

# Affirming Network Support Package

Antler River Watershed

Horseshoe Falls

Western Ontario Waterways

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Affirming Network of Horseshoe Falls, Western Ontario Waterways and Antler River Watershed Regional Councils

Support Package for those congregations considering becoming Affirming

### **Why?**

It is very important to understand why you are considering this journey and why it is important to your congregation.

Some reasons may be:

- social justice issue
- safe space for those who don't fit into a traditional church
- celebrate God's diversity
- being intentional about listening to those who have been silenced
- being more than welcoming

For example, at Applewood UC in Mississauga, the Same Gender Marriage vote resulted in an updated Marriage Policy and conversations about becoming an Affirming Congregation.

### **Next Steps:**

[Affirm United](#) is a national program for United Church congregations and ministries that has been in place since 1992. This program is envisioned as a means of support and education for justice-seeking Ministries. Becoming Affirming isn't a quick journey, because it's a process of love, discernment, and transformation.

The following link will give you a good overview of what steps are required:

<https://affirmunited.ause.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/02/StepsToBecomingAffirming-twoPages-July2019.pdf.pdf>

The document *Open Hearts* is a much more comprehensive resource which you can use once you are in the process and can be downloaded from their website:

<https://affirmunited.ause.ca/affirm-unitedsaaffirmer-ensemble-3/>

When you are ready to start your journey you can make contact with Affirming Ministry co-ordinators through the website.

### **Experiences on the journey:**

The journey is unique for each congregation, however it is always beneficial to hear from others who have experienced it.

From Westminster UC, Thamesford:

What is required to become an Affirming Ministry?

- A statement of faith concerning the inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans-identified individuals in the life and work of the Ministry
- A continuing plan of action for the Ministry
- A commitment to the Affirming Ministry Program nationally
- An inclusive marriage policy
- ALL OF THIS COMES THROUGH EDUCATION, CONVERSATION, AND TRANSFORMATION

Following are some examples of the process used by individual congregations:

From New Vision, Hamilton:

The process will be led by the LGBTQ-Allies Committee of the Church Council.

- a. Summary of LGBTQ-positive activities of the amalgamated congregation, including a description and data of the wall activity on Pride Sunday. Other things: trans day of remembrance, LGBTQ committee as part of Council, international day against homo-, bi- and transphobia, the spirituality group.
- b. Service theme “What it takes to be designated an Affirming ministry” with our Sunday soup and bun conversation after the service revolving around an Affirming question.
- c. Service theme “Why we should affirm all sexual orientations and gender identities” with a workshop with a sandwich lunch afterward to review our

vision statement and propose (as a group) suggestions to make it inclusive of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

- d. Church Council meeting to decide on a revised vision statement, continuing plan of action and marriage policy to recommend to the congregation.
- e. after service congregational meeting to vote on becoming an Affirming Ministry
- f. A recognition service of becoming an Affirming Congregation

From the experience of First St. Andrews, London:

- Inclusivity for all people at church with no homophobic remarks or actions
- Provide a safe place in a church that demonstrates social justice and integrity
- Educate congregation to interact in more caring ways
- Reach out to LGBT people in community who looking for a liberal theology church
- Met with a local United Church minister/chaplain with experience in this area to get ideas
- Received ideas on resources in the community, films about sexual orientation and the church, e.g., *Fish Out of Water*, how to incorporate LGBT issues into services and group activities, publicizing important dates (Pride Day, Pride Parade, AIDS Awareness Day)
- Decided we needed to plan a sensitivity training session (asap)
- Developed a rationale and a proposal for a 4-hr. workshop for the whole congregation to take to Council for approval
- Rationale included a list of examples of things that a proactive church could do

- Recommended that action suggestions developed at workshop come to Ad Hoc committee to determine how to implement them and then monitor them over time.
- Other considerations: why we were focusing only on LGBT and not including race, disabilities, class, etc.
- Ad Hoc committee presented the workshop as a template of what could be done with other designated groups, by other volunteers who felt a passion for working with those groups. Our passion was for LGBT.

From the experience of Applewood United, Mississauga:

- Held an Affirming Sunday where the chair of PFLAG Toronto spoke and answered questions. We continued to meet and plan educational events.
- ‘Minutes for Affirmation’ during worship on a regular basis, providing updates and information.
- We held our first movie and discussion event and showed ‘Inlaws and Outlaws’ by Drew Emery.  
At this point we were trying to discern who in the congregation was hesitating and why. It turned out that it was a small group.
- We put great effort into our ‘How to Be an Ally’ workshop that included lunch and a panel of speakers who shared their experiences of the gay community and the church. Over 50 people attended.
- This was followed by a focused Affirming Sunday service and another Question and Answer session. The committee also had personal discussion with people who were unsure.

**Questions and Concerns which may arise:**

From New Vision:

How will we be held accountable as an affirming ministry?

How will the face of our church look different as an affirming ministry?

How will the process be modified by us?

How will our role in this community change once we are a part of Affirm United?

ie. how will we know and measure that we are making a difference

Is the term “Affirming” inclusive of other marginalized groups, as well as the LGBTQ community?

How do we integrate LGBTQ experiences more organically into worship and ministry?

How do we identify our Church as affirming to the public?

How many other affirming congregations are there in the (Hamilton Conference)?  
re there other congregations in Hamilton who are affirming? What are they doing to welcome etc.?

How do we maintain a balance between the issues we are involved in? Does this mean that is our primary focus?

How does being affirming get integrated into our other ministries of outreach and welcoming all marginalized persons?

Does “affirming” extend also to seniors (multigenerational)?

Does “affirming” mean that we Christians have to “tolerate” honor killings by the Muslims? How safe am I?

I don't know what an affirming ministry is, what is the difference?

Will this help get young people going to church?

What about those that are non-accepting of this Ministry – how do we assist them?

Applewood United's experience:

Similar questions were being asked. Applewood chose to put together a letter which included the proposed new Mission Statement and an attached the list of questions with answers. This was sent out to the whole congregation, who then had an opportunity to send feedback indicating theirs questions had been answered or they needed more information. The ongoing education was based on that survey. (A copy can be requested if interested.)

### **Some sample Mission Statements:**

#### **Trinity United Church, Vancouver**

We celebrate among us a variety of people of all ages, backgrounds, faith perspectives, income levels, gender identities, and sexual orientations.

We are a congregation in the way of Jesus, who prefer questions to answers, and we want to help create and model a different kind of world and way of being in relationship with each other.

#### **McDougall United Church, Edmonton**



### **Grosvenor Park United Church, Saskatoon**

Grosvenor Park United Church celebrated its Affirming Ministry designation in May of 2009. This means that the congregation voted to work for inclusion and justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

This decision came after over four years of discussion and education. We hope that all people will feel welcomed when they walk through our doors and will feel affirmed for who they are.

### **Trinity, Winnipeg**

“By the grace of God, Trinity United Church [Winnipeg] is an Affirming Christian congregation which lives out God’s love in worship and service by supporting each other, seeking justice and welcoming the participation of people of all sexual orientation, gender identity, socio-economic status, cultural diversity, age and abilities.”

### **St. Peter’s United Church, Sudbury**

By choosing to become publicly known as an Affirming Congregation St. Peter’s commits itself to the ongoing inclusion of lesbians, gay men, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) people and their families in all areas of ministry, including same gender marriages.

To be in ministry to and with all involves an attitude of sensitivity and openness to the gifts and graces of each person in the body of Christ.

## Eastminster United Church, Toronto

### Our Statement of Inclusiveness



We affirm all people, regardless of ability, age, gender, race, gender identity, or sexual orientation in the membership, ministry, leadership and life of this congregation.

## Beaconsfield United Church, Beaconsfield, Quebec

[part of] Mission Statement

We are a community of Christians of varied ages and backgrounds who gather together to be embraced by God's presence and to live Jesus' message of love, hope and service.

God calls us to be welcoming, inclusive and supportive of all our neighbours in God's world.

As an Affirming Congregation we explicitly welcome membership, participation and engagement with the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered members of our community.

## Bedford United Church, Bedford NS

Bedford United Church Inclusivity Statement

We the people of Bedford United Church declare publicly our commitment to creating a community where all people are welcome regardless of age, gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, differing abilities, ethnic background or economic circumstances.

All persons are welcome to take part in every aspect of church life including membership, leadership, celebrating life passages and marriage.

We celebrate the richness that diversity brings to our church, even as it challenges us. We pray for God's spirit to guide us as we work for reconciliation and justice for all persons in both church and society.

### **Applewood United Church, Mississauga**

Applewood United Church takes its inspiration from the life of Jesus. As an open, welcoming, compassionate community we are inclusive and respect diverse understandings of God. We recognize our need for spiritual nourishment.

We are intentional in our inclusiveness. We welcome unconditionally people of all ages, races, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, ethnic origins and economic circumstances.

We will build on our strengths and add new ones, seeking to be a more effective church. We will inspire people to "Go out and make a difference in the world!" As a result of these efforts, we will grow as people and as a faith community.

### **What happens next:**

Once the vote has taken place and you have completed the process of becoming an Affirming Church you can put your future action plan in place.

What did First St. Andrews, London learn along the way?

- ❖ To examine ourselves objectively, not judgmentally, but realistically in what we are and are not doing to be welcoming to LGBT
- ❖ To involve as many people as possible in this process of change

- ❖ To keep pushing gently, persistently, while realising that change is slow
- ❖ To realize that we will lose some people who do not fit with this journey, while hoping to find others who do
- ❖ To pace ourselves and not feel that we have to do everything at once
- ❖ To partner with an agency with more expertise than we have on these issues

#### Applewood, Mississauga Action Plan:

1. To ensure that Applewood United Church provides a safe and inclusive environment for all (including worship, educational and social activities.)
2. To provide educational opportunities through workshops and shared resources which focus on a broad range of topics affecting society in general, and especially those which affect the LGBTQ+ community.
3. To liaise with community agencies, e.g. PFLAG, East Mississauga Community Health Centre, Pride Parade, Seniors Centre, in order to learn about the supports available and to assist where and when required.
4. \*To connect with Horseshoe Falls Regional Council Affirming Network and through them provide support for congregations in the Affirming process.
5. To keep the community aware of our affirming designation and how we live it out as community and as individuals.

\*Note: #4 was added recently.

Blessings on your journey!!