

Megan A. Reynolds

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June 15, 2014

Ms. Annette Marquis
LGBTQ and Multicultural Programs Director
Unitarian Universalist Association
24 Farnsworth Street
Boston MA 02210

Re: People's Church, 1758 North 10th St, Kalamazoo, MI 49009

Dear Ms. Marquis:

I am writing as a member, and current Vice-President of the Board of Trustees, of People's Church to request recognition as a Welcoming Congregation.

A unanimous congregational vote was held on May 20, 2012 in affirmation of being recognized by the Unitarian Universalist Association as a Welcoming Congregation.

This letter will summarize the work of our congregation using the UUA Commitments and Action Steps as a guide. This writer is humbled by the task of summarizing this history because the record of People's Church as a welcoming congregation to sexual and gender minorities extends back to 1974, when I was one-year-old. To say that the congregation is overdue in submitting its application for recognition as a Welcoming Congregation is to state the obvious. However, there is a clear record to support that this work was long ago started, has long since taken root, and will always continue because it now reflects who we are as a congregation.

The congregation's first public statements in support of LGBTQ rights date to 1974, when a member of the congregation came out publicly to his employer and to the larger Kalamazoo community. The congregation had been aware of this member's self-identification for some time before but followed his lead into its first engagements with public advocacy, outreach to the local LGBTQ community, and education about LGBTQ issues for its members and friends. The member who led the way with his brave personal coming-out, Charlie Kast, left Kalamazoo to become UU minister but it was the start of this congregation's journey.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the church offered its building to PLFAG and a local chapter of Phoenix Community Church. People's Church gradually developed a connection with the local LGBTQ community by renting the building to various gay social groups for dances and singles events. More and more LGBTQ persons affiliated with the church and became members through such initial contacts.

1998-2000 – First Welcoming Congregation Task Force is formed under the leadership of the newly called minister, Jill McAllister. Activities throughout the period included: meetings of the Welcoming Congregation task force, educational publications and presentations to the congregation, inclusion of news of legislative developments affecting LGBTQ populations in the church newsletter, creation of a highly-visible educational bulletin board for LGBTQ issues in the church lobby, development and popular use of special name tags for members publicly supporting LGBT rights, implementation of the OWL curriculum and creation (by the Sunday Services committee) of written guidance for worship coordinators and guest speakers regarding inclusive language. All of these activities culminated in a congregational vote to expand the non-discrimination clause of our bylaws, which passed by unanimous vote at a congregational meeting on May 17, 2000.

2001 – 2012: All of the above-listed activities continue with the Welcoming Congregational Task Force renamed as the Social Justice Coordinating Committee. For some reason, the application to the UUA that was prepared by the Welcoming Congregational Task Force in 2000 was never submitted, although it appears to have been close to completion. Not until 2012, does the congregation again vote to seek the formal recognition from the UUA. However, activities and outreach continue, expanding along with the awareness of our non-LGBTQ members and the growth of our LGBTQ membership. The number of LGBTQ members and friends to the congregation steadily grows, reaching approximately 10% of the congregation and holding steady for many years. LGBTQ members are leaders in our RE program, numerous committees, and the Board of Trustees. Our long-time DRE, now entering her 13th year in that position, is a lesbian mom.

2004 – People’s Church Minister Jill McAllister and members of the church make public comment at Kalamazoo City Commission meetings in support of an administrative policy to offer employee benefits to the partners and children of city employees in same-sex relationships. Numerous church members express public support for the policy using their identification with the church.

2009 – The Social Justice Coordinating Committee’s request to the Board of Trustees that the congregation publicly support a City of Kalamazoo ballot initiative to add non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ persons to the Code of Ordinance. The Board calls a special congregational meeting to consider the motion and 98% of the congregation voted to approve. The Kalamazoo Gazette published a letter to the editor from the chairperson of our Social Justice Coordinating Committee in support of the ordinance bearing his identification with the church. Our minister, our DRE, and numerous members, coordinated by the Social Justice Coordinating Committee, canvassed in support of the ballot initiative, which ultimately is approved by 62% of Kalamazoo voters on November 4, 2009.

2012 – Congregational vote to seek Welcoming Congregation status from the UUA.

2012-2014 – The reconstituted Welcoming Congregation committee organizes several speakers to present to the congregation throughout the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 church years. For example

the 2014 Mother's Day Sunday service is a presentation by long-term member River Artz-Ifland, who raised three children in the church since the 1990s, beautifully describing her history as a lesbian mother, including the discrimination that prevented her from becoming a foster mother. LGBTQ justice issues are increasingly considered from a more sophisticated, intersectional perspective in conjunction with our active ARAOMC (Anti-Racism Anti-Oppression Multi-Cultural) Committee and our Beloved Conversations programs. Jill McAllister is actively engaged with international partners in Africa and other contexts where emerging Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist groups are taking a stand for LGBTQ rights in countries with extreme human rights abuses against that population. People's Church through its minister Jill McAllister publicly supports a non-discrimination ordinance that is ultimately adopted by the suburban municipality in which our church is located, Oshtemo Township. When Jill leaves People's Church after 15 years of settled ministry, the congregation hires a lesbian interim minister, Pam Allen-Thompson. For the 2014-2015 church year, one co-President and the Vice-President of the Board of Trustees are LGBTQ identified. The church has transgender members, one of whom is serving on the Search Committee for our next settled minister. It has now become a tradition for the church to encourage annual participation by its members in events like Kalamazoo Pride festival and Transgender Day of Remembrance events.

The attached documents describe many of the activities outlined in this summary. Please contact me if there are additional documents that would help you in considering our application. Although the process in seeking the Welcoming Congregation status has been a long and circuitous one for our congregation, there will be much celebration when the recognition is officially conferred upon us.

Sincerely,

Megan A. Reynolds