Short Guide to a successful ONA process

Suggested steps

These steps are based on the “Building an Inclusive Church (BIC) Toolkit”—a resource we strongly recommend for every congregation planning an ONA process. Every congregation is unique, so you may want to follow these steps in a different order, or add other steps.

Step 1: form a core team

Gather an ad hoc planning group of five to ten people who share your passion for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Christians and their families in the life of your congregation. Your pastor should be consulted before taking this step, and should attend the team’s meetings. If your congregation has openly LGBT members, at least one should be represented on the team. All meetings should begin and end with prayer. The team should meet occasionally for Bible study led by your pastor.

Step 2: connect with the Coalition, and examine available resources

The UCC Coalition maintains a nationwide network of ONA consultants trained to help congregations through their journey towards an ONA covenant. Contact us at ona@openandaffirming.org: we’ll answer your questions, and send you an ONA Starter Kit. Explore this site to identify books, films, YouTube videos and other resources that may be helpful as your core team begins work.

Step 3: gather information about your congregation

No ONA process should begin without some reflection on the unique culture of your congregation, your “way of doing things.” Ask these questions: how does the congregation handle change? How can difficult topics be explored in an environment of mutual respect? How can the ONA process be a “safe space” for every member of the congregation? What should be the pastor’s role? What are the potential obstacles? The BIC Toolkit includes a congregational assessment tool that will be helpful.

Step 4: talk to your LGBT members

Your pastor and the core team should convene a meeting of the church’s LGBT members to discern what role they will want to have in the ONA process. Some LGBT members may feel threatened by a process that is “about them.” Others may be closeted with their families or at work, and may feel conflicted about the possibility of a public ONA covenant. Others may want to be active in the conversation. The pastor should help LGBT members feel safe, and meet with individuals from time to time if spiritual support is needed.

Step 5: build relationships

Building and deepening relationships—especially with persons who at first may not be open to an ONA process—is a key element for your ONA plan. Everyone in your congregation should feel safe. Each
person should be accepted for who they are. Use the **BIC Toolkit** for suggestions, including organized “one-to-one” visits.

**Step 6: outline your plan, and revise when needed**

With the information you’ve collected through your congregational assessment and one-to-one visits, you’re ready to begin developing your ONA plan. Careful planning is essential for a healthy ONA process. You may find as you gain experience that the plan will need to be revised. The **BIC Toolkit** includes planning resources.

**Step 7: set the frame**

Through your congregational assessment and one-to-one visits, you will better understand the “frame” for your ONA process. The frame should reflect what the congregation’s members believe about the church’s mission and vocation. Framing is a useful skill for the conversation: you’ll find tools to shape your frame in the **BIC Toolkit**.

**Step 8: make it ‘official’**

Until now, your core team has been an unofficial, ad hoc body. After developing your plan, you should be ready to form an expanded, official committee of the congregation—sometimes called an “Open and Affirming Task Force.” Membership will include the original core team and other “stakeholders” in the congregation. All members of the new Task Force should be supporters of the ONA process. The transition to an official “task force” helps the congregation understand that the ONA process is not the project of a special-interest group but is sanctioned by the church’s lay and ordained leadership.

**Step 9: provide educational opportunities**

Your congregational assessment and one-to-one visits will help you make decisions about opportunities for education and dialogue (panels, films, Bible studies) that meet the needs of your members. Panels—especially with LGBT members of the congregation and parents of LGBT children—are an important way to humanize the conversation. Films—both documentaries and dramas on LGBT experience—can connect with some of your members in ways that written resources can’t. Bible studies can help members understand the basic values of Scripture which will inform your ONA covenant. You will also want to decide the order in which topics are introduced. You might begin by exploring foundational questions like the biblical values of hospitality, welcome, and reconciliation, and introduce subjects like sexual orientation and gender identity or expression at a later time.

**Step 10: draft your ONA covenant**

A written covenant is essential to put your church on record that it is truly an Open and Affirming congregation, and is a requirement for certification. A covenant will show LGBTQ seekers that your church is a safe spiritual home for them and their families. Use language that is authentic, reflects your congregation’s values, and includes a specific welcome to the transgender community. You’ll find examples of ONA covenants adopted by other congregations on the [Covenants page](#). It may be helpful to share your draft with the [Coalition](#).
Step 11: conduct an exploratory survey before you vote

While you may be tempted to skip this step, this is a vital one. One of the goals of the ONA journey is to help a congregation experience the fullness of the Body of Christ, not to divide us against one another. If you take a vote, and the result shows the congregation is still conflicted, the process will have failed even if the vote passes. To avoid an outcome in which the church is divided into “winners” and “losers,” an exploratory survey will help. Have you heard from every constituency? Have you effectively addressed all concerns and fears? The BIC Toolkit includes suggested language for a congregational survey or “straw poll” (which should protect the anonymity of respondents). If the result shows that less than 75 percent would vote in favor of the proposed ONA covenant, the Task Force should meet with the pastor and discuss additional steps that may be needed to reach a near consensus. But if your survey shows that more than 75 percent will support the covenant, you may be ready for a vote.

Step 12: vote

The vote enables your congregation to “own” your ONA covenant. The procedure will differ from church to church: sometimes the entire congregation votes in an annual meeting, sometimes an elected governing body is empowered to decide. Read your congregation’s constitution or bylaws and consult with your church’s leadership to decide the right time and place for the vote. Remember: a covenant affirms your relationship with God, and therefore should be framed by prayer and worship.

Step 13: certify

The Coalition’s ONA program is responsible for the certification of new ONA covenants. Certification means that your church will be officially listed as ONA on the Coalition and national UCC websites. We’ll also dedicate a day on our Facebook and Twitter pages to introduce you to the wider Open and Affirming family. Certification entitles you to a wide range of resources designed to help ONA congregations grow. To certify your covenant, please complete this online form. If you have any questions, contact Andy Lang at ed@openandaffirming.org.

Step 14: celebrate

Affirm your covenant at a regular service on Sunday morning. Members of the congregation should stand if they are able and read the covenant together. LGBTQ members can be invited to give public testimony. The choice of hymns, music, readings and the sermon should be appropriate for the occasion.

Step 15: publicize and evangelize

If you don’t publicize your covenant widely, your LGBT neighbors won’t know that you’re an Open and Affirming congregation. Write a press release, and consider displaying a rainbow flag, banner or symbol outside your church. And publicity won’t be a one-time effort: look for any opportunity to reach the wider LGBTQ community and other seekers who are looking for a church with ONA values.
Step 16: turn to the future

As you live into your ONA covenant, your congregation will open up to new opportunities for mission, ministry and evangelism. To keep the momentum going, form a standing ONA committee to explore ways your covenant can have an impact. Use our Next and Evangelism pages for more ideas. After one or two years, consider using this “Self-Evaluation Tool for ONA Churches” to chart the progress you’ve made, and to inform planning for your next steps.

Basics of a successful ONA process

- Take as much time as you need: a successful ONA process is an extended time of prayer, dialogue, study and discernment. Don’t rush to a decision. Be thorough and give the congregation enough time to assimilate and discuss new information.
- Plan ahead: form a core team. It should be clear that the ONA process is an initiative by lay leaders with the pastor’s support.
- Be flexible: adjust to new learnings, realities and insights during your ONA journey.
- Create a safe and respectful environment for everybody: find ways to support members who feel at risk and members who are uneasy or hesitant. Communicate continuously and effectively: present information in various forms (discussions, panels, graphics, study guides, Bible studies, movies).
- Listen as well as speak: Ensure that everyone is heard.
- Include personal stories: especially stories by LGBT members or neighbors and their families, stories of changed minds and hearts.
- Provide pastoral care: the pastor should be supportive of the process but should not lobby for a specific outcome, and should be pastorally available to everyone.
- Pray without ceasing: trust that the Holy Spirit will work through your congregation. Begin and end each session with prayer. Encourage intercessory prayer by members throughout the process.

More resources

**Building an Inclusive Church Toolkit**
The BIC Toolkit will help you map out a detailed plan to lead your congregation through an ONA process.

**Building an Inclusive Church Workshops**
BIC workshops train lay leaders in the skills needed to guide a church towards an ONA covenant.

**Transgender resources**
No ONA process is complete without study and dialogue on transgender inclusion.

**Films and documentaries**
Film nights can be an effective way to connect with your congregation.