

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Living the Baptismal Promises

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They were bringing children to Jesus... and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them..."

Sharing in the sacrament of baptism was one of my favorite aspects of parish ministry. When I baptized infants, I got to hold them in my arms and look into their bright eyes as I proclaimed God's abundant love for them in Christ. I would turn to the congregation and ask, "Do you, who witness and celebrate this sacrament, promise your love, support and care to this one...?"

They always affirmed, "We promise our love, support and care." Grace abounds in a community bound together by faith, sharing responsibility for the new life in our midst.

Inevitably, each cooing infant becomes a teenager with a changing body, an increasing awareness of his or her sexuality and a peer group whose acceptance is of utmost importance. Most will be straight (or straight-ish, on the Kinsey continuum). And many will be lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgendered, whether or not they have recognized it, accepted it, or begun to live into it.

Those young people we've been reading about in the headlines - they are *our* children. We have held them, loved them,

baptized them - both the bullied children who may contemplate suicide and the bullying children who mob and taunt them. They belong to our churches and go to our schools. They live in our homes and just down the street from us. They come over for sleepovers and birthday parties with our children and grandchildren, our nephews and nieces, cousins and siblings.

As individuals, we have the power to do something vitally important: shape the perspectives of young people in our lives. Every moment of every day, our language, attitudes and actions concerning sexual orientation and gender identities (as well as race, culture, religion and other forms of diversity) convey a message. From simply watching us they will learn either the way of Christ's inclusive compassion or the way of exclusivity and hate. Which will they learn from you?

As the church, we are challenged to keep those baptismal promises in tangible ways. Do youth experience our love, support and care for them when they are struggling with their sexual identity? What does love look like when we witness them acting with malice toward kids who are different from themselves? Are we offering a safe place (sanctuary) for suffering, alienated youth in our communities? Are we speaking with a loud, prophetic voice on issues of justice for LGBT people? Are we taking a public stand against other forms of intolerance? All of these actions are pastoral and prophetic expressions of love, support and care, and they are but a few possibilities. What can our churches do that not one of us could accomplish alone? Let's dream big, collaborate, and live into those baptismal promises with faith, courage and action.

The United Church of Christ offers LGBT justice and anti-bullying resources at <http://www.ucc.org/lgbt/>.

LivingWorks' Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) helps people to recognize and competently respond to persons at risk of suicide. www.livingworks.net.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,300 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.