

Open and Affirming: The Next Horizon

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Some of you have heard me speak on other occasions about Frank, my fraternity brother at Gettysburg College who, in 1971, announced to me that he was gay. I don't recall that this unnerved me in any particular way. Frank was a friend needing help and I felt honored to be perceived as a person sufficiently open as to perhaps be affirming. Desperately needing to talk with someone, he wanted me to check out the college counseling offices to find out how "gay friendly" they might be. I'm sure that wasn't the phrase he used, but I dutifully went to see the senior counselor at the college. It was a classic "I have a friend. . ." scenario and I'm sure the counselor expected me to show up for the real appointment in a few days!

But Frank found a welcome there, and some help for his coming out. We remained friends for a few years after college, though as often is the case, our paths eventually took us in different directions – family, career, graduate school, geography often overwhelm the best of intentions. Frank was teaching in New Jersey and, I knew, was exploring his newly claimed identity in a world that demanded severe closeting. I was beginning ministry in an east coast suburb where folk like Frank were also well closeted.

This was about the time the United Church of Christ was beginning to realize that many of its members were no longer willing to deny their sexual identity for the sake of their baptismal identity. Bill Johnson was moving toward ordination, the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries was embarking on a landmark study of human sexuality, and before long the United Church People for Biblical Witness was being organized in response to a newly emerging sexual ethic they found deeply troubling. But as that

period in the church's life began to unfold, I was still far more engaged in the witness against the war in Vietnam and far more conscious of the church's struggle to welcome the distinctive gifts for ministry among women, some of whom brought with them a feminist theology that was far more unnerving to me than anything Frank could muster. The first visiting lecturer I heard at Yale Divinity School as a brand new first year student was Mary Daly, and she got us all on the edge of our seats when she announced her topic: "The castration of the male Jesus!"

In the early years of my ministry I was certainly aware of the debates taking place in the wider church about how and if to welcome the gifts for membership and ministry of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. But they were not pressing in the local church setting where I served, or at least not in obvious and overt ways. Occasionally a gay or lesbian person would intuit, I suppose, my openness, and come to share personal struggles. Attending General Synods as a young pastor exposed me to the growing debates. But other issues and challenges seemed more urgent and, I suppose if I were to be honest, more interesting to me. I was involved in issues of homelessness and hunger, police brutality and standing with Jewish colleagues in the face of anti-Semitism and the emergence of post-Holocaust literature and theology. Ecumenism had become a passion. In the 1970's in Connecticut, and among the German Reformed congregations of the Penn Northeast Conference in the early 1980's, ONA was not much out of its own closet.

Encountering my friendship with Frank again in the late-1980's, however, began to change that. I took a confirmation class to see the AIDS quilt on display at Muhlenberg College in Allentown. Wandering through the immense field house in the hushed reverence of that experience, I found myself in front of a quilt honoring the memory of Frank. I didn't know he had died. To this day I don't know the circumstances of his death, how he contracted AIDS, though I could guess. Being a school teacher in a suburban public school district and living in the midst of a large, conservative Italian Catholic family didn't provide much space for relationships that could be open, lasting, and safe. That night was a jarring and, in many ways, a transformative moment. How might Frank's life have been different, how might his love

have been enriched, how might his extraordinary talent been more valued, had there been a church open to him, and publicly affirming of him?

Years later that question would resonate as I read the poet, Mark Doty, reflecting on the challenges of his teen age years:

When I was a teenager, I never saw a self-identified adult gay person. I didn't even know that was a possibility. And I felt utterly alone, and had periods of feeling profoundly suicidal, feeling there's no way I can live in accordance with my desires. What on earth am I going to do, I wondered – spend my life in hiding? Without a sense of love and connection? It would have made a great difference to meet some adults who were confident in themselves, who could say, “You'll be all right. There is a life you can live. There are possibilities for you.”

Here, it seems to me, was, is, and will be the most profound gift of the open and affirming movement in the United Church of Christ. The exegetical and theological journey has been rich and profoundly meaningful – to the church and to me. The challenge to understand human sexuality, and issues of gender, offers a deep challenge that can also be deeply liberating. But at the heart of it all is a pastoral act of providing welcoming and affirming space for those glbt persons who can communicate from within the body of Christ to all the young Franks we know that “you'll be all right. There is a life you can live. There are possibilities for you.” No matter where the horizon beckons, the encounters with Frank will be the core pastoral responsibility for the church.

Of course, the United Church of Christ journey has taken place within the context of a wider ecumenical arena, a place where I lived out my ministry during the 1990's as our denomination's ecumenical officer. I was deeply immersed in the struggles of the National Council of Churches to respond to the request for membership of the Metropolitan Community Churches. I led the UCC dialogue with the Reformed Church in America, exploring the biblical and theological groundings for convictions and commitments that our partners in the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue could not or, should I

say, would not share. I found myself interpreting again and again our conviction and experience to Lutheran colleagues trying to discern whether to enter into full communion with us. I lectured on Paul's admonition that "they eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,'" and wondered what that could mean for Christians and their communions who differed so sharply on this issue. I prepared our UCC delegation to the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, knowing that we were going to a country whose leader, Robert Mugabe, was using homophobia as a way to disrupt and demean an international gathering for his own political agenda. (Parenthetically, I remember going to that meeting lamenting the fact that this might dominate my time there. I was tired of being the "out" church, always having to address this issue when there were other themes, and other theological issues that I wanted to be a part of. Ironically, when I got there my first committee meeting dealt with the reception of an African Instituted Church as a member. The sticking point? That church's acceptance of polygamy.! God has a sense of humor.)

Much of the ecumenical reaction to our open and affirming commitments was and continues to be discouraging, disappointing, even demoralizing. But those years gave me an opportunity to practice a way of articulating our distinctive vocation within the wider ecumenical movement that often spoke helpfully to our partners and that spoke as well to our own members. It helped me find my own voice, theologically and biblically, a voice giving grounding and foundation to my pastoral instincts. More importantly, perhaps, it exposed me to an incredible array of gifted and generous glbt people and their allies in the United Church of Christ and in many other communions who have become on this journey, and in so many other ways, sons and daughters of deep encouragement. To this day I have rich conversations with uncertain folk in the UCC and among our partner churches overseas sharing the commitments and struggles of our church, most recently in a van traveling through Chile with leaders of the Pentecostal Church of Chile who listened with respect and a desire for understanding. (Of course there are the bizarre moments, too, like the meeting with the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem who asked me about all of this, then wondered whether I believed in the Bible, and in effect forced me to go down a route of conversation I had never intended!)

In many ways the next horizons of our Open and Affirming commitments, I believe, will invite even us into even deeper service of the wider church – ecumenical and global. To the extent that we can remain both steadfast in our convictions, and engaged in our relationships, even when that is profoundly difficult, I believe we will be a gift, part of an unfolding providence that arcs toward a welcome and an affirmation even though it will, in some places, be revealed far beyond our own lifetime. That may be hard to imagine in the face of the ugly rhetoric of people like Anglican Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria and his allies among conservative American bishops. So hard, in fact that may be tempting to stay within the comfortable and sectarian confines of a church that has announced its commitments and is well on the way toward receiving them deeply and meaningfully throughout all its settings. But if we are to travel toward the horizons of God’s extravagant welcome, then we cannot savor this joy only for ourselves. It is, I believe, a gift intended for the whole church. The fact that this is a gift marked, “some assembly required,” and that some churches are having more challenge unwrapping it than others, should not lead us either to scorn or to indifference.

Of course, even within the UCC the journey toward God’s new horizon means encounters and experiences that unsettle and disturb even those of us who think we’ve adjusted our comfort zones to the edginess of our “God is still speaking” ethos. And here I want to lift up the witness of a United Church of Christ leader well known to you – Barbara Satin. I first met Barbara at a national Coalition gathering in Chicago in the late 1990’s. She was making a keynote presentation about transgender issues and doing it in a remarkable way. On stage, with make-up, wig, and clothing, she transformed herself in front of our eyes from David to Barbara while describing her own pilgrimage, challenging the church in the process to a broader, deeper and more far reaching understanding of what open and affirming means. I found myself on the one hand intrigued and enchanted with this remarkable presentation and this remarkable person, even as I thought to myself – ecumenical officer that I was at the time – “this won’t go well with the Lutherans!” But I also knew that I was being challenged, pushed out of my comfortable binary world of “this and that,” of “either-or,” of “one or the other.”

Barbara has subsequently become part of the Executive Council where she continues to make an impressive contribution, not the least of which is raising the standard of the dress code at meetings! I'll never forget one moment which seemed to defy my instinctive anxiety born of ecumenical sensibilities. We were at evening prayer, and asked to hold hands for the benediction. As luck, or fate, or providence would have it, Barbara was standing next to the representative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – the retired bishop of Northeastern Ohio! And he seemed quite fine about it all. They made quite a couple – he in his clerical collar, Barbara in all her splendor. Maybe the horizon is not that far off after all! Relationships do matter, do transform. But transgender issues as they are embodied in real people, real members of the body of Christ, will discomfort the body of Christ in the coming years including, I suspect, some of our gay and lesbian members not to mention the straight folk among us. The last people to cross the bridge to the beautiful resort island are always the first to want to pull up the draw-bridge to keep others from coming and spoiling the Eden they have found. Gay and lesbian Christians and their allies who have fought long and hard for acceptance, will be tempted to avoid disrupting the zone of comfort and respectability they have carved out through pain and struggle. But we do so at the peril of all that has made us a courageous gift to the world.

Following the 2005 General Synod in Atlanta, and our adoption of the marriage equality resolution, we saw beginning to emerge another challenge on the horizon as some members of our historic racial and ethnic communities, and some members of new immigrant communities, began to grow restive with what they saw to be a preoccupation of the United Church of Christ. In our commitment to inclusion, have we privileged one marginalized community over another? Have we implicitly named a priority for a marginalized group that is predominantly white and who share some, if not all of that privilege, and in the process further marginalized people of color? Have we said, in effect, that it is more important to be Open and Affirming than to be Multi-racial, multi-cultural? These are not pleasant questions for the United Church of Christ and they threaten to become ugly encounters, cropping up in odd places like the discussions about

a new national governance structure for example where HUGS, the historically underrepresented groups, struggle to determine whether they share a common voice or whether there, too, the Coalition, Disabilities Ministries, and the Council for Youth and Young Adult Ministries are perceived as white, and therefore not full partners by the racial and ethnic communities. Painful questions and even more painful experiences. But the journey toward the horizon of God's future must pass through these questions, even if answers are not easy to find. The sacred conversation on race will need to include these questions if we are to be faithful to United Church of Christ commitments and values.

If ever there was a lived experience of our eschatological reality – “already, but not yet” – then open and affirming is it. In so many places it is real, so real that it is no longer a preoccupation, no longer a “big deal,” but woven into the very fabric of who and what and how we are. Here the Franks of our communities do find a word that confirms for them that they will be all right, do have a life they can live, do have very real possibilities. What a joy it is. And there are other places that are “becoming.” Becoming open and affirming. Becoming less hostile, less resistant. When our *New York Times* advertisement came out this winter, it included among other things, the phrase, “we were the first mainline church to ordain an openly gay pastor.” The ad was received with great enthusiasm across our church, especially in more traditional, even conservative congregations. I don't think they missed the reference. I think it's simply the fact that folk recognize that this is part of who we are, that even if my own congregation isn't ONA, “the church I belong to is.” And increasingly, that's ok. We're not just hoping to get to the Promised Land, “we're bound for the Promised Land.” Bound. Ready. Intending. Determined.

But we're bound for the Promised Land. We're not there yet. It is here, but beyond the horizon. Today I've tried to name three dimensions of the landscape from here to there. How can we interpret and share our gift, our conviction and experience, with ecumenical and global partners so that this gift can be more and more readily received? Already we know that we are a source of deep encouragement to allies in those

other churches still struggling, still yearning. But we must become more than mere cheerleaders. We must take on the vocation of loving encouragement. That's not easy. I remember the difficult moments in our dialogue with members of the Reformed Church in America. The out, lesbian pastor on our team made herself vulnerable in courageous ways as members of the dialogue were tempted to debate an issue in ways that rendered her very self "debatable." At the end of our process we had not persuaded them to become UCC. But we had demonstrated that our convictions grew out of our Biblical faith; they were not convictions we came to in spite of that faith. As we said farewell, Alice gave each of our RCA colleagues a little gift. It was a refrigerator magnet. On it was a woman playing a piano. Underneath were the words, "practicing lesbian." And they loved it! But the joy came at a cost. Are we prepared to pay that cost, together?

When Bill Johnson hosted a gathering of transgender persons some years ago, I found myself in thoughtful conversation with the group but also was aware that part of me was trying to "figure each of them out." Which female had been male? Which male had been female? Why did it matter? Of course, in important ways, it didn't really matter. But what I discovered was how being pushed beyond gender as "one or the other," I was put on edge. And if that is the case for me, what about the many members of our church who have come "this far by faith" and more than a little encouragement from the Holy Spirit! but who don't really understand that "this far" is not the whole journey? It's a fragile comfort zone that we have created in the United Church of Christ. Are we prepared to challenge it already? Yet if open and affirming is really for t, as well as for g, l, and b, then don't we have an obligation to press toward new horizons?

I'm comforted by the fact that it's not just the UCC that has trouble with inclusion that means more than we thought it did. At the International Convention of the Universal Fellowship of Community Churches one year I was warned just as I was about to enter the hall that "this is leather night." "No problem," I responded, though wondering inside, "what on earth is this all about?" It turns out that even in the UFMCC some communities are not always welcomed, that part of the national gathering needed to intentionally prod all of their members to be open to the full range of God's rainbow. Everyone was

encouraged to wear leather that night – kind of like our General Synod “wear a church camp T-shirt session.” Well, not quite. Sadly, the warning for me came too late to meet the dress code.

The sacred conversation on race that we inaugurated on May 18 offers great hope for the United Church of Christ. But it is fraught with peril as well. Whether we will really be able to move beyond superficialities to come to grips with white privilege remains to be seen. And that will be a challenge for the lgbt community which, at least in the United Church of Christ, resembles the demographics of the whole church. A community often defined by its own marginalization by the dominant heterosexual culture will need to take a place among the privileged for this conversation about race. Can the open and affirming process teach us something here? That remains to be seen. But know this: it will be a difficult conversation, full of suspicion and shadowed by the politics of race in this church. We will need to keep our eyes fixed on the horizon that beckons, lest we run to safe hiding places along the way.

In a real sense I entered into the open and affirming process over thirty-five years ago, long before it was ever a program and a process in the official life of the United Church of Christ. I never would have anticipated then that this would be such a dominant dimension of my ministry. And, if I’m honest, I must confess that I probably would not have chosen to make these convictions core elements of my leadership over the years. But this is where God has placed me, and this is where the United Church of Christ has led me. Looking back, I would not have had it any other way. Every year I meet for a retreat with my counterparts in other communions. Part of our time is in silence, part of it is a sharing time when we talk about the challenges and joys of leadership in the year past. As you might expect for a group that includes the presiding bishops of the Episcopal and Lutheran churches, the stated clerk of the Presbyterian church, the General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America, and the GMP of the Disciples, issues related to human sexuality tend to surface! Most of my colleagues share, at a personal level, my convictions; they share our convictions. But they serve under canons and procedures and policies and disciplines quite different from my own. They do not

underestimate the challenges I face in the United Church of Christ. But they consistently remind me of the privilege I have of being able to give voice to official positions that are consistent with the values of my heart. Never am I more cognizant of that privilege than when I listen to the Coalition choir sing at our General Synod. Few other church leaders in the world can be serenaded like that. It's a song whose lyrics are always the same: "You'll be all right. There is a life you can live. There are possibilities for you. And for this, I am profoundly grateful.