He and his wife treated my confession with sympathy and more understanding than perhaps I had any right to expect. We slowly told a selected few in the church, including the Rector. They were very kind and supportive.

Because of personal circumstance, my transition had to be protracted but eventually the time was right. I then spent a lot of time talking to many of the church members explaining my position, what I intended to do and why. Being a large and successful church with about 200 at Sunday communion, it was impossible to tell everyone. However I spoke to many and the reaction was mostly good and kind.

On the day when I first went to Sunday communion dressed in women's clothes, I was supported by two friends. The congregation's reaction was somewhat startled but generally very positive. While the first few visits were nerve-wracking, things settled down beautifully and the congregation took me in its stride. The only negative reaction came from some a few elderly people who, to this day, won't speak to me and avoid me in the street.

The happy ending is that my coming out inspired a lovely pair of lesbian ladies to make known their situation, to be well received, and for them to feel more secure and cherished than they had ever felt in their many years together.



Introducing the scheme at a PCC meeting

We suggest the scheme is introduced to the Church Council in two stages. This will depend on the degree to which your church is already consciously open and welcoming of people. You may be able to proceed directly to a discussion around the resolution. Other congregations may need a longer period of preparation, probably using the case studies as a basis, before it is right to bring a proposal to the PCC.

1st PCC meeting

Allow 1 hour on the agenda

Circulate with the agenda photocopies of the sheet outlining what a W&O congregation might look like

Invite the PCC to look at two of the three case studies and reflect on their feelings and opinions about the different ways in which LGBT people are made to feel welcome or unwelcome by the church

Give time for open discussion and questions

Circulate the proposed resolution to be voted on at the next meeting

Sample resolution: *The PCC of agreed at a meeting on ...
..... That it wishes details of the church and its services to be listed
on the Changing Attitude web site as a congregation which is open
and welcoming to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people*

2nd PCC meeting

Briefly reintroduce the proposal

Vote on the resolution

Agree a process to implement any of the actions necessary to introduce the scheme: nominate a contact person, person to upload details to the CA web site, person to monitor changes

Who needs to be committed?

A church which is proclaiming itself as a welcoming and open congregation may not have every member fully in agreement, given the variety of human attitudes in the world and in the church. The church does need to have the full agreement of the clergy, church wardens, and all who hold office in the church and those responsible for rotas and tasks.



Trustees

Christina Beardsley, Rachel Beck, Jenny Clark, Alex Huzzey, Nigel Greenwood, Brenda Harrison, Max Manin, Jean Mayland, Barry Naylor, David Page, Sr Rosemary CHN, Jeremy Timm.

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