



Practicing Love Together

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Last November I had the joy of worshipping with University UCC in Seattle for Ubuntu Sunday. Ubuntu is an African concept of the interconnectedness of community most often translated with the phrase: *"I am because We are."*

On this Sunday, the invitation to Our Churches Wider Mission (OCWM) was offered by a parent at the church. The mom began by sharing an encounter she'd had with her child who was not feeling like going to church that day and asked her: *"Why do we always go to church?"*

This mom's response to the question arrested my attention. She told her child: *"We go to church to practice love together."*

As this mom stood before us reflecting on the response she'd shared with her child, I asked myself: *Is this why we go to church, to practice love together?* While I was still pondering the statement, she began to tell the story of University's journey to becoming an Open and Affirming (ONA) Congregation, reminding the gathered church of the challenges, the anxiety filled moments, and the strained conversations they'd shared.

She talked about how everyone loved the church, but that some couldn't find their way to agreement about the direction of the church. She shared how many stayed and some left, and said that both acted out of their deep sense of love for the church they knew.

No matter how difficult the conversations or painful the separations, the majority of people kept showing up. They kept pushing. They kept talking, and they kept listening. She reminded everyone that back then there were common phrases used that we would never say now, and beliefs held that we now find offensive. Yet still, they kept practicing love together, and now no one can even imagine there was a time when their church wasn't ONA.

I thought about this church on the last few days of Synod when the sanctuary that love built was breached by the harmful words and actions of siblings from another denomination with which we shared convention space. I've replayed my Sunday at University UCC as I've read pain-filled messages from some who were unsafe.

I am angry that we were violated. I lament the harm inflicted upon our gathering because some who lost their love lost their way. I grieve the fear and painful memories evoked in LGBTIA+ siblings who deserved to simply delight themselves in what should be the safest place on earth, the Church. But the Church is not safe for everyone and, in the spirit of Ubuntu, that means the Church is not safe for anyone.

I am grateful their leadership called to apologize. While I know leaders cannot control the actions of every member, apologies must be accompanied by repentance that indicates a commitment to change the way one shows up in the world. These harmful actions disrupted our peace and damaged their witness.

May repentance come as I anxiously await the day when we, the Church, the One body of Christ, can't even imagine that we were ever anything with and to one another other than love. I believe that day is coming, but until then, I will be right here, practicing love with all of you, until love is all we know.

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