

Becoming an Affirming Ministry within the United Church of Canada: Our Affirming Process

In June of 2023, one of our recently confirmed youth members, Neelah Irving, approached the board and invited us to consider beginning the process of becoming Affirming—that is, publicly, explicitly and intentionally working toward the inclusion of everyone. She had seen Pride Flags being presented to Affirming Communities of Faith at the Western Ontario Waterways Regional Council Meeting that May and she wondered where our Pride Flag was! When she discovered that Centennial United Church had not yet gone through the process of becoming an Affirming Ministry within the United Church of Canada she felt strongly that it was time. In her mind, the Centennial she knew and loved was a church that welcomed everyone. So becoming affirming would just align our policy with our practice!

The board voted that same day that we would be open to starting this process agreeing with Neelah that the community of faith at Centennial United Church was already committed to this very way of being the church in the community even if it wasn't official. At that board meeting it was recognized that this process would open some painful wounds from the past. It was agreed that as a congregation we were in a strong enough place to engage in difficult conversations that might arise even if it "rocked the boat" a little bit.

That September, an Affirming Ministries Committee was formed from volunteers from the Congregation. These are some of the reasons they gave for wanting to join this committee:

"I genuinely thought we already were Affirming! I want the LGBTQIA+ and 2 Spirit Community to know that they are welcome here. I don't want them to have to worry that they will be excluded or judged when they come to our church."

"I, like many people, have a family member who is part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. My daughter and her wife do not have the same type of privileges that I, as a heterosexual white male, enjoy. And that's not fair. They are sometimes afraid to walk down the streets of the city where they live. There are many places where they cannot travel to or vacation at. If they were inclined to join a church community, they would find it difficult to source one that is welcoming. They volunteer at a local drop in centre where there are many diverse people and it suits them—but it's not a place of worship. We at Centennial have done better. Let's show others how we have done better! That's why I want us to go through this process and become an Affirming United Church."

"I wasn't raised in the United Church. I was raised verry, verrrry Catholic. But, for years I'd been struggling with 3 issues about organized religion in general, and my church tradition in particular:

1. The lack of equality for women in the Church,
2. The treatment of Indigenous Peoples and the lack of attempts to repair and learn, and
3. The treatment of the LGBTQ+ community.

In all 3 cases, it was watching people I loved dearly feel less than wholly loved for their entire selves that made it hurt. One day I sat down to google "Churches in Canada that ordain women/Churches in Canada that have apologized for the

Residential Schools”, and most importantly, because I was pretty sure I’d heard vaguely that there were some out there, “Churches in Canada that will affirm and marry LGBTQ couples and allow them to be ministers.” Guess which was the only church that appeared near the top of all 3? It is important to me that the church I go to INTENTIONALLY AND EXPLICITLY believes as an institution what I feel inside. So, one Sunday, over 10 years ago, we snuck into a back pew to see if this “United Church of Canada” that the internet said was the first to ordain women, LGBTQ people, the first to apologize for the residential schools and the first to joyfully marry LGBTQ members really was as open as they said. And over 10 years later, that’s why I’m here.”

This committee’s first learning was that becoming Affirming was about more than the intentional inclusion of LGBTQIA+ and 2 Spirit people in the life and work of the church. It was a process that looks at how we remove all barriers to participation our church—whether they are due to age, gender, race, ability, class, marital or economic status or gender identity and sexual orientation.

In an effort to be more inclusive, over the past few years, the committee encouraged (among other things):

- the printing of large print bulletins each week,
- the efforts to improve our sound system,
- the renewed signage to show where the accessible entrance is,
- the inclusion of the words to The Lord’s Prayer in our slides each Sunday,
- the addition of Rainbows and the words “Embracing Diversity | A Place for You” to the brick sign on the front lawn of the church
- the replacement of the doors to the sanctuary with doors that would be easier to open to literally make it easier for people to actually get into the church

They hosted a lunch and learn showing a [video](#) about the difference between being a “welcoming” church and being a truly “affirming” church followed by discussion.

They also drafted an Affirming Vision Statement they believed Centennial could agree with:

AFFIRMING VISION STATEMENT **Centennial United Church**

We Believe:

Creation is holy and sacred

All God’s people deserve wholeness, peace, and safety

Embracing differences brings joy and blessings to our community

We Envision:

A world where people are free to live as their own vibrant and authentic selves

We Commit:

To keep learning how to be public and intentional and explicit

in actively affirming, supporting, and celebrating,

as well as engaging in the life and work of our church,

all peoples of every age, race, class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, family configuration, economic status, neurodivergence, and, mental and physical ability, as part of a broader commitment to seeking justice and inclusion for all people.

This vision statement was presented to the congregation in bulletins in the fall of 2024 after the Affirming Committee came under the umbrella of the Outreach and Social Justice Committee. Feedback and revisions were invited. This Vision Statement was included in the Annual Report for 2024 for discussion at the Annual Meeting in February of 2025. It was well received.

The Affirming Process also included special worship services for PIE Day each year since Centennial started the process. There was a special service to mark the Transgender Day of Remember in November of 2024 with guest speaker, trans woman Stephanie Cooper.

Throughout 2025 and the beginning of 2026, the committee continued to speak with committees and individuals in the church. They hosted another lunch and learn with a short film about what being Public, Intentional and Explicit about inclusion has meant to other congregations followed by discussion about what it could mean for us. They hosted a movie night with the film “1946: The Mistranslation that Shifted Culture” with discussion which brought in other churches in the process. They explored the new United Church hymnal “Then Let Us Sing” and the ways we can be inclusive in the worship music we sing too!

They conducted a survey of congregation members which confirmed people within the congregation were feeling positive about becoming an Affirming Ministry.

Responses lifted up the importance of living out Jesus’ commandment to love one another. It is particularly important that churches, which have often been places of systemic discrimination and exclusion of LGBTQ+, be explicitly welcoming and inclusive and offer healing. The spaces and places we worship in should be open and welcoming to all – to those in the LGBTQ+ community, those living with disability and all races.

Through the process, the Worship Committee created a new, more explicitly inclusive marriage policy after discovering the work that was done in 2005 and 2006 to create an inclusive marriage policy allowing same sex marriages within Centennial United Church. This can be found on our web-site: <https://www.ucstayner.ca/weddings1>

As a last step in preparation for a vote, the Committee created an Action Plan for how we will continue to live out our commitment to be an Affirming Ministry within the United Church of Canada:

Centennial United Church Affirming Committee Action Plan

1. Find ways to make public that we are an Affirming Ministry by:
 - a. Displaying signage at all doors (or in windows near doors if they are wooden).
 - b. Explore adding Affirm United Logo to the large church sign outside
 - c. Adding Logo and Vision Statement to our website
2. In conjunction with the minister, help lead worship services around the following days: PIE, Pride Month (one service), Transgender Day of Remembrance, Black History Month (one service), Indigenous Day of Prayer, National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, and Day for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.
3. Continue our “Minute for Mission”, with a focus on work that highlights our Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Affirming efforts.
4. Continue to investigate ways to make our sanctuary and church more accessible, including but not limited to enhancing our sound system and visuals.

5. Commit to Anti-Racist work by investigation United Church's Anti-Racism Initiatives holding one event per year to promote Diversity and Inclusion. Invite the entire congregation to participate in the United Church's 40 days of Engagement in Anti-Racism and find ways to continue to engage with the material provided.
6. Host two "Lunch and Learns" annually.
7. March in Collingwood Pride Parade, in partnership with other affirming churches, showcasing Centennial United Church's Pride.
8. Revisit our action plan annually (ie. On the anniversary of our becoming an Affirming Ministry) so that we're moving forward and adding new items every year as old ones are completed.

This Action Plan shows what becoming an Affirming Ministry in the United Church of Canada will look like for Centennial United Church.

The committee feels that the members of the congregation are ready to **vote about becoming an Affirming Ministry** and have set the date of **Sunday June 7th, 2026** as the day to hold this vote following worship (approximately 11:45am). It is important that the entire congregation of Centennial United Church feels that they have had a chance to be heard throughout this process. To further ensure this, discussion will be encouraged with time given for people to speak about how they plan to vote and why.

The vote itself will be conducted anonymously. Those participating in person will vote by secret ballot and those participating online will vote through the use of an anonymous poll feature in Zoom. People participating online are asked to ensure that their zoom is up-to-date so that the anonymous poll feature will work for them. This vote will not be live-streamed so people can not participate on Facebook. It will be a "yes" or "no" vote. Full members will vote at the start of the meeting on a motion to allow adherents to vote (those participating in the life of the church who are not officially members). In accordance with United Church policy, there can be no advance ballot or voting by proxy on this decision. In order to ensure those who cannot be present, for any reason, are heard in their absence, please consider writing a statement that can be read by another congregation member during the time of discussion.

The motions will be as follows:

That Centennial United Church adopt the Affirming Vision Statement & Action Plan as presented.

*That Centennial United Church officially become an Affirming Ministry of The United Church of Canada, joining Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble through an annual membership fee of \$100**

**fee based on 1/20 of 1% of our annual net revenue figures submitted to The United Church of Canada in our annual statistics report: maximum annual membership fee of \$500.*

In order for this motion to pass, at least 75% of those voting must vote in favour. However, the committee would not be calling the vote at this time if they did not believe that the percentage of people voting in favour will be much higher. They have faith that, although we are still learning and growing and there are ways we can be more inclusive as a congregation, members of Centennial United Church believe deeply that everyone is loved by God and welcome in the family of God. The committee trusts that now is the right time to align our practice and our policy and declare our stance as an Affirming Ministry publicly, intentionally, and explicitly.

Some Frequently Asked Questions throughout the Process

(the committee welcomes any other questions you may have before the vote)

Q. What is an Affirming Church?

A. “Affirming” is an official designation from Affirm United. It signifies that a church has spent an intentional period of time considering what it means to be inclusive and, following that exploration, has made the decision to actively strive to welcome people of all races, ethnic backgrounds, economic circumstances, sexual orientations, gender identities, ages, mental and physical abilities, and so on. An “Affirming Church” recognizes that being welcoming and hospitable is more than politely shaking hands; it does the hard, vulnerable and intentional work of creating a space where all are actively embraced as God’s beloved ones and made to feel welcome, wanted and valued, particularly those for whom church has too often been a place of judgment and exclusion.

Q. Can’t we just say “everyone is welcome”? Why do we need to name ourselves as Affirming or focus on certain things, people or groups?

A. We know that ‘all are welcome’ because God loves everyone and in God’s world everyone has a place. But we also know that our world doesn’t work that way. Jesus specifically went to and named those who had been pushed out, marginalized, and made to feel unwelcome: gentiles, women, children, Samaritans, the poor, the doubters, and the sick and lame. As his followers, we are called to do the same. And words are not enough; our actions have to back up what we say. There are other reasons to be Affirming as well: First, we need to be explicit about our inclusion because, in the broader church, so many Christians have been so explicit about their exclusions. Second, while many churches say they love everyone, the definition of everyone has not always truly meant ALL people. Either explicitly or through implication, some sexualities and genders, mental health issues, cultures, economic backgrounds or other things have been left out of the definition of everyone, so we must spell it out. And third, many people are made to feel unwelcome because of invisible and stigmatized reasons. As we know from the Civil Rights and Suffrage movements, equality and human rights have been secured only when issues of injustice become named and visible. As a result Affirming Churches are public and explicit about what welcome and justice seeking really means and looks like.

Q. Does that mean that Affirming Congregations are primarily concerned with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and with social justice issues?

A. No. Affirming Congregations are not “gay churches” or “social justice groups.” They have a firm commitment to supporting and developing faith and spirituality, to being a caring church community and to engaging in the outreach and justice work involved in bringing about God’s shalom. Our Affirming Committee joined with Outreach and Social Justice Committee and are focusing on food security, accessibility needs, sexuality and gender, anti-racist work and reconciliation. While those areas may be the current focus of work for our Outreach and Social Justice Committee, they will not be the only things we explore, highlight or talk about. And the other work that makes Centennial who we are (like worship, pastoral care, prayer group, Bible study and so on) will continue to be a vital part of our life together.

Q. What will happen on June 7?

A. On June 7 we will vote on a motion to become an Affirming Congregation. If 75% or more of us vote in favour of the motion, the motion passes. We will also vote on a motion to adopt an Affirming Vision Statement and Affirming Action Plan as part of that vote.

Q. If Centennial votes to become Affirming, what happens next?

A. We will submit our results to Affirm United for their confirmation. We will also submit other documents to show that we have fulfilled our obligation to engage with the congregation about this important decision (*we have been in on-going dialogue with Affirm United throughout our process and have every reason to be confident that our work will meet with their approval*). We can expect to get official confirmation within a short time so that we can begin planning a service of celebration at which we can receive our Affirming certificate and publicly announce ourselves as Affirming to our community and the wider United Church.

Q. Is the celebration where we declare ourselves an Affirming Church the end of the process?

A. The celebration is an important milestone, but it is only part of a long-term commitment to live out what it means to be an Affirming Church. Affirming Ministries are asked to create an ongoing Action Plan. They recognize that there will always be more to learn. Affirming Ministries continue to grow and change as they gain further understanding and as they seek new ways to act for the healing and wholeness of all.

Q. So then, what is an Affirming Action Plan?

A. An action plan is just that, a plan to act out our commitment to be publicly, intentionally, and explicitly inclusive of all people. It is also meant to be a living document, not a rigid, static, proscriptive contract. In Centennial's case, our plan is built around the values that we discerned for ourselves.

Q. Might some people leave Centennial if we become an Affirming Church?

A. Yes, it's possible. Some congregations have lost a few members during their process. However, we have taken time to hear and address concerns raised during the process. Most churches grow in numbers and vitality when they become Affirming. People are drawn to churches that actively live out their vision and mission and that welcome others. While it would be very sad to even one member, it is a risk we must take if we truly believe in the gospel message: ALL people are God's beloved ones and there is an important place for each one in the life and work of God's church.

Q. Is there a possibility that Centennial will be vandalized if we become an Affirming Church?

A. Of course, it's possible but, based on the experience of other congregations in the immediate area that are Affirming, and of businesses that have publicly identified as spaces that welcome the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, it is highly unlikely. That being said, of course we will be prudent about the steps we will take to minimize possible risk, however unlikely. Finally though, the call of the gospel is clear: we are called to stand with those who live at the margins and who need our support and allyship. And we can be confident that God's presence will be with us always.