

## We're Already Welcoming, So Why Become Affirming?

Some ministries already have many signs of inclusion. They may feel they include everyone and wonder why they would need to specifically mention sexual orientation or gender identity. When the question of becoming an Affirming Ministry arises, people may feel that they are already welcoming so there is no reason to become Affirming.

### Offering More than Just a Welcome

Being an Affirming Ministry is not merely about welcoming people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Words like *welcoming* or *inclusion* suggest those on the inside have the power to choose to accept those on the outside. This makes it sound like an act of charity to welcome those who are different or marginalized. However, it is not *our* place to welcome anyone because church is not a private club and we are not the gatekeepers. As soon as one new person comes through the doors, the community becomes a new community.

Jesus' parable of the great dinner (Matthew 22:1-14) reminds us that the true host of our faith community is the Risen Christ. In Jesus' parable, the guests who have been invited fail to show up, so the host goes to the streets and back alleys of town to fill the banquet hall. In the church, by God's grace, everyone is already included in the celebration. When we participate in Christ's church, we accept an invitation to which others, including gender and sexual minorities, have *already been welcomed*. By showing up, we agree to sit at table together. By accepting the welcome offered to each one of us as individuals, we encounter God's radical love for humankind in all its wonderful diversity.

Affirming Ministries acknowledge that God's love is wider and more encompassing than they can imagine, let alone live out, and they commit themselves to sharing that news with others who may have heard a quite different message about what it means to be church. Because voices of condemnation, exclusion, and hatred are loud and persistent within the church and in society, Affirming Ministries make a public statement about who they are and what they believe. They understand that while it may be risky and challenging to "come out" as an Affirming Ministry, it is often far less dangerous than it is for LGBTQIA2S+ people themselves. Affirming Ministries believe it is important to be a public witness and to be a role model for other ministries.

### Declaring that All Gender Identities and Sexual Orientations are a Gift from God

Most marginalized people spend their lives surrounded by messages of hatred, judgment, and negativity about themselves and their relationships. Some may have grown up with a terrifying and unnameable sense of otherness, punctuated now and again by words such as *queers* or *fags* or *deviants*. In schoolyards, children and youth frequently hear words like *gay* and *dyke* and *tranny* used as putdowns and insults. Many of the aforementioned people receive strong messages of condemnation from their loved ones, co-workers, friends, or faith communities when they come out about who they are.

Sadly, churches are often the loudest and most vitriolic in their messages of hatred and condemnation. At Pride events, protesters from the Christian right carry placards proclaiming, "You will rot in hell" or "God hates fags." Television evangelists and other organizations such as Focus on the Family continue to pump out a message of rejection, judgment, and hatred. And every so often, another preacher comes through town or appears on TV bringing a message, said to be direct from God, that homosexuality is evil in God's sight. Often, Leviticus is cited: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them" (20:13), without an understanding of its specific context. AIDS, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, or some other calamity is named as God's punishment on homosexuals and those who support them. Marriage laws that include same-sex couples or the election of a gay Anglican bishop get swift, angry responses from some Christians, and religious organizations actively support and facilitate dangerous practices such as conversion therapy.

Such hateful words and practices are spoken in the name of Christianity, and many LGBTQIA2S+ people hear only that side of the story. They think that *all* Christians think this way. They may believe that God really does reject them. Christians who value inclusion and justice for people of diverse genders and sexualities need to speak up about love and compassion. We cannot assume that newcomers or people in our communities will know what we



believe unless we tell them, so we have to be explicit. Affirming Ministries commit themselves to proclaiming and following Jesus' way of love and compassion, not a way of judgment and condemnation. They make a statement of vision and hope part of their mission statement. Because those who reject LGBTQIA2S+ people in God's name are very specific, Affirming Vision Statements are specific also, using the phrase "of all sexual orientations and gender identities." In their worship, programs, and community life, they name and honour the diversity of family configurations, relationships, and life experiences.

### **Making Safe Space**

Affirming Ministries acknowledge the hurt and pain that has been part of the church experience for many people because of their identity or sexuality. The bitterness of the debate within the church about same-gender, trans, and related rights left many people distrustful of church. Some individual communities of faith in the United Church have taken a position against gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans people—declaring that they will never have a gay minister, that they condemn homosexual relationships, or that they will never celebrate equal marriages. Some LGBTQIA2S+ people have been asked to resign as Sunday school teachers or youth leaders, or have been made unwelcome in their home communities of faith. Many times the hurts are very personal: A couple approaches their minister to ask her to marry them and discovers that their community of faith will not permit equal marriages in the sanctuary; a young man finally gets up the courage to tell his Bible study group he is gay and is asked why homosexuals always have to flaunt their sexuality; or a woman with a trans son sits in silence as the community of faith declares its opposition to trans people and gays in ministry.

According to Statistics Canada, close to 600 youth between the ages of 10 and 24 die by suicide every year. Numerous studies suggest that among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, approximately 32 percent contemplate or attempt suicide (compared to 7 percent of all youth). For trans youth, these rates are twice as high. Twelve percent of LGBTQIA2S+ youth who are rejected by their families attempt suicide. But, according to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health,<sup>7</sup> it's not their sexuality that leads these kids down a suicidal path—it's the stigma and discrimination they face in a heterosexual world. Stigma, discrimination, and rejection can be both soul-destroying and life-threatening. Often, these experiences are situated alongside other intersecting forms of marginalization and oppression, such as poverty, racism, and sexism that also negatively impact mental health.

Affirming Ministries seek to listen to the experiences of their members, including painful experiences. They strive to be a community of nurture and support for LGBTQIA2S+ folk, and for those who are gender non-conforming. And they make their stance public. This public statement is especially important. People whose gender identities and sexual orientations are marginalized and stigmatized also long for a spiritual home in which to celebrate life, love God, and serve others—and may have no way to know whether a particular ministry is one where they can be fully who they are or one where they will be shunned or rejected. Because of this, Affirming Ministries put up signs and symbols, they are listed on a national registry of Affirming Ministries, and they state their Affirming stance on their website and in their publications.

Several Affirming Ministries have opening statements in their weekly bulletins or in their morning announcements that express:

As an Affirming Ministry, we celebrate the diversity of God's creation. We celebrate the richness of our community when we have diversity in age, gender identity, racial/cultural backgrounds, sexual orientation, ability, and family configurations. We seek to create a safe space with an open invitation to bring every aspect of your whole self into your participation within this ministry.

### **Celebrating God's Gift of Diversity**

Ministries that choose to become Affirming discover that embracing difference brings blessing and joy to their community. As they declare an explicit openness to *otherness*, they discover the grace of encountering the depth and breadth of human diversity. A community that is able to celebrate its diversity is better equipped to solve problems in a collaborative way. It is more able to learn and benefit from the varied experiences and talents of its

<sup>7</sup> "Better Dead than Queer: Youth Suicide and Discrimination in a Heterosexual World," *CrossCurrents* (Winter 2004/05). Accessed August 1, 2010, at [www.camh.net/Publications/Cross\\_Currents/Winter\\_2004-05/deadqueer\\_crcuwinter0405.html](http://www.camh.net/Publications/Cross_Currents/Winter_2004-05/deadqueer_crcuwinter0405.html).



members. It manages conflict more creatively. It is less judgmental and thus able to embrace a wider perspective of ideas and perspectives. And it is enriched by a great variety of different knowledge, stories, and ways of seeing the world. Affirming Ministries discover that when they create space and openness for one facet of human diversity, they create openness for others. To use a physical analogy, building a wheelchair ramp for people who use wheelchairs also benefits parents pushing strollers, volunteers delivering boxes for the food bank, and people delivering supplies. Creating openness to difference has a similar ripple effect, helping many others to feel less judged and more included, such as people struggling with addiction, mental health, or disruptions in their family life. Affirmation is not just for those on the "outside"—it helps all members to bring their whole and authentic selves to the community.

### Seeking Justice

Most queer folk know at least one other person who has experienced violence because they were (or someone thought they were) gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Youth get targeted in the schoolyard. Teens are kicked out of home or rejected by friends and families when they come out. A disproportionate number of gay and transgender youth attempt or die by suicide. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and Two-Spirit adults face discrimination and harassment in work, housing, community life, by healthcare workers, and in the church. Many people still live in closets of shame or fear.

Affirming Ministries make an ongoing commitment to work for justice, to promote reconciliation and healing, and to create equity for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities within the church and in wider society. They support and participate in events with the LGBTQIA2S+ community, they proudly display their Affirming Ministry banner, they encourage other ministries to become Affirming, and they support the work of Affirm United.

Affirming Ministries are not *gay churches* or *single-issue communities*. They work on a variety of justice issues. They know that the work of healing and justice-making, of being the church, is an ongoing part of who they are, whether they strive to combat racism or work to make their buildings wheelchair-accessible, as they attend anti-poverty marches or seek to live out the United Church's apology on residential schools; when they honour children and provide space for addiction support groups.

Work for justice on sexuality or gender issues often supports or integrates with other work for justice—anti-racism, economic justice, or environmental justice. This resource deals specifically with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, but to be Affirming is to be on a journey for greater justice and compassion for all the earth.