



## **From Becoming A Welcoming Congregation to Interweave**

Offered during Sunday worship by Joan Burleigh, October 12, 2014  
(with appreciation to Cathy Doherty, Gene Gaunt and Jim Toy  
for sharing their recollections)

Half a century ago, people with unfamiliar sexual orientations, gender expressions and gender identities were largely an “invisible minority” in our society. The Stonewall riots of 1969 are widely considered to be the single most important event leading to the gay liberation movement and the modern fight for LGBT rights in the United States.

In 1970, Ann Arbor women and men organized the Ann Arbor Gay Liberation Front. The group was built on the work of the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Liberation and Students for a Democratic Society. Early in its history, the Ann Arbor Gay Liberation Front was invited by our minister, Rev. Erwin Gaede, to have their dances in our church on Washtenaw. Rev. Gaede, and after him Rev. Ken Phifer, invited the group to have holiday dinners there and, as the years went by, to hold in the church building same-sex weddings and -- especially at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic -- memorial services.

In January 1988, Ken Phifer preached a sermon on the issue of fairness to gay and lesbian ministers in response to an incident at Community Church in New York City, where a lesbian couple had been rejected for an associate ministry. That spring, our Congregation unanimously voted to support the General Assembly resolution proposing that congregations give fair consideration

for lesbian and gay ministers, and that our Congregation become involved in the emerging Unitarian Universalist Association's "Welcoming Congregation" program.

At that time, Ken Phifer formed what came to be known as the the Common Vision Committee. Their work would include: examining our Congregation for fairness, extending a congregational welcome to members of the gay and lesbian community, and working actively in the larger society for lesbian and gay rights. Led by Cathy Doherty, Mary Barber and Kerry Graves they worked as pioneers, with scant materials available from the UUA Office of Gay and Lesbian Affairs.

In addition to its work within the Congregation, the Common Vision Committee welcomed the Ann Arbor chapter of PFLAG who held meetings in our church and partnered with various organizations in SE Michigan working against violence and advocating for civil rights for the LGBT community.

In 1989, General Assembly passed a resolution urging the UUA to implement the Welcoming Congregation program, and in 1992, after intensive work, and not without struggle, our Congregation voted to become a Welcoming Congregation. A Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Concerns Committee chaired by Cecy Ewing added concern for transgender persons.

In the early 90's a local news story broke reporting that Cracker Barrel restaurant in Belleville had fired a waiter specifically because he was a gay man, in line with the policy of the restaurant chain. With the help of Dr. Ron Bishop, First UU bought \$3,000 worth of stock, making Congregation representatives eligible to attend the annual corporate meeting and to advocate for a change in the policy.

In February 2007, responding to the expressed concerns of some new to our Congregation who did not find a visible welcome, Interim Minister Barbara Childs formed a study group. At its recommendation Interweave was formed to create a more explicit welcoming presence. This welcome has taken many forms including: the installation of a large Pride flag at our entrance, regular potluck meetings, a table in the Social Hall, educational programs, an annual Interfaith Service of Affirmation, a spring retreat, and participation in witness and advocacy actions for marriage equality and equal rights, still denied in the state of Michigan.

On April 27, 2008 Rev. Gail Gaisenhaier, a “out” lesbian woman, was called as our Senior Minister, by almost unanimous vote.

On June 1, 2014 our Congregation unanimously voted to approve an Affirmation of Marriage Equality. And on August 5 of this year, 65 members of our Congregation traveled to Lansing to take part in a “Celebration of Marriage Equality and All Families.” This was on the eve of the hearing of the DeBoar case before the US Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Today, 45 years after Stonewall, the “invisible minority” has become visible among us and embraced by our Congregation. If time allowed, so much more could be said about the transformative experiences here of both gay members and their allies through the sharing of their personal stories.

To close, Jim Toy, Ann Arbor gay rights icon and pioneer reflects: “First UU Church has for more than four decades prayerfully and wholeheartedly supported and advocated for the human and civil rights of intersex, transgender, bisexual, lesbian, gay and queer people and our allies. I can't adequately express my gratitude to all of you for these forty-and-more years and for your 150 years of work for human dignity and justice!”