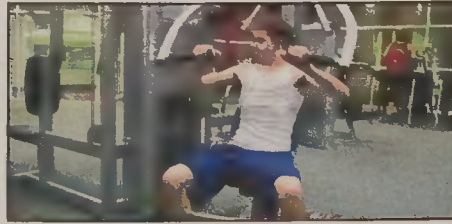




Storyed seniors fall two goals short in conference defeat

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"Fitspiration" trend could lead to problematic results

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Coming out for Christ



Open and Affirming churches are on the rise nationally. These institutions fully accept LGBTQIA people within their ministries.

Open and Affirming may expand in Alamance County

Jonathan Black
Editor-in-Chief

People poured into the office of the Rev. Phil Hardy, pastor at Life's Journey United Church of Christ in Burlington. It was Spring 2012, and Amendment One, which made it illegal for North Carolina to recognize same-sex marriage, had just passed.

But Hardy and his church refused to buy into the contempt. As an Open and Affirming congregation, Life's Journey decided the church would openly include LGBTQIA people in the assembly's life and ministry.

Open and Affirming is an official designation for congregations within the United Church of Christ and means that a church fully accepts LGBTQIA people within its ministry.

"One of the things the passing of Amendment One did was spike the angry, condemning religious rhetoric," Hardy said. "During those times, people sitting in my office — how profoundly thankful they were to hear a different kind of rhetoric. The power with the church is not that people don't hear us, but that people do hear us."

The United Church of Christ is a Protestant sect of Christianity, with about 1.1 million members filling 5,100 churches across the United States.

Life's Journey is one of 20 Open and Affirming churches in North Carolina and the only one in Alamance County.

But another church, right in Elon University's backyard, may soon join it.

Becoming Open and Affirming

In a few months, the Elon Community Church (ECC) will be taking a vote on whether to become Open and Affirming. The church is currently in discernment — a time period for obtaining spiritual direction and understanding without making judgment — until an outcome is decided in January.

The process began last September to determine if the church will label itself Open and Affirming.

"When Amendment One came out we had a forum at the church," said the Rev. Randy Orwig, senior pastor at ECC. "We try to accept all sides of an argument. That's how we're presenting Open and Affirming."

ECC organized a survey on its website's home page for congregation members to voice their feelings on becoming Open and Affirming. With 67 responses in — about 25 percent of the church membership — 57 were in favor of adding the Open and Affirming label, eight were against and three had no opinion.

Additionally, the church held meetings to discuss the status and will continue to do so until the vote Jan. 18.

Robert Martin has been a member of ECC since July and is on the Open and Affirming task force, which was formed to organize events and logistics as the vote draws nearer. He said he felt drawn to ECC for taking a stand for love and graciousness.

"Being Open and Affirming is holding up a banner that says that love can be given

freely," he said. "You can love everybody, and why shouldn't we? It's what Christ wanted."

While Orwig said there is a favorable contingency at the church who want it to become Open and Affirming, there is still some silence from those on the other side.

"I don't know if I'm surprised or concerned because I care about those people even if they feel like they can't vote for this," he said. "I want them to know they're still loved. We're trying to create this to be a win-win situation."

Martin said he is pleased with the dialogue in the church so far.

"There are folks in the church who are very traditional [and] who think we are turning our back on the Bible," he said. "What the church is up to is trying to figure out how the idea of being Open and Affirming can coordinate with those beliefs."

While ECC weighs the decision five miles away, Life's Journey is in its fourth year as an Open and Affirming church.

The church is a product of a merger of two Burlington churches: Grace United Church of Christ and St. John's New Mission. When the two congregations combined in 2011, it was decided the new establishment would register as Open and Affirming from inception.

Hardy, who was pastor at Grace United and oversaw the merger, said the decision to become Open provided a new resource to the county.

NC combats veteran homelessness

Meghan Mahoney
Arts & Entertainment Editor

"It was like everything was just over."

This is how Sam,* a veteran of the U.S. Navy, felt returning to civilian life after being employed by the Navy for four years. His sense of normalcy was gone, as was any hope of a daily regimen.

After four years of service, Sam said the transition from military to civilian life was difficult without having things in place upon return.

"You're disciplined and geared in a different way, and when you come out it's something totally different," he said.

This is what led Sam to eventually become one of the more than 8,000 homeless veterans in North Carolina.

President Obama sets a goal

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, in 2009, President Barack Obama and VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki announced the goal of ending veteran homelessness by the end of 2015. Through the Homeless Veterans Outreach Initiative, the VA is determined to meet this challenge.

John Turner, retired U.S. Army Capt., said it was brought to his attention in 2009 that veterans were returning home and finding themselves homeless. Turner, executive director of the Veterans Leadership Council of North Carolina — Cares (VLCNC-CARES), met with various people to form an organization designed to help veterans reintegrate back into society.

VLCNC-CARES, located in Raleigh, aims to provide temporary housing, counseling, job training and medical and psychological care. Veterans are provided the necessary services to become productive individuals and reintegrate back into society.

"We're looking at the most at-risk and needy population of veterans that exist," VLCNC-CARES director of communications Jay Bryant said.

In May 2014, VLCNC-CARES received a \$4.2 million community velvet block grant from the N.C. Department of Commerce. With that, VLCNC-CARES is currently renovating a building in Butner, North Carolina that will soon house 150 veterans.

The location of the building in Butner is in close proximity to the state mental hospital and an alcohol and drug abuse center. Bryant said they will be working very closely with those facilities.

"That is the veterans returning to self reliance," Turner said. "Not just having a place to stay but going on and being productive and reintegrating back into the community — that's our focus."

Turner said he hopes the building will be