

## **Welcoming Congregation FAQ**

**Question:** Why is it important to become a Welcoming Congregation? Isn't it just symbolic?

**Answer:** It's true that it's symbolic, but it's an important symbol that means a lot. While going through the process of formally becoming a Welcoming Congregation, a church begins to confront its assumptions, misconceptions, and biases. The role of education and having a broad congregational discussion around the topic means that members will have a chance to consider issues that they might have overlooked in regard to discrimination, heterosexism, gay marriage, bisexuality, and transgender.

**Question:** What does a church have to go through to become a Welcoming Congregation?

**Answer:** Here is how the Unitarian Universalist Association describes the process: "The Welcoming Congregation Program is a completely volunteer program for congregations that see a need to become more inclusive towards bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people. It consists of a series of workshops developed by the UUA. The goal of the workshops is to reduce prejudice by increasing understanding and acceptance among people of different sexual orientations. Some of the workshop titles include: How Homophobia Hurts Heterosexuals; Connections to Other Forms of Oppression; Gender Socialization and Homophobia; and Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality. Many congregations offer the workshop series several consecutive times as an adult religious education curriculum open to all members and friends. In some congregations the workshop series (and later the entire program) is sponsored by a Welcoming Congregation Task Force/Committee created for just this purpose, while other congregations sponsor the workshop series through their Interweave chapters. In either case, the workshops are best facilitated by those that have experienced the curriculum."

**Question:** How did First Parish Duxbury become a Welcoming Congregation?

**Answer:** First Parish Duxbury became a Welcoming Congregation in January of 1998 following a period of education and discussion. The decision to become a Welcoming Congregation came at an annual meeting and required a congregational vote. The vote was 52 to 4 to approve.

**Question:** Was there resistance from First Parish Duxbury members to become a Welcoming Congregation?

**Answer:** Not a lot. The final vote was not unanimous, but it was nearly so. The minister recalls that one (but only one) person left the church over the decision.

**Question:** What does it mean to be a Welcoming Congregation?

**Answer:** It means a lot of things but one important meaning is that the church is fully supportive of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community. It also

identifies that the congregation has gone through a process of education and discussion and has voted to become a Welcoming Congregation.

**Question:** What does being a Welcoming Congregation mean to First Parish Duxbury today more than ten years after the vote to become a Welcoming Congregation?

**Answer:** We've learned that it's an ongoing process and that we need to continually revisit it and provide ongoing education. For example, one of our initiatives in this church year is to make sure that members and friends understand what it means to be a capital "W" capital "C" Welcoming Congregation.

**Question:** Do I have any personal responsibilities as a member of a church that is a Welcoming Congregation?

**Answer:** Yes, you do. Here are some thoughts on this: Let people know that you support gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people. Speak up when you hear biased jokes or comments. Use the words gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender in conversation so that people hear the words spoken without hesitation. Avoid abbreviations like GLBT for the same reason. In your conversations (and in church services) don't assume that everyone is heterosexual. Voice your support for equal rights. Decry discrimination in all forms, including discrimination related to sexual orientation.

**Question:** Do I have to support same-sex civil marriage?

**Answer:** No. Everyone needs to find their own position on this issue. However, the First Parish Duxbury Welcoming Congregation committee is fully supportive of same-sex civil marriage and feels strongly that civil unions at best represent an unsatisfactory separate-but-equal system.

**Question:** Why should heterosexuals get involved in same-sex or transgender issues?

**Answer:** There are a lot of good reasons. Here are some: To work to change society's bias against them; to help people who fear coming out due to societal disapproval; to work to prevent violence against homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgender people; to prevent suicide of those who see little societal support for their concerns; and to prevent discrimination against a minority.

**Question:** Does a Unitarian Universalist church have to be a Welcoming Congregation to perform same-sex marriages?

**Answer:** No.

**Question:** Do other churches on the South Shore perform same-sex marriages?

**Answer:** First Parish Church was the first religious institution in Duxbury to perform a same-sex marriage. It is also one of the few on the South Shore that will allow them.

**Question:** What does First Parish Duxbury do to promote its status as a Welcoming Congregation?

**Answer:** We have an annual Welcoming Congregation worship service; we have an extensive Welcoming Congregation page (<http://www.duxburyuu.org/welcomingchurchcommittee.htm>) on the First Parish Duxbury web site (<http://www.duxburyuu.org>); we have rainbow banners outside the door to the assembly hall and inside that entrance as well; we hung a Welcoming Congregation sign under our wayside pulpit; we mention that we are a Welcoming Congregation in our directory, we maintain a library of books and videos on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender topics; and we have an official Welcoming Congregation committee as part of our bylaws. Of course there is still much more to do.

This is the mission statement of our Welcoming Congregation committee: The Welcoming Congregation Committee acts to affirm and promote the first Unitarian Universalist principle, which recognizes the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We strive to support civil rights and to foster understanding, enabling us to welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people into the church family.

**Question:** Does First Parish Duxbury have transgender members?

**Answer:** Yes, we do. We welcome transgender people and hope we can support them in their spiritual journey.

**Question:** What is the most contentious issue for First Parish Duxbury around Welcoming Congregation?

**Answer:** Whether to allow a local Boy Scout troop to use our facilities. The church created a working group to investigate this issue and scheduled a sermon and after church talkback session on conflict resolution. The Welcoming Congregation committee's position on this statement is as follows: "The Welcoming Congregation Committee believes the Duxbury troop of the Boy Scouts of America should not be allowed to meet at First Parish Church on a permanent basis because of the national organization's policy to exclude gays from its membership and leadership. This issue is currently being reviewed by an ad hoc committee of First Parish Church. Our position on this matter is consistent with the Unitarian Universalist principles and our status as a Welcoming Congregation."

**Question:** How many Unitarian Universalist congregations are Welcoming Congregations?

**Answer:** According to the web site of the Unitarian Universalist Association (<http://www.uua.org/> see <http://www.uua.org/aboutus/findcongregation/index.php>), more than half of UU congregations are Welcoming Congregations. Here is a breakdown as of December 2007:

570 out of 1,060 in the United States (54%)

73 of 143 in Massachusetts (51%)

24 out of 47 in the Ballou Channing district (51%)