

# Interweave Connect



Maryka Bhattacharyya speaking at UUCE

Dear Interweave members and friends,

I cannot tell you how impressed I am by the nine articles that were contributed to this newsletter by our new Welcoming Congregations! You may notice that this issue is a bit late. Well, following through on all the articles took awhile! Thank you, thank you, thank you! You are the important people who make this newsletter tick!!

I trust you have noticed that members of the Interweave board have worked hard during recent years to establish an active network among our congregations on matters important to LGBTQ persons and their allies. Much of that communication has happened by way of our expanded monthly newsletter.

This year, Interweave Continental has also accomplished the following:

- Obtained funds to send at least two transgender youth to Camp Aranu'tiq, a summer camp for trans\* youth and their families
- Generated a transgender curriculum that has been tested in one of our congregations
- Sponsored an annual reception for UUs at 'Creating Change', the largest National Conference on LGBT Equality.
- Sponsored our annual LGBTQ sermon contest and Mark DeWolfe Award
- Sponsored an Interweave banquet and a reception to honor our LGBTQ ministers at UU General Assembly
- Maintained an Interweave Website ([www.interweaveuu.org](http://www.interweaveuu.org))
- Held monthly board conference calls
- Held an annual retreat of our board members
- Encouraged Interweave members and friends in our UU congregations to interact and learn from one another

An important message in my letter today is that Interweave Continental critically needs to translate the above actions at the national level into continuing investment from our individual congregations and Interweave members. Our newsletter, banquet, ministers' reception, LGBTQ awards, Creating Change reception, and annual board retreat all cost money.

As the UUA's interest and energy shifts to Multicultural Ministries, Interweave Continental remains a focused UU resource to LGBTQ persons and their allies.

During the next year, we will launch an all-out effort to persuade our congregations to put \$100 into their annual budgets for Interweave Continental. If your congregation has just achieved Welcoming status, and the Welcoming Congregation task force is burned out on that investment, consider investing \$100 per year in Interweave at the national level, and your effort will be continued!

We hope to see many of you at GA Providence in June! Our preparations for Interweave GA activities are well underway.

All the best,

Maryka Bhattacharyya

President, Interweave Continental

## Interweave Continental Board

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## Interweave Continental GA Awards for 2014

### Interweave Sermon Award

Each year, Interweave Continental recognizes the best sermon addressing LGBTQ issues that was preached in a seminary setting during the previous year (April 1 through March 31.)

The winner of the Interweave Continental Sermon Award receives a \$250 prize, and is invited to deliver the winning sermon at the Interweave Continental Banquet at General Assembly.

Individuals may submit their own sermons for consideration for the Interweave Continental Sermon Award or they may nominate sermons preached by others on LGBTQ issues.

For further information about the Interweave Continental Sermon Contest, please write to [interweavesermon@gmail.com](mailto:interweavesermon@gmail.com)

[Entry deadline for both awards \(April 30th\) has passed. Applications are being reviewed. SEE YOU AT GA 2014!](#)

### Mark DeWolfe Award

Each year, Interweave Continental confers the Mark De Wolfe Award on a Unitarian Universalist who has contributed substantially to improving the lives of LGBTQ people in a Unitarian Universalist setting or in the wider community.

This award was established to honor the memory of the Reverend Mark DeWolfe, the first openly gay minister in the Unitarian Universalist Association to serve a congregation.

The recipient of the Mark DeWolfe Award receives a \$250 prize and is recognized at the Interweave Continental Banquet at General Assembly.

Nominations for the Mark DeWolfe Award should include the nominee's name and the name of the nominee's UU congregation, as well as a detailed description of the nominee's contributions to improving the lives of LGBTQ people. Nominations should also include the nominator's name and contact information.

For further information about the Mark DeWolfe Award, please write to [dewolfeaward@gmail.com](mailto:dewolfeaward@gmail.com).

## Interweave Continental is Busy Preparing for GA

1. An Interweave Continental booth
2. LGBTQ Ministers Reception will be held at the Dunkin' Donuts Center. LGBTQ and Allies are invited to celebrate our LGBTQ ministers.

3. Interweave Banquet at the Rhode Island Convention Center. \$35 per lunch tickets can be purchased before from our website or at the banquet.
4. We will announce the winner of the Mark DeWolfe Award and the Interweave Sermon Award in the June newsletter.

## Unitarian Universalist Society of Iowa City, Iowa

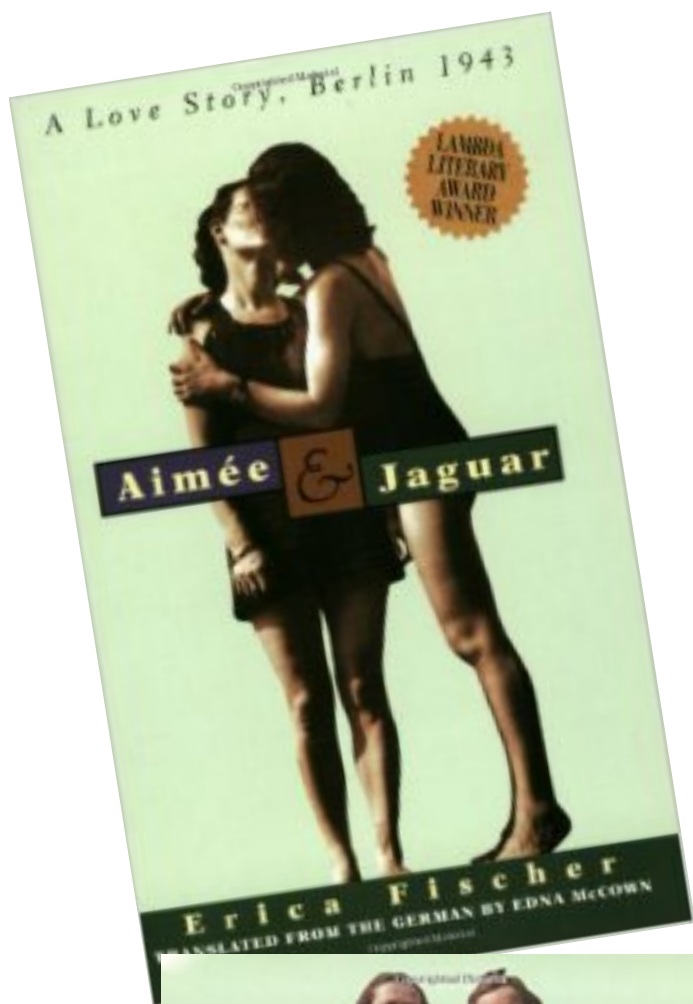
Members of the Interweave Continental board have requested that you and/or your congregation consider making Camp Aranu'tiq one of your social justice focuses for this year. We asked all Interweave Chapters to help send transgender youth to Aranu'tiq, a camp for transgender and gender-variant/gender-nonconforming youth.

We thank the Unitarian Universalist Society of Iowa City, Iowa for their donation. They sent \$250 to Camp Aranu'tiq.

Tova Vitiello  
Interweave Continental board member



## Yom HaShoah Holocaust Remembrance Day



Today, April 28th is Yom HaShoah. Throughout the world, Holocaust Remembrance ceremonies have been taking place.

In recognition of Yom Ha Shoah, I am recommending you read *Aimée & Jaguar* by Erica Fischer. It was originally published in 1994 in Germany. The translated version was published in 1995 by HarperCollins.

In 1991 at the age of eighty, Elizabeth Wust, revealed a secret she had kept hidden for many years. She told her lesbian love story to Erica Fischer, a well known journalist and feminist writer living in Germany.

In 1943, Elizabeth Wust met Felice Schragenheim. Elizabeth, a German Christian and mother of four children, was the wife of a Nazi officer. Felice was a Jew living underground. Their initial meeting was polite and awkward, but there was an attraction. For some time, Elizabeth did not know that Felice was a Jew in hiding. As they continued to meet, their initial attraction became a passionate love. Upon finding out the truth about Felice's identity, Elizabeth had Felice move into her house. She thought it would be a safe place for both of them. However, the Gestapo eventually found Felice.

The two women saw each other for the last time on September 7, 1944. On September 8th, Felice Sara Schragenheim was taken to Theresienstadt ghetto and later sent to Bergen-Belsen, where she died in 1945.

Tova Vitiello, editor  
*Interweave Connect*



the movie

## Welcoming vs Hospitality

In keeping with the concepts of inherent worth and dignity of every person, the UUA Welcoming Congregation Program began in 1990. The goal was peace, liberty, and justice for all. As you know, most religious institutions were condemning of LGBTQ people (and many continue to be.) The UUA wanted LGBTQ people to know that they would be safe with us.

The term “Welcoming” is a code word for religious institutions that have taken intentional steps to include people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

A few years ago, Alex Kapitan, Congregational Justice Administrator of LGBT Ministries within the UUA, contacted Interweave Continental and Interweave Chapters. We were informed that LGBT Ministries recommends that all congregations go through a Welcoming Congregation Program, or a refresher course every five years.

Has YOUR congregation gone through the UUA Welcoming Congregation Program? If so, how long ago was it? Since then, new people have joined your congregation. There are those who do not know why we “welcome” LGBTQ people and offer hospitality to others. There are members who do not understand the umbrella term transgender, nor do they know the hormonal or genetic evidence that supports the biological determinants of gender and gender identity. Interweave Continental encourages all congregations to go through the Welcoming Congregation Program. Here are just a few of the topics that you would discuss:

- \*Why we welcome LGBTQ people and offer hospitality to others
- \*Stereotypes, myths and generalizations
- \*Gender socialization, oppression, homophobia, transphobia ...
- \*Biological determinants of gender and gender identity
- \*Transgender issues
- \*Congregational strategies and what is next for your congregation

Tova Vitiello  
Editor of *Interweave Connect*



## The Most Difficult Part of the Welcoming Process for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Yakima, WA

I think the most difficult part of the welcoming process for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Yakima, Washington was convincing people that we needed to go through the official Welcoming Congregation program. Many in our church thought we were already welcoming, so they questioned why we needed to spend time on this. However, after the process started, there was an increased understanding of what makes a welcoming congregation.

Coincidentally, our welcoming process and vote occurred at the same time Washington State was trying to pass R-74, the new law that allowed gay and lesbian couples to legally marry in Washington State. Some of us were involved in canvassing neighborhoods while others in our congregation participated in phone banks to get this important legislation passed.

We borrowed the “Standing on The Side of Love” banner and took a photograph with it after we finalized our welcoming process and voted to become a welcoming congregation. Shortly after, Washington State passed R -74!

Mary Lou Shean  
Welcoming Task Force Chairperson  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Yakima, WA

## Welcoming Congregation Refresher Course Is on going at Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia, Brunswick



Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia, Brunswick received official UUA recognition as a Welcoming Congregation in February, 2012. Since then, UUCG Welcoming Congregation's effect can be seen within our congregation and in our outreach.

UUCG Welcoming Congregation's commitment has become integrated into a pattern of living: our beautifully framed Welcoming Congregation poster hangs highly visible in the vestibule; our rainbow flag hangs in our Rappaport Meeting Room; our outdoor Welcoming Congregation sign has a small rainbow; our minister, Rev. Lynne Garner, consistently voices our LGBTQ welcome in the community; our lesbian congregational president leads enthusiastically and gracefully.

For some, it may seem as if being welcoming is second nature to us. However, it is important to continue our learning. Since 2012, UUCG has



*Justin Bell, Pres NEFL, Names Project at PFLAG Brunswick March 2013*

pursued connections to LGBTQ individuals and groups within our community. In April 2012, UUCG made friends with the newly-formed Gay-Straight Alliance at the College of Coastal Georgia by creating the "Cookie Brigade." In order to show our gratitude and support for all that GSA does for LGBTQ people, we provided refreshments for their meetings. The Cookie Brigade continues in 2014.

A second major community outreach involved PFLAG. On Nov. 8, 2012, the first PFLAG group met at UUCG. A gratifying number attended, including two mothers who still preside as PFLAG Brunswick's president and treasurer. PFLAG Brunswick thrives.

In addition, UUCG has worked in coalition with other community organizations. We have participated in its local World AIDS Awareness Day projects. In conjunction with other organizations we helped

sponsor the "One World, Many Faces: International Culture and Food Festival" in April 2013 and 2014, an annual event on the College of Coastal Georgia campus.

Another coalition effort was sparked in early 2012 at PFLAG Jax when UUCG visitors met the soon-to-be-president of the Northeast Florida Names Foundation Project, home of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. The contact resulted in the now-president speaking at the March 2013, PFLAG Brunswick meeting to which he brought several AIDS Memorial Quilt samples. Plans immediately began to bring AIDS Memorial Quilt Exhibit to the CCGA campus. At the same time, free and safe HIV and AIDS testing was provided by the Coastal Health District. This event succeeded beyond expectations.

On January 25, 2014, a volunteer gave a free, three-hour "safe space" workshop on the CCGA campus. Twenty-seven people attended the event.

Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia's Welcoming Congregation outreach has been varied and productive. In addition, we have created a Multicultural Ministries.

The first Multicultural Ministries OUTreach Program took place on Thursday, March 20, 2014. It focused on the concept of families and was entitled, "Two Lesbian Moms Create a Happy Family Mosaic of Seven Children." Over twenty people attended the service.

For our congregation, welcoming means that we continue to earn our official status by reaching out to our community and working in coalition to enhance our life-long learning and welcome. Our refresher course is ongoing!

Mary Freeman  
Unitarian  
Universalists of  
Coastal Georgia,  
Brunswick





Children of the Unitarian Church of Montpelier, VT were urged to wear a rainbow-colored top in celebration of the Welcoming Congregation service on March 30. Reds, blues, and violets were in abundance while oranges, yellows, and green were somewhat scarce :) (Photo courtesy of Dave Armstrong).

## The Gay & Lesbian Experience Today: Celebrations and Challenges

While I was preparing for today's service, I was reminded of a joke: "What does a lesbian bring on a second date?" The punch line: "A U-Haul." It's a joke, yes, but the reason that it's funny is that there is more than a germ of truth in it. Many women who love other women are willing to commit wholeheartedly to a same-sex partner, early in the relationship, even though that kind of love is forbidden in much of the world.

A while ago, during the hymn "De Colores," we sang about "people now taking their place in the sun" and "people who know that their freedom is won." Today's service is about celebrating the right of people everywhere to love who they choose to

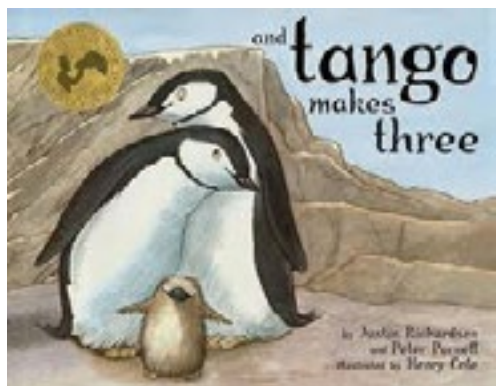
love, without restrictions regarding sexual identity and sexual orientation. Unfortunately, many individuals in Vermont, in other parts of this country, and around the world who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer don't have a "place in the sun" and don't "know that their freedom is won." More than 70 countries have laws criminalizing homosexual conduct.

Consider, for example, a few headlines from recent weeks: "India's Supreme Court Upholds Anti-Gay Sex Law," or "Idaho Police Arrest Gay Rights Protestors," and "Gay Rights Group Attacked in Ivory Coast." In Uganda, a law recently went into effect that punishes consensual sex between same-sex couples with

**The Gay & Lesbian Experience Today:  
Celebrations and Challenges** continued on page 7

## The Gay & Lesbian Experience Today: Celebrations and Challenges continued from page 6

life in prison. In Russia, a law was recently enacted that prohibits “gay propaganda.” During the Sochi Olympics, Cossacks used horsewhips on members



Children's book, "And Tango Makes Three"

of "Pussy Riot," a punk rock group that calls for LGBT rights in its song lyrics.

The award-winning children's book that we will hear today, "And Tango Makes Three," has consistently ranked high on the American Library Association's "most challenged" books' list because it tells the true story of two male penguins who bond at the Central Park Zoo. Like couples in other states, same-sex couples in Michigan are riding an emotional roller coaster. First, they were banned from marrying, and then they rushed to marry when a judge ruled the ban unconstitutional. Then they faced disappointment and frustration again when the judge's ruling was put on hold, preventing any additional marriages from taking place. It would be interesting to see what percentage of same-sex marriages in this country occur at midnight as people hurry to marry before the right is taken away!

While these stories are distressing, they don't give the whole picture. Other recent headlines include: "Texas Gay Marriage Ban Latest to Be Struck Down in Federal Court," and "How U.S. Businesses Forced Arizona Veto," and "Methodists Drop Same-Sex Wedding Prosecution," and "California Panel Says: End U.S. Ban on Transgender Troops," and "Jason Collins Set to Become 1st Openly Gay NBA Player."

NFL draft prospect Michael Sam, by announcing that he is gay, could become the first openly gay man in the National Football League. Homophobia in sports is deeply entrenched, so the Jason Collins



Michael Sam

and Michael Sam announcements mark significant progress in this country. In the past, an athlete who came out of the closet would do so only after he or she had retired from competitive sports.

Then, there was the news that Disney has withdrawn its support for the Boy Scouts of America because the scouts refuse to accept volunteer scout leaders who are gay. Mayor Bill De Blasio in New York City did not march in New York's historic St. Patrick's Day parade two weeks ago because gay groups are banned from the parade. Mayor De Blasio is the first New York mayor in decades to not march in this parade. Beer maker, Sam Adams, withdrew its sponsorship of the St. Patrick's Day parade in Boston and Guinness pulled its sponsorship from the New York parade to protest the ban on pro-gay marchers. By contrast, the organizers of the Gay Pride Parade in New York City have announced they will welcome anti-gay marchers and banners in their annual parade. The problematic "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military policy instituted in the Clinton administration was finally ended. In June of last year, the Supreme Court of the United States overturned the discriminatory Defense of Marriage Act, usually referred to as DOMA.

## The Gay & Lesbian Experience Today: Celebrations and Challenges continued on page 8

This decision has many repercussions but one small example is this: my spouse, Anne, and I will be able to file our federal taxes for the first time as a married couple. We have been a legally-joined couple in the eyes of the state of Vermont for many years, but the federal government has viewed us as two single women. That distinction has caused unnecessary headaches, confusion, and expense at tax time every year. We are thrilled to be treated now by the IRS the same as all of you who happen to love a person of the opposite sex.

The many news stories I mentioned earlier indicate that we live in a time when the LGBTQ community is making strides and, simultaneously, losing ground. This makes it all the more important that we reach out as a community of caring Unitarian Universalists to do all we can to advance LGBTQ rights here in Montpelier and around the world. It's wonderful that we host a queer youth group here in this church twice a month; it's fantastic that some pouch contributions last year and this year have gone to support Outright VT, the state's advocacy group for gay youth; it's great that we have a rainbow rectangle as a permanent part of our church sign and that we now fly the rainbow flag on Sunday mornings; it's very special that this is the very first worship service in this church to be dedicated to LGBTQ rights. These are all good things, but there is more that we can do. Progress that we make in Montpelier does reverberate beyond this small town. You are invited to be a part of the ongoing effort to celebrate and make life better for the LGBTQ community by joining the Welcoming Congregation Committee. For more information, please speak to Anne Ferguson, Peter Watt or myself.

Oh, yes. If you're wondering about that lesbian who brought the U-Haul on the second date: She and I will celebrate 20 years together next February.

Nancy Schulz  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier, Vermont



*Nancy Schulz, chair of the Welcoming Congregation Committee at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier, VT, is shown with the church's rainbow flag and sign. (Photo courtesy of Anne Ferguson).*





### Foothills Unitarian Universalist Fellowship Becomes a Welcoming Congregation

In December 2013 Foothills Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (FUUF) was officially recognized as a Welcoming Congregation by the UUA. Our journey, like most, had aspects common to others as well as features uniquely our own. This article highlights a few of our experiences which may help other congregations in their journey.

First, let me present some background. We are a small congregation of approximately seventy members and we preside in a socially and politically conservative, small southeastern town. From the beginning, our congregation exhibited a strong, deliberate intention to be both a liberal voice and a welcoming place for all people in our community.

When we began the steps of becoming a Welcoming Congregation, we were also in the process of searching for our first, part-time, consulting minister. For us, the impetus and desire to be a Welcoming Congregation needed to happen prior to hiring a minister. As it so happened, our new minister proved to be a valuable resource.

Prior to offering the workshops, a series of newsletter articles were published describing the purpose and history of the UUA Welcoming Program, including how it relates to our UU Principles. An important part of the prelude was to state the importance for honest and open dialogue, and to set the tone for the workshops to be a safe place for self-reflection and understanding.

Our initial hopes and fears about becoming a Welcoming Congregation may be another familiar

feature of our journey. Identifying these early on was invaluable. It enabled us to reconnect with our shared vision and verbalize our individual concerns.

Some of our fears included:

- The possibility of LGBTQ issues becoming the domain of a small, core interest group.
- Some in the congregation would find the process unnecessary. We already proclaimed to respect “the inherent worth and dignity” of all individuals. We had a few LGBTQ congregants. We invited openly gay speakers to give sermons, and we co-sponsored a few activities with the local PFLAG chapter.
- Possible negative reactions for singling out the LGBTQ community when there are many other marginalized groups and social justice issues in our community.
- There might be an end to the active dialogue once we became “officially” recognized. Perhaps not from apathy, but due to all the other issues and work that needed to be done in our small fellowship.
- And finally, there (still) exists the fear of violence from without. Some of our LGBTQ congregants have personally experienced discrimination in the wider community. A few years before, a same-gender couple’s garage was defaced with hateful graffiti and subsequently burnt down. Also, some of us were members at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church when violence occurred in the sanctuary.

**Foothills Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
Becomes a Welcoming Congregation** continued on page 10



By verbalizing these fears, we were able to proceed in a way that was unique to our needs. Because of our small size and some of the identified concerns, we decided from the beginning to invite everyone in the congregation to participate in the process in any way and at any level of involvement possible. An ongoing open invitation was extended to everyone – youth, adults, members, and friends.

We kicked off the process with a lay-led Welcoming Service that focused on understanding and affirming LGBTQ persons. Eleven different members, including youth, were involved with the service. For many people, an “aha” moment occurred during a visualization meditation led by a few teens describing specific day-to-day experiences of how it might feel to be a heterosexual person living in an LGBTQ dominated world (modified from a lesson from the OWL curriculum.)

Additional potlucks and workshops were offered once a month after worship services. Fears of this becoming the project of a few were unfounded. There was an overwhelming show of support and participation. Attendance in the workshops ranged from twenty-two to thirty-five people at a time

when we had sixty to sixty-five members in our congregation. Often, more than half of those attending the service stayed for the workshop afterward.

A synopsis of all workshops was published in our newsletter for those who were not able to attend. In addition, reminders about LGBTQ people being targeted for discrimination, specifically by religious institutions, helped reaffirm why this work was so important for us to do as a religious community.

The workshops were co-led with the help of a member of the LGBTQ community who previously helped lead a Welcoming Congregation refresher course at his own larger UU congregation. Some of the most successful activities (besides the identification of our hopes and fears) included: viewing the film, *For The Bible Tells Me So*; a panel of LGBTQ persons ranging in age from a teen to a person in the mid-60s who spoke about their experiences growing up and their experiences living in our local community; and a workshop entitled *Trans101: The Basics of Gender Identity and Expression*.

One pleasant outcome of the Welcoming Congregation process was congregational bonding. We came through the process having a shared

### Foothills Unitarian Universalist Fellowship Becomes a Welcoming Congregation continued from page 10

journey of increased understanding and commitment. Our congregation transformed from a group of people who viewed themselves as being open minded toward everyone and realizing that they still had work to do. We established a congregational-wide culture of affirmation and advocacy for LGBTQ people and issues. At the congregational meeting following the workshop series, the vote was unanimous for us to formally apply to the UUA for Welcoming status.

Shortly after the vote, The Supreme Court deliberated the Defense of Marriage Act. Our congregation co-hosted a public gathering to foster discussion and to introduce our newly hired minister to the local community. The following month, our Rev. Laura Bogle co-led an interfaith worship service to celebrate PRIDE Week.

Some of our ongoing commitments include setting up a table at each service dedicated to posting "Steps for Straight Allies," listing local and national LGBTQ news, including incidents of oppression, and opportunities for further education. In addition, we work with community partners and help support annual Transgender Day of Remembrance vigils, PRIDE Parades, and Day of Silence events. Furthermore, three of our members have been named to the board of the local chapter of PFLAG.

Anita Blatnik  
Foothills UU Fellowship  
Maryville, TN



## Comments upon their becoming a Welcoming Congregation:

**O**ur Welcoming Congregation poster has arrived! Nice to have tangible evidence of the milepost we have reached. I agree with you that the next step can be expanding our inclusion skills to embrace a full spectrum of abilities and backgrounds.

Here are my thoughts as I look back on the certification process... As Adult RE chair I tried to find a facilitator at the get-go, but when that didn't work out we still could assemble a group to test-drive the UUA curriculum. We found the handbook somewhat dated but usable; I wish we had relied more on the UUA website. As facilitator I then set out to disseminate our learnings to the rest of the congregation. Rather than create a new committee, we assembled a consortium of existing groups to carry out



the action steps which had not yet been tried. We also made contact with every existing group in the congregation, such as the book discussion group, men's group, Buddhist meditation group, etc, to seek out their concerns and try to address them. This process really worked well for us, and I hope to use it again.

You have been wonderfully supportive at every step of the way. We sort of met at the gender identity e-workshop at First Church, which coincided with a big snowfall in Boston -- at least I was able to see you, and you saw me. Appreciatively,

Barbara Hansen  
West Hills UU Fellowship, Portland, OR

### TUUF is a Welcoming Congregation

Timberland Unitarian Universalist Fellowship went through eighteen months of training to become a "Welcoming Congregation" in 2013. We originally did it for the recognition us because we felt we had been welcoming since its inception in 1969. The committee, which was over half of our little fellowship, felt we should have the official status to advertise on our website.

What we learned was more than just a way to advertise our welcoming. We were guided through the history of the struggles and prejudices toward LGBTQ people. From the gay members of a panel discussion, we learned first-hand about their suffering.

After our Welcoming Congregation process, I asked our congregants what stood out the most in their minds. Most of the respondents said they gained a better understanding of the personal struggles of LGBTQ people. One individual replied that it was the inhumane treatment of gay men after the NAZI concentrations camps were liberated at the end of WWII. The "Gay Holocaust" survivors were kept on a "sex offenders" list, and some of them (because of Paragraph 175) were re-imprisoned by the Allied-established Federal Republic of Germany.

Paragraph 175 was part of the German penal code enacted in 1871. It stated: "An unnatural sex act committed between persons of male sex or by humans with animals is punishable by imprisonment; the loss of civil rights may also be imposed." Paragraph 175 remained law in West and East Germany until the late 1960s. (For more information, watch the documentary film "Paragraph 175", directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 2000).

I, personally, was profoundly affected by the book *God vs Gay?: The Religious Case for Equality* (Beacon

Press, 2011) by Jay Michaelson. Although some people have used the Bible to reject and condemn lesbians and gays, Michaelson reveals how the Bible can be used to argue for equality. He points out that there are numerous interpretations of the selective sections that have been quoted as "anti-homosexuality," and the Bible can be used to argue for the dignity and acceptance of lesbians and gays. Michaelson gave me an understanding of the historical context of the distortions and mistranslations so that I am ready, without a doubt, to engage in conversations with my fundamentalist's friends without fear of being trumped by "God's word."

Since we went through the Welcoming Congregation process, we have become more aware of the positive gains that have been made for LGBTQ people. To validate that progress, we always share articles that we find in newspapers and magazines. In addition, we have listened to many sermons by the progressive Christian, Rev. Roger Ray of Springfield, MO. He always reminds us of the importance of inclusiveness and standing up against injustices.

Timberland is a small lay-led fellowship. Our LGBTQ members make up approximately ten percent of our congregation. Through them, we are connected to a larger group of LGBTQ people.

In summary, I think the most important thing we have learned is that progress is being made. We need to celebrate that progress and we need to stand up for it when we can.

Susan Mendola, president  
Timberland Unitarian  
Universalist Fellowship  
Lufkin, TX



## **The Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Southwest Michigan (UUCC), is proud to announce it has achieved formal recognition as a Welcoming Congregation by the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA).**

**W**e are a small congregation of about 60 members so our biggest challenge was maintaining the resources to focus on this important work. The program was started once in 2004 and led by our minister, but following a ministerial change the program lost direction. The program was reintroduced early in 2012 with renewed interest as a lay-led effort. Initially the Board and Minister were cautious of draining our thin resource pool to complete the program but our Welcoming Congregation Committee cleverly leveraged our existing committee structure so that the work was evenly distributed and naturally integrated into each committee's responsibilities. Even the Welcoming Congregation Committee was simply a topic added to the existing Faith In Action committee.

We also leveraged community resources by developing a relationship with the Kalamazoo Gay and Lesbian Resource Center and its Faith Alliance to support their ongoing efforts.

UUCC has long had a reputation as being a welcoming (lower case) congregation, so completing the program to be formally recognized as a Welcoming (upper case) congregation was a matter of following the program as outlined by the UUA. The most rewarding aspect of the program was the

series of educational workshops. These workshops were enlightening and the discussions were frank. The workshop series culminated with a panel discussion with members of the LGBTQ community of Kalamazoo. This event was rewarding for both the members of our congregation and the panelists.

UUCC capped its work on the Welcoming Congregation Program, after 16 months of focused effort, by voting unanimously to include affirmative, inclusive language in the church bylaws to promote participation in all of its activities, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

UUCC's Reverend Greg Martin noted that, "Inclusion is at the heart of who we are as Unitarian Universalists. With greater

strides being taken daily by our society for full equality and inclusion, it is more important than ever for those of us in the LGBTQ community to know there are spiritual communities that embrace us. This is an important milestone for Portage and southwestern Michigan".

UUCC continues its relationship with the local LGBTQ community. We proudly feature LGBTQ speakers in our pulpit, our youth group hosts a table at the local PRIDE event and we continue to warmly welcome all into our church community.

Joe Calme  
UUCC Of Southwest Michigan  
Portage, MI



## Becoming a Welcoming Congregation: The Unitarian Universalist Church of Tarpon Springs



In the invitation to write an article describing our experience in becoming officially recognized as a Welcoming Congregation, there were 7 questions suggesting subjects we might address. The majority of these questions involved a superlative of some form – greatest, most, biggest. I didn't find a great deal of resonance with these terms in my experience as co-chair of our "Welcoming Congregation Committee". I hesitated to embark on the article because I felt there was not enough drama in our experience to be of interest. I realized however, that perhaps because our experience was relatively drama-free it might serve to encourage others to follow their convictions and hopes to establish their congregations as officially "Welcoming".

Both our Pastor and the chair of our "Welcoming Congregation Committee" had great personal insight and knowledge about the "LGBTQ-experience" in both the religious and secular spheres. Having this informed, discerning, and sensitive leadership I believe was important to our having so little drama in our endeavor. We structured our program very much according to the guidelines provided by the UUA, cf. The Welcoming Congregation Program at the UUA website. We also found that there is a wealth of really wonderful educational material available on this excellent resource.

As I said we structured our program around the basics suggested by the UUA: worship, education, justice, and community life. We had special guest speakers at Sunday services who could address in real, personal terms their experiences as members of the LGBTQ community. We spoke to other congregations concerning their experiences in

becoming officially "Welcoming" and had them speak to us. We incorporated special programs with focus on LGBTQ experiences in our educational and social justice forums a few times each month over the course of approximately a year. We heard from and supported efforts from advocacy groups, such as Equality Florida and GLSEN, and participated quite enthusiastically in the local Pride Event – our quilters group created the banner we carry each year (see photo, yes we have been chartered since 1885!!!).

We hung a Rainbow Flag with ceremony and joy as part of a special Congregational event (also pictured). We had movie nights and shared films such as "Edie and Thea: A Very Long Engagement". We had open and frank discussions of the 12 Commitments of a Welcoming Congregation – recognizing that these must be made by each of us if they are to be true of our Congregation.

The one question among those suggested as guidance for writing this article that did resonate for me was: "Were there any surprises along the way?" The answer is yes: It was surprisingly simple and straightforward! All that seemed to be required was to approach the program sincerely and openly with full recognition that a Welcoming Congregation is one that is truly living its covenant to openness, acceptance, and love – for all.

Greg Rosasco

Unitarian Universalist Church of Tarpon Springs, FL





## Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester, MA

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester (UUCW) earned its Welcoming Congregation designation in February 1998. The activities of the “Rainbow Alliance” committee dwindled down over the years to random social events for GLTB members and their families, while others worked on the annual Worcester Pride organization. In September 2009, the program committee chairs and the minister met to evaluate each group to determine their viability. Our initial impression of the Welcoming Congregation committee was that it had run out of steam. However, the minister pointed out that there was work that remained around bisexuality and transgender issues. We had not even contemplated those in our initial phase. He challenged us to investigate the willingness of the congregation to implement the “Living the Welcoming Congregation” curriculum. A meeting was called and about a dozen people attended. At that time, we agreed to pursue the program.

One challenge we encountered was that some people thought we were investing valuable volunteer assets in a program that only benefited one “special interest group.” There was concern that the recommendation to engage in a program entitled

“Welcoming Congregation” could be interpreted as criticism that the congregation was not welcoming. We both believe that we learned more about what “welcoming” means in responding to these charges than we did in any of the subsequent workshops. There were no simple answers, but there were meaningful conversations. Also, we both believe these conversations were important learning experiences for the congregation.

We held a series of workshops during the winter of 2010. We met every other Sunday after the services (1 to 3 p.m.) in January and February. We were delighted to see that between 30 and 40 people participated in each workshop. We had a good mix of straight and LGBTQI people. A second set of workshops was conducted in the winter of 2011, and it was also well attended.

Some of the events that we have sponsored include:

- Pot-luck dinners and LGBTQI-themed films
- Lay-led LGBTQI-themed services
- A transgender member of our congregation conducted a service
- The youth group hosted a showing of The Laramie Project

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- Jointly hosting with three other religious groups a guest who discussed sexual identity and attractions
- Our youth group has been involved in anti-bullying activities and advocating for same-sex marriage
- A rainbow window was placed in our Fellowship Hall.

We finally met the criteria to qualify as a “renewed” Welcoming Congregation last spring when the congregation voted at the annual meeting to commit to the Welcoming Congregation principles. Shortly thereafter, we became concerned about the future direction of our congregation. There seemed to be a perception that the work was successfully completed. The unanswered needs of our LGBTQI members were presumably addressed. Furthermore, none of our LGBTI members came forth to assume leadership of the program when the co-chairs stepped down.

We contacted Alex Kapitan, LGBTQ and Multicultural Program Administrator at the UUA, for guidance. It was recommended that, among other things, we pursue a welcoming philosophy in a broader sense. We have been appraising our facility and membership with a view toward identifying barriers to acceptance and participation. We were admonished for assuming that we must recruit an LGBTQI member to lead.

Included in this article are two testimonials from the co-chairs of our Welcoming Congregation renewal effort. One person is transgender and both people identify as bisexual.

1. When first arriving at UUCW nearly six years ago, I had many of the concerns that other people sometimes have about finding a community of people who will be a good fit for one’s personal values and faith. Among these concerns was my desire to find a community with whom I could practice living with greater authenticity. I learned that the Welcoming Congregation renewal activities were beginning around the same time I started attending UUCW on a regular basis. Desperate to take some part in the activities, I wrote my name and every little piece of personal contact information I could think of on a survey that was distributed to the congregation. My message got across, and I began attending regular

meetings of what would come to be known as LGBTQI and Allies.

Over the next several years, I began to lead workshops and become more involved in the activities of LGBTQI and Allies and Welcoming Congregation. In the process, I learned so much more about others – and about myself – than I had bargained for. An avowed introvert, I surprised myself as I began to take an active lay leadership role at UUCW. Along with my co-chair and with other members of the lay leadership, I coordinated a workshop with Robyn Ochs, a well-known speaker, bisexual activist, and LGBT activist. She gave an engaging interactive workshop on sexual orientations and gender identities. We also coordinated an interfaith effort to organize a Transgender Day of Remembrance Vigil. Movie nights, social gatherings, and collaborations with others were also important to our efforts, as were LGBT-themed services.

In my engagement with these activities, I encountered pleasant surprises and also saw where I thought more work and learning needed to be done, both for myself and for others. UUCW became a spiritual home. I found that I was increasingly able to bring my full self to each of my relationships. I made new friends who cared about the entirety of my personhood, and I theirs. At the same time, introduction of these workshops and programs posed some challenges. I think that bisexual and transgender people are often seen as such small segments of the overall population that it is often assumed that our needs are met by simply aligning with a greater LGBTQI effort when this is not always the case.

I also learned that Welcoming Congregation work and LGBTQI work is important within the context of other social structures and oppressions. Becoming a Welcoming Congregation for LGBTQI people is directly tied into working on being welcoming and inclusive of diversity across the board.

It is my hope that the people within our Welcoming Congregations continue to learn, grow, and expand themselves in their understanding of welcome. I hope that respectful curiosity and engagement continue, and that conversations can be had about concepts like biphobia, transphobia, monosexism and cissexism, (to name a few), and how these oppressive



structures continue to make it hard for bisexuals and transgender people to be open about themselves in a way that may be different than it is for people who are gay or lesbian. I hope that conversations within our communities of faith go deeper into what our labels mean to us and how we choose the words we do to identify ourselves. It is my firm personal opinion that labels are only a starting point, a way to open the door to deeper understanding of one another. The words we use to talk about ourselves are important, and continue to be important. However, learning about ourselves and each other may help move humanity toward the eventual transcendence of categorization, allowing each of us to accept our own uniqueness and the uniqueness of others as vital threads in the tapestry of life. This is an ideal, to be sure, but I think it's an endeavor well worth our time.

2. A couple of things stand out about my experience working in the Welcoming Congregation program. One would be the acceptance and support I received for my identity and perspective. I really appreciated the opportunities to speak about bisexual and transgender issues in the workshops to open and willing participants, and to be involved in church services that focused around LGBT issues. Also valuable to me was the opportunity to experience how much motivation existed on the part of straight allies to do this kind of work, to collaborate with me on it, and to learn while doing it. I feel very grateful for their interest and hard work.

Speaking for myself as a bisexual and transgender person, UUCW was a very important part of my coming-out process, which included expressing my views on transgender spirituality in a Sunday service, participating in other LGBT-themed services, and helping to organize Welcoming Congregation workshops. I couldn't have hoped for a more receptive place to further my confidence and identity as a transperson. While I was co-chair of LGBTQI and Allies, UUCW's Welcoming Congregation committee, I found that the congregation, as a whole, was very open to learning about and supporting LGBTQI issues. We generally had good turnouts for LGBT-themed services and Welcoming Congregation workshops, the second of which I believe we offered for a couple of years while I was in a leadership capacity. However, the workshops were a lot of work for the few organizers we had, and we eventually ran out of energy and impetus to keep them going.



As my need to come out in an accepting atmosphere lessened (because it was being met), my need to focus on other areas of my life—including recuperation from the work I had done in the Welcoming Congregation program—became greater. My sense is that other former LGBT leaders and others who had been involved in the program in previous years had possibly also reached this point. I understand that this process of ebb and flow of programs and leaders is normal, but there's a concern about the current ebb at UUCW becoming long-term. I would like to address this.

Hopefully, I will not sound flippant when I say that this ebb has been happening only during the last couple of years, and that I feel that there's not much reason to worry at this point. I don't know why a certain "f" word (failure) is even being thought about in relation to the program and I certainly don't want to use it myself. I don't think it fits the situation. What would fit, in my view, is to find out what needs are out there right now and how UUCW is realistically able to respond to them. I second the minister's statement that searching for alternative ways to "engage issues of welcoming" is the thing to do if there aren't the human resources enough to hold workshops right now. Some really creative and valuable things could result.

I can't say enough about how important it has been to me that some in the church care so much about the Welcoming Congregation program that they want it to continue to be strong. One of the straight members is one of these people, and I have found him to be a rock in his support of it. The minister's leadership has been invaluable to its success as well, and other straight allies and LGBT leaders have put their energy into it over the years. I feel certain that the Welcoming Congregation program at UUCW will continue to develop, and I look forward to seeing what directions it takes.

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