

100% OPEN AND AFFIRMING

Reflecting on where we have been and rejoicing in God's faithfulness, the Open and Affirming Coalition and the UCC's ONA churches look toward a bright future. The theme of National ONA Gathering 2017 was "The Road Ahead" focusing on extravagant welcome and inclusion for all within the United Church of Christ. Celebrating 45 years of the Coalition, UCC representatives recognized the work that's happened over the past year and considered all the work yet to be done while attending last week's ONA Gathering.

Five members of the Penn Central Conference Open and Affirming Ministry Team attended this ONA Gathering. Day One held detailed information for ONA Consultants as they are the first level of support for local churches engaged in their ONA Journey. It was a time of networking with other ONA Consultants and planning for the difficult road ahead.

The Rev. Traci Blackmon, the Acting Executive Minister of Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ and Senior Pastor of Christ the King UCC in MO. provided inspiration and direction. "We cannot weather the storm using the same strategies, nor can we continue to work within our current silos." She reminded us that "...making real change means we must step out of our comfort zone and get in the ship with everyone else. In our work, NO ONE can be abandoned." We must consider what we brought in the ship with us, because we may need to abandon some of that 'stuff'; the stuff that takes up too much space so that others can't get in. In fact, we may need to throw it overboard to lighten the ship. Rev. Blackmon challenged us by asking – "What are you willing to throw overboard so that we all survive the storm. All of us survive!" We must resist the instinct to save only ourselves, to throw others overboard. Our strength is being in the ship together.

Two days of inspiring speakers, conversations in small groups and tasty food gave us inspiration and tools to move forward. This year highlighted Transgender Justice and Allyship in Faith Communities, particularly in communities of color. An important aspect of our discussion was understanding each person's pronouns. Some of us use the pronouns of he, him, his or she, her, hers. Some of us use they, them, theirs as their pronouns. Asking someone about their pronouns honors their personhood. We heard from African LGBTQ activist Jide Macaulay, founder of House of Rainbow (www.houseofrainbow.org) who helped us understand that the Bible does not support discrimination.

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National ONA Gathering 2018, June 27-29, Dallas, Texas

National ONA Gathering 2019, June 18-20, Milwaukee, Wisconsin