In 1996, FRS was among some of the early Unitarian Universalist congregations to participate in the UUA's Welcoming Congregation Program, which was established by a vote at the 1989 General Assembly, following a report of the 1987 UUA Common Vision Planning Committee which had spent two years assessing how welcomed and accepted LGBTQ+ people felt in their UU congregations.

Motivated by the challenges found in this report and inspired by the principles of our UU faith – particularly our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person – the 1989 General Assembly invited congregations to take a variety of intentional steps to welcome and be welcoming to people of all sexual orientations. The modern Welcoming Congregation Program has since grown to encompass gender identity as well as sexual orientation and encourages congregations to be mindful of the intersection of other factors of identity such as race, ethnicity, class, and ability. Today, more than 800 congregations – nearly 75% of UU congregations – are designated Welcoming Congregations. Each congregation reaffirms their commitment periodically with a formal renewal process that documents the unique work of their congregations in areas of LGBTQ+ inclusion. FRS last renewed its designation in 2017 and has reconvened a Welcoming Committee to reinvigorate our justice work in these areas and steer our next renewal process.

Welcoming Congregations are encouraged and supported to design their own programming in response to the needs and interests of their own congregation, although guidelines and criteria are provided by the UUA. Congregations typically create programs that include educational opportunities, celebratory programming, and community outreach – integrating these areas continually into congregational life.

FRS's recent October 17th service, marking National Coming Out Day, was an example of integrating awareness of LGBTQ+ experiences into worship practices and congregational life. The service celebrated the establishment of FRS's youth-lead All-Ages Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) and the reconvening of the Welcoming Committee. The service included reflections from FRS GSA youth leaders Sophie Himmel and Alice Mead, parishioners Erin Hutchinson-Himmel, Janine Brunell Looker, and Christine Doherty, as well as testimony from guest speaker Alex Looker. The program invited the congregation to reflect on the experiences of members of the LGBTQ+ community from 1996, when our parish was first designated a Welcoming Congregation, to the present day. The service also included historically important music selections thoughtfully chosen by Director of Church Music Justin Murphy-Mancini and included complimentary rainbow COVID masks donated by Maureen Adams and Lee McLaughlin. The shared collection that day supported NAGLY – the North Shore Alliance for GLBTQ Youth. Members of the Welcoming Committee were involved in planning the service.

In the recent past, FRS has also offered educational programming and Journeys of Faith about transgender experiences, acknowledged Transgender Days of Remembrance, and supported Newburyport's Human Rights Commission's efforts to have rainbow crosswalks installed in the City. This Spring, FRS will dedicate a welcoming outdoor seating space with rainbow-colored Adirondack Chairs, a project initiated by Susan Cooper and Michelle Kimball of the FRS Newcomer Group and a delightful signal of welcoming for all. Additionally, the congregation continually offers OWL programming for 7th and 8th graders, which is embedded with gender and sexuality education that affirms LGBTQ+ experiences. FRS also previously updated our signage and website to communicate the parish's support and welcoming of the LBGTQ+ community.

The committee's future scope of work will be to plan programming that follows the Five Steps of Renewal recommended by the UUA, which includes establishing ongoing offerings in the areas of: worship services, days of observance, religious education, and support of the work of organizations which uplift the lives of LGBTQ+ communities.

More information about the UUA's LGBTQ+ justice and inclusion work, including specifics about the Welcoming Congregation Program can be found at: [https://www.uua.org/lgbtq](https://www.uua.org/lgbtq). This page also provides links to a myriad of UUA educational resources, tools, and testimony focusing on LGBTQ+ issues that can be used for exploration, reflection, and self-study.

Current members of the Welcoming Committee include Erin Hutchinson-Himmel, Susan Cooper, Maureen Adams, Janine Looker, Holly Cashman, Christine Doherty, and Julie Parker Amery. If you have ideas for future programming or issues of concern, please reach out to any committee member or Rev. Rebecca.

January 2022