

# Sylvia



*One of the symbols that the UCC has is the rainbow flag, with the words, 'God is still speaking.' And the rest of that sentence is, 'Don't put a period where God has put a comma.' We're still open to the leading of God, and the rainbow flag is a symbol of diversity and welcome.*

I wear a lot of different hats. I initially was trained professionally as a musician, and I have a couple of doctorates in musical fields. I conduct a community orchestra. I teach at Cal State Dominguez Hills. The other hat I wear is that of a minister in the United Church of Christ (UCC).

I had always felt a calling to service, if you will. And since my professional training was musical, that was where I started. I actually took a "church gig," directing a choir, while I was still in school. A few years later I moved to Louisiana. I had a full-time symphony job and of course it didn't pay enough, so I took more "church gigs." I worked for Catholic churches, Lutheran churches, Presbyterian churches, and Methodist churches. I even served part-time as a cantor in a Jewish temple.

One of the turning points in my life was being fired by a Methodist church for being gay. I was a minister of music and really most of the church members loved me. The pastor and I got along fine, and I was "out." But there was one particular person who was a big contributor to the church who said, "She's a lesbian. If she doesn't go, I go." And, of course, the church said, "Okay, we're gonna have to let her go, because we can't survive without your money." So, that happened.

A lot happened in Louisiana – but fifteen years after moving there I came back to California. I grew up in West Covina. My parents were in their eighties and their health was starting to fail, and I decided that I needed to move back and help them as they traveled through the end of their life years. My partner, Sandy, and I went church shopping. And we ended up at Bethel Church in Ontario.

Bethel is an open and affirming church. That means practicing what we call "radical welcome." We welcome people of all genders and sexualities. It means accepting people of all economic levels, ethnic varieties, levels of ability, and sizes. Tall people. Short people. Fat people. Skinny people. We're a small congregation, and I try to get Bethel's name out there. I have a magnet sign on my car that has the name of the church, and it says, "Open and affirming." And it has a long version of a rainbow flag.

Some people get offended by it, because of the association of rainbows with the LGBTQ etcetera alphabet community. But the rainbow is a sign of God's love for humanity. At the end of the story of Noah's arc, in the Old Testament, there's a rainbow, as a symbol of God's promise not to destroy the earth by water again.

People who ask "Why does God make people gay?" most likely don't mean anything bad by that question. But it does indicate a society that assumes that "normal" is straight. And it indicates a general outlook on life that being gay, or bi, or trans is some sort of weird anomaly.



“Thirty, forty years ago, if someone had said, ‘A lesbian woman who’s primarily a musician, is gonna end up being the minister of this one hundred and something year old congregational church, I would have said, ‘Nah. Nah. That’s not gonna happen.’ But, it did.”

Why in the world would we think that God would only make heterosexuals? Why would we limit God to that? Yes, it’s a minority of people, but it’s not something unnatural.

We’re told that the bad thing to do is to be in a relationship that is unnatural. Well, okay, for me, it is unnatural to be with a man. For me, it is natural to be with a woman. It’s not like God sat up there, rubbing a beard and twirling a mustache, saying, “I’m gonna make Sylvia gay, so she has all these challenges to deal with.” That’s not it at all. It’s just part of a spectrum of nature.

I think humans try to create God in an image that’s comfortable to them. And therefore that image, or that understanding of God, is very, very limited, and only fits them. God is so much bigger than the box that humans try to put God into. If God wants me to serve, then that must mean God wants me as I am. And so, why should I have to



Sylvia’s stole and bible.

mask who I am in order to serve God? I don’t have to do that. No, I’m not gonna do that. God doesn’t make mistakes.

Many times you find people who say, “We are Christians, and therefore ABCDE,” most of which I have found, in my perspective as a Christian, as being bigoted and hateful and hypocritical. I want people who are lesbian, gay, transgendered, pierced, tattooed, skinny, homeless, poor to be welcomed, you know, by people who say they are Christians.

A lot of people don’t know that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is about hospitality. It’s about the people of a city attacking and raping the angels in the welcome of God. It has nothing to do with sexuality. It has to do with power and hate, and a failure to welcome people.