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Dear Church,

As many of you are aware, over the past few years, some members of this congregation have expressed an interest in pursuing *Open and Affirming* (or “ONA”) status, which is the designation that the United Church of Christ uses for congregations that have committed, through a shared covenant, to welcome and support LGBTQ people. In many ONA churches, these covenants extend broadly to include many different groups of people who have historically been excluded from or marginalized in the life of the Church. Examples of such covenants are included below. These covenants express a community’s commitment to being a place of wide welcome — to living out, together, the full-hearted promise that “no matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

In response to those requests, Church Council appointed a working group to research the process of becoming an ONA church. That working group included Judith Sandven, Roberta Boczkiewicz, Ray Nualla, and Andi Lloyd. The working group reported what they had learned to Church Council at our June meeting. They also shared some initial ideas for what it might look like for TCP to begin to move through the Open & Affirming process. Council voted unanimously to begin that process.

Why become an ONA church, if we already practice a wide welcome? Two reasons were prominent in Council’s decision to engage this process. First, the process itself has value as an opportunity for *all* of us to deepen our sensitivities and sensibilities. It’s a chance for us all to learn about a facet of our culture that is rapidly changing. It’s a chance for deep conversation about *why* our welcome matters and about *how* we can best express it. Second, ONA status is one way that we can make known to those outside our church that we *are* a place of welcome — a place of safety for those who, like many in the LGBTQ community, have not always found church to be a place of welcome. ONA churches are listed on the UCC’s directory of churches; folks looking for a new church would be assured that *this* church is one that will welcome them, just as they are. And that outward signal of our inner welcome

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is known to be a key determinant of decisions about churchgoing.

The Open and Affirming process involves a period of discernment, prayer, and conversation, after which the church may choose to write and vote on adoption of its own ONA covenant. The creation of the covenant is an important piece of the process – an opportunity for us find language that reflects our own particular context, understanding, and theological/Biblical grounding.

The working group suggested that we think about a three-part process: learning, small-group conversation, and discussion of a covenant . As we begin to chart a concrete path forwards, we'd love to hear from you so that we can arrive at a process that creates space for conversation about the issues and questions on your hearts and minds. What would you be interested in learning about? Or discussing? What questions arise for you? We'll be providing opportunities to offer us your feedback about process in the coming weeks. In the meantime, feel free to reach out to any one of us on Council – or to a member of the working group – to share your thoughts and questions.

As a Council, we are excited about the prospect of building on and deepening this church's long-standing commitment to being a place of belonging. The covenant that we ultimately create, if the conversations lead in that direction, will be a way for us to declare to one another and to God our commitment to being a place that lives out God's love with a wide welcome to *all*. And, if we vote to adopt that covenant, we will be declaring to those who stand *outside* our doors that they are welcome here.

We'll make time at the annual meeting (July 30, immediately after worship) to answer any questions about the process – and to hear your thoughts and suggestions about topics/questions/issues that you'd like to be able to discuss as we move, together, through this process of discernment.

Please feel free to be in touch with any one of us if you have questions or are interested in hearing more about the Open & Affirming process.

With gratitude,

Church Council (Bobby Vagt, Bruce Boczkiewicz, Roberta Boczkiewicz, Andrea Hatch, Andi Lloyd, Ray Nualla, Kim Smith-Tourles)

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Examples of ONA covenants:

UNITED CHRISTIAN CHURCH, LINCOLNVILLE, ME

The United Christian Church in Lincolnville, Maine is an Open and Affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ. We declare our openness and affirmation to all, especially to those who have suffered prejudice, bigotry, and oppression. God's love is for everyone.

We embrace diversity and affirm the dignity and worth of every person. To that end, we engage and support all people, whoever they may be and wherever they are on their spiritual journey. We intentionally and joyfully welcome people of every race, ethnicity, age, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, marital status, physical and mental ability, variety of thoughts and beliefs, socio-economic situation and faith background.

We welcome everyone to share in all aspects of our church life, as we believe that all people are blessed and loved equally by God. No matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, CONGREGATIONAL, BOXBOROUGH, MA

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34)

We, the United Church of Christ, Congregational, Boxborough, value and welcome a diverse congregation. We are an Open and Affirming (ONA) church, believing that each of us is created in God's image. We celebrate everyone, including people of all ages, races, cultures, sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, family configurations, economic circumstances, physical, cognitive or emotional abilities, education, or spiritual and religious traditions.

All are welcome to participate fully in the life, leadership, ministry and mission of this church as we seek to grow together in a safe and nurturing community of faith. We strive to demonstrate in all ways that “no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!”

We commit ourselves to the ongoing work of being an ONA congregation, one that lives out the belief that God is still speaking. With God's grace, we journey

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