



**HOST:**

**BONNIE ERBE**

**SPECIAL EDITION**

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2013**

**TRANSCRIPT PROVIDED BY  
DC TRANSCRIPTION – [WWW.DCTMR.COM](http://WWW.DCTMR.COM)**

BONNIE ERBE: Hello, I'm Bonnie Erbe. Welcome to *To the Contrary*. I'm reporting from Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ in Washington, D.C. This is one of a growing number of churches that are welcoming people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender preferences. They call it Open and Affirming, or O&A.

On this special edition of *To the Contrary*, we take you to three churches in very different parts of the country that are opening their doors, along with their communal lives and ministries.

OBY BALLINGER: Open and affirming is our church's – our big-C church, our way of grappling intentionally and faithfully with one of the most difficult things that the church faces right now: how to welcome and embrace and sanctify gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer people.

MS. ERBE: Here in St. Paul Park, Minnesota a new consciousness is taking hold. Although this town was a manufacturing hub back in its heyday, today it's a quiet town with one oil refinery. The church mirrors the town. Once a thriving church, the Community United Church of Christ saw its population dwindle as the town hit hard times. Today, both are experiencing revitalization.

In 2006, Community UCC underwent a pastoral transition.

JIM HUFFMAN: We had maybe 88, not quite 90 applications that we had received – gay, lesbian, straight. Three quarters about, more than, asked is the church Open and Affirming.

MS. ERBE: The importance of answering that question soon became apparent. When the search committee agreed on a candidate for pastor, she didn't accept their call.

EDIE SEEFELDT: She said you're not – your church isn't Open and Affirming officially, so I can't take it. She was – had a commitment to her lesbian partner and she said I don't know how she would be treated if she came here.

MS. ERBE: The church decided to examine its policies. Edie Seefeldt led the church through an open and affirming process.

MS. SEEFELDT: Although it wasn't my cup of tea, I had to do what I could to make this church a welcoming church to the gay community.

MS. ERBE: But not all church members shared the enthusiasm.

DIANNE BARNACK: I was part of the whole process and at first I was one against it.

MS. SEEFELDT: I can think of one person in particular that would quote just certain places in Scripture and then we could come back with if you're going to take the whole Bible literally, you'll have all kinds of problems.

We interpreted the Bible as best we could, as our hearts told us to. And what we came up with is that God is love.

MS. ERBE: The congregation studied the issue for months.

MS. SEEFELDT: What worked the best was just having people come and share their stories. Then we finally had a vote. And I'm quite sure that I can say that we had a two-thirds affirmative to become open and affirming. Only one person that I know of that actually left the church.

MS. ERBE: Now, and O&A church, the search for a pastor began again. Oby Ballinger came in for an interview. He was gay with a husband.

MS. SEEFELDT: We found Oby. And after they met him, it was a piece of cake.

MR. BALLINGER: Almost immediately, they asked about Javen, my family. They wanted to meet him. And people embraced him and welcome him as my husband.

MS. ERBE: But church was not always a welcoming place for Oby. At 15, he was baptized in a Lutheran congregation. In that church he felt his call to ministry.

MR. BALLINGER: By the end of high school, when I was a senior, I came out to myself and started coming out to my family and friends at school only to realize that that church was not altogether safe or friendly place to come out as a gay man and still be a Christian.

MS. ERBE: In college Oby found the United Church of Christ.

MR. BALLINGER: A pastor there became a mentor of mine. I think it took her less than a week to rope into being on their Open and Affirming task force.

MS. ERBE: He went on to work on Connecticut's same-sex marriage campaign while his partner, Javen Swanson, finished seminary. When Javen finished his studies, the two men had a big church wedding in the seminary chapel.

MS. : Help Javen and Oby as they commit themselves to each other.

MS. ERBE: Pastor Oby was able to take time off to work with Javen to help make Minnesota the 12<sup>th</sup> U.S. state to legalize gay marriage.

JAVEN SWANSON: People are really struggling with what Scripture says and some of the traditional teachings of the Christian Church.

MS. BARNACK: When Pastor Oby was voted in, well, a few of the members quit coming. I wasn't going to quit coming, whether Pastor Oby is – his business, not mine. I'm not the judge. And he's preaching God's word.

MR. SWANSON: People who are religious honestly wrestling with a lot of it. And they can't discount the reality that Oby's doing fantastic ministry here just because he's gay. And at the same time, they can't – they can't just dust aside sort of the qualms that they have about homosexuality.

MS. ERBE: Javen is studying to be a Lutheran minister. In 2009, the Evangelical Lutheran Church voted to start ordaining gay clergy who were in lifelong monogamous relationships. Prior to that, gay pastors were expected to be celibate.

As with public policy, church policy is evolving. The welcoming church movement, which goes by various names in the denominations, is vital to this change.

UCC was a pioneer. In 1985, the general synod encouraged but did not require its congregations to adopt a nondiscrimination policy and a covenant of openness and affirmation.

MR. SWANSON: There are really strong movements in all of the partisan Christian traditions. I think the UCC probably has the strongest kind of welcoming movement. And I think we all sort of learn from each other and we've even started collaborating a lot on trainings.

MR. BALLINGER: I invite the children to come forward now for a time with children as we gather.

The ribbons are different symbols for the different directions. Now, what are the directions that you might see on a compass? Any of you know a compass?

Open and affirming is an example of the sort of new heart and the new spirit that's taking root in this place.

MR. HUFFMAN: There's energy and there's the vitality.

MR. BALLINGER: Members of this church, people in this community are starting to realize that the way forward, the way of life, the way that the church will continue is to reach out and embrace people, no matter who they are or where they are life's journey, and welcome them in.

I think it's one of the reasons we've been growing.

GEORGE AULT: Good morning. And welcome to our worship service on this beautiful Sunday in Sedona. And remember, no matter who you are or where you are in your faith journey, you are welcome here.

MS. ERBE: A traditional church in a conservative state, welcome to the Church of the Red Rocks in Sedona, Arizona, with a congregation of 600 members. It was here one Sunday morning, in 2010, that the pastor surprised the parishioners.

MR. AULT: Instead of doing the benediction, I went down to the congregation and I said I'd like you to welcome David as I have.

MS. ERBE: As agreed, Pastor George Ault told the congregation that their associate pastor was gay.

DAVID RAGAN: I just started sobbing. And I don't know where that came from. It just was so, again, bizarre, surreal to be in front of 300-400 people and having my sexuality announced to the entire congregation.

MS. ERBE: David had asked his family to be at the service. He had already come out to them.

MR. RAGAN: I couldn't look at my kids. I couldn't look at my parents. And next thing I know, there was a standing ovation. And I would have never, ever seen that coming, never. And on the way out, more people came up to me and told me that they had a niece that was gay, a son that was gay, a grandchild that was gay, a sister who was gay.

MR. AULT: He thought for 40 years that whenever people found out he was gay, they would reject him.

MS. ERBE: Associate Pastor David Ragan had been married twice and he had two children. After his second divorce, David decided soul searching was in order. He admitted to himself, some family, and close friends that he was gay. But it was in Sedona that he made the decision to go public, prompted by a gay teenager in the congregation.

MR. RAGAN: He would tell his mother that I was the only heterosexual that understood him. I finally just felt like too big a hypocrite and so I told his mother, after probably a year, a year and a half that the reason I understood her son so well was because I was on the same journey.

MS. ERBE: Embraced by the congregation, David felt affirmed, but he was also ready to move on to his next position. He had no idea his spiritual journey would spark a movement at the Church of the Red Rocks.

MR. AULT: We've been thinking about it for quite a number of years. In fact, we decided not to do it about six or seven years ago, mostly probably being afraid that maybe it will split the congregation.

MS. ERBE: The church took a chance. It would consider becoming an open and affirming United Church of Christ.

MR. AULT: Some came and said why are you even doing this? We're already open and affirming.

MS. ERBE: Susan Hughes stepped up to spearhead the effort.

SUSAN HUGHES: The more I talked to Dr. Ault and to David about it, the more I learned that something did need to be done if we wanted to officially become an open and affirming congregation.

MS. ERBE: Susan and her husband were close friends with David. But Susan also had another reason to meet this challenge, her son.

MR. RAGAN: He was in college. He was home on break the day that I was announced as being gay to the congregation. And I had no idea that he was gay. And he wrote me a letter about a month later saying, you know, David, I watched you come out and I watched how my parents supported you. And it made me realize that I need to give them the benefit of the doubt. Still makes me a little emotional. I need to give them the benefit of the doubt that they will love me too.

MS. HUGHES: I think we always knew about our son, both my husband and I. But we had always decided that it was up to him to tell us.

MS. ERBE: The Church of the Red Rocks has a very active ministry, bringing the community together for classes, art exhibitions, and clubs, in addition to Sunday worship. Now, the church calendar would include educational events about open and affirming.

MR. AULT: One of the reasons why I wanted to take plenty of time for education and development of the O&A process here was so that people have an opportunity to grow and become their potential because if a person leaves, if they get angry or their anxiety level goes up and they leave, then you have no chance to work with them.

MS. ERBE: This guide called "The Blue Book" was key. It contains all sorts of frequently asked questions, their answers, additional readings, and information. It was put together by churches that had gone down this path before.

They also use it to guide Bible study.

MR. AULT: There're so many things in Leviticus, when you really study the Bible, you have to know the difference. A lot of people don't know Scripture. They read Scripture literally.

MR. RAGAN: Sodom and Gomorrah, the story, is really about hospitality. It's really about welcoming the stranger. And the irony is the very scripture that people fight over to exclude homosexual is probably the very scripture that calls them into embracing all the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, the strangers in their midst.

MS. ERBE: In addition to Bible study, the Open and Affirming Committee put together panel discussions, videos, and movies.

MS. HUGHES: We have a man in the congregation. I think he's close to 90. And he was at every event, every film, every panel discussion. And I remember specifically a film we showed in August and he turned to me and thanked me for doing this and said that it just had really opened his eyes and his mind and his heart.

MARIAM STEIN: There are times when I had kids over the years who were struggling with their identity. There were a couple that I look back and I think we lost them to suicide and I think it's because society is so cruel. And I don't want my church to be cruel. I want it to be loving.

MS. ERBE: Before the vote, there were still doubts about the final outcome.

MR. AULT: You never know until you take the vote, until you go through the process.

MS. HUGHES: We got so little pushback. I was worried that there was a contingent that was, you know, laying low and waiting to perhaps ambush us right at the vote time.

MS. ERBE: When the ballots were counted, in January, 2010, O&A passed with 90 percent of the vote. Congregants don't believe they lost many if any members.

New members believe the distinction is important.

SUSAN BLECHMANN: Well, if you look at the message of Christ, it's very inclusive.

MS. ERBE: The Church of the Red Rocks welcomes many visitors every week. The day *To the Contrary* was filming, David Ragan came home to visit the very place he came out publicly.

MR. AULT: Here's a guy that keeps roaming around, Dave Ragan. Welcome back, David. (Applause.)

MS. ERBE: It was the first time he was back since he left, in 2010. As David was greeted with hugs, he remembered what took place in this church.

MR. RAGAN: It was amazing. It gives me goose bumps right now. I never ever expected that type of affirmation. But I lucked out, I guess, to be in such a loving community.

MS. : Good morning and welcome to Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ. We are the miracle on South Capitol Street.

MS. ERBE: Located in Washington, D.C., Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ is a model of inclusivity. It's casual Sunday. A look around the sanctuary reveals the stunning difference since this church began as an all-white Southern Baptist congregation.

DENNIS WILEY: The church was a thriving church up until after the 1954 Supreme Court decision that desegregated the schools.

MS. ERBE: With white flight, the church had two choices, sell the building and move or hire a black pastor. The decision to stay would be complicated because the congregation had dwindled. There was no money to pay a pastor until Reverend Wesley Wiley stepped up.

MR. WILEY: My father was able to come at no salary initially because he was serving the Southern Baptist Convention in a position of cooperative ministries helping to foster better relation between blacks and whites.

MS. WILEY: This legacy of inclusion, amazingly, it was – it was handed to us by a group of Southern Baptists.

MS. ERBE: Inclusivity and openness became hallmarks of the church. The church took on gender equality. Dr. Christine and Dennis Wiley, husband and wife, fulfilled the call as co-pastors. Some members questioned having a woman at the pulpit, but it succeeded. What came up next would stir real controversy. The pastors are passionate about social justice and true inclusivity. That meant welcoming LGBTQ people.

NIGEL SIMON: They were with the marriage equality and LGBT equality for a long time, even when it was not popular, even when it was not safe, but they knew it was the right thing to do.

LONNIE WEIDEMAN HUTCHINSON: This church was the leader, a leader in that whole process in terms of sensitizing people.

MS. ERBE: Pastors Dennis and Christine began officiating at civil union ceremonies, first outside the church. Then, two couples requested church services.

MS. WILEY: The congregation was clear that we were now an inclusive congregation, and so many people were joining the church. And you could see that people were starting to ask: this persons joining the church, I wonder if they're gay or they're straight. When the union ceremony piece came up, that was the straw that broke the camel's back.

BRENDA WARLEY: When I thought about inclusion, at first, it was just let everybody come. And I was OK with that. But then, when they ha the first marriage, I felt, well, we're going to be doing that. So I had to embrace everything what inclusion meant.

CHARLES WILSON: Well, I think the first union – (inaudible). It was done away from the church. Some of our members were even fine with that. Then, we had the first union service in the church. There was a different attitude, a different spirit. When I heard about the first union, I asked the pastor, could I have a conference with him because I was not happy with it.

MR. WILEY: We really didn't have anybody within our denomination who really could talk with us or with whom we could fellowship and feel comfortable.

MS. WILEY: In the very beginning, it was a very lonely place.

MS. ERBE: Covenant Baptist turned to other denomination, such as the United Church of Christ for Guidance.

MS. WILEY: UCC assigned us mentor pastors –

MR. WILEY: Within our church.

MS. WILEY: We talked with the ministers, with a group of ministers. We talked with our deacons. And then we also talked with the group of five that we call Advisory Group.

MR. WILEY: The Advisory Group. And so finally – and everybody was pretty consistent with saying that, you know, agreeing that this isn't a issue you want to bring to an up and down vote, a yay or nay vote because it could be so divisive. And it could create a split in the church.

MS. ERBE: The pastors called a meeting to discuss and decide whether union ceremonies would be offered by the church. There was no consensus. The congregation decided to impose a moratorium on civil unions, form a task force, and study the issue for a year.

MS. WILEY: When the congregation came together to actually vote, the congregation had changed a lot during that time. You know, we have gotten many more

persons who were more progressive or who were gay and lesbian. And so the congregation voted that yes, union ceremonies would be part of the ministry of this church. And it wasn't long – so some people, when they heard that, that night, they never came back.

MR. WILSON: We lost numerous members. We were hurt financially. We lost a lot of our children, young adults, teenagers. And some of the members we lost were really the big givers.

MS. WARLEY: I was asked constantly, why are you still here Ms. Warley. You're one of the older members of the church. Don't you feel the same way scripturally about what they say about inclusion?

MR. WILEY: It's interesting how in the black church as well as in the church in general sometimes people are very selective about what scriptures they will use to support preconceived notions and ideas.

MS. ERBE: Katrina Carter was married at Covenant Baptist. She agrees.

KATRINA CARTER: And it's not meant to tear us apart and to attack each other, even when you look at it says that, you know, a slave should obey their master, you know. Then that can be an argument for enslaving a group of people.

MS. ERBE: Historically, the African-American church and community have been slow to embrace gay rights, but President Obama's public support for gay marriage provoked a shift in attitudes.

MR. WILEY: When I think the president's expression of support for same-sex marriage was very critical in helping to move this country and also the black community, especially, to at least be able to support it as a civil right, not so much as a religious rite, R-I-T-E, but a civil right, R-I-G-H-T.

AL WILLIAMS: We were looking for a church home and we have been unhappy where we were. And at least one church told us that well, this church doesn't really like homosexuality. We don't really believe in that, so. We just wanted a place of worship where we felt comfortable, where we weren't –

MR. SIMON: As well as to affirm who we are as black gay men that we had to be comfortable in a space where we didn't have to hide, worship God, as well as being felt in a safe space.

MS. ERBE: Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ is listed as a welcoming and affirming Baptist congregation. It is not yet officially listed as O&A, but that's just a technicality. This church is definitely on the leading edge of the welcoming church movement.

MS. WILEY: I often say that in the beginning, I used to wail at God, why us God? Why did you give us this ministry? But you know, I've gotten to a point where I thank God for choosing us to be pioneers.

MR. WILEY: Our goal is not to be the gay church. Our goal is to be the church.

MS. WILEY: You know, it's not just the gay folk who, you know, appreciate, you know, what has been done here. Often, they will say, this place, you know, saved my life. But it's everybody. It's everybody. It's all people understanding who God is and that God embraces all people, that God made all people.

MR. WILEY: And that's why we call this "The Miracle on South Capitol Street." Because we believe that God is doing miraculous things in this place.

MS. ERBE: The welcoming movement continues to spread and grow as more houses of worship ask: should we make this official? We'll continue to follow this issue. So please check our website at [pbs.org/tothecontrary](http://pbs.org/tothecontrary). And whether you agree or think to the contrary, please join us next time.

(END)