

open and affirming

SOME  
THOUGHTS

God is still  
speaking,



By Dr. Timothy J. Brown, Commissioned Minister

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The Coordinating Committee of the Association of United Church Educators has updated its policies to become a more intentionally open and affirming organization. To me, there are two significant reasons why this is an important step.

The first of these is the importance to our own members of knowing that this organization of church educators, of which I have been a member since 1998, is open to including all as members, regardless of affectional orientation or gender identity. My suspicion is that I am not the only open gay man who is a member of AUCE. As an often marginalized community, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have come to learn that "All are welcome" means "Everyone but us." When a community states a welcome to everyone, and is willing to name whom everyone might be, the message is clear. While many of my AUCE colleagues are very open, a self-designation by an organization is a stronger statement and much less ambiguous.

The second vitally important reason is for the communities with which our members work. Church educators work with children and youth throughout the United Church of Christ. All children and youth in the denomination should have access to age-appropriate sexuality and gender identity education, regardless of their own individual sexuality or gender identity.

In William Letts' and James Sears' book, *Queering Elementary Education*, a compelling argument is presented for the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in the classroom which can easily be extended to the religious education activities in which so many of us are involved. The writers show that stereotypes and biases may develop early in life. We must therefore be willing to allow ourselves to be visible, even with children, in the same way that straight people do, so that these stereotypes do not develop. Straight people need to treat lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people as normalized. The writers state:

What children could know about being gay or lesbian is related to their present and future families. Every child is a part of a multi-generational family, in which elders, the child her- or himself, and/or the child's future offspring may be gay or lesbian. Imagine Sally. As a child, she may have a gay or

lesbian parent. Or when she grows up, Sally may be a lesbian and live with a partner, and together they might rear a child who grows up to be straight. Or Sally might marry a man and raise a son who grows up to be a gay man. Maybe Sally's sister is a lesbian and Sally is straight. These are only some of Sally's putative family configurations that include gay or lesbian family members. Letting a five-year-old Sally and her classmates know that gays and lesbians are part of our world will help her understand the current and later experiences with people in her family, and beyond it. (40)

Curricular inclusion, however, as the excerpt implies, is not enough. The approximate 10% of the children in our Sunday School classes and youth groups who will grow up to be LGBT are often growing up in a damaging environment. Ann Hanson, Minister for Children, Families, and Human Sexuality Advocacy in the United Church of Christ has written, "Long before they have any real understanding of what the word means, gay children have already been instilled with the belief that to be gay is something terribly unnatural and shameful." An intentional church educator can do much for the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of children and youth.

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