

Open Hearts

Resources for Affirming Ministries in
The United Church of Canada



Alyson C. Huntly
in conjunction with the
Affirming Ministries
Program Coordinators

Revised April 2020

Open Hearts: Resources for Affirming Ministries in The United Church of Canada and Wider Society
Alyson C. Huntly

Copyright © 2011 Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble
Revised 2017; 2020

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble
P.O. Box 57057,
Ottawa, ON K1R 1A1
www.affirmunited.ca

With open hearts, open minds
there is welcome in this place
there is welcome in this space
there is welcome with embrace
with open hearts.

Mary-Ellen Kish © 2008. Used with permission.

This resource was developed collaboratively by The United Church of Canada and Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble in response to a need for resources and educational materials to support Affirming Ministries within this denomination and among its partners.

The United Church of Canada seeks to fully honour and celebrate the gifts and diversity of all its members and leaders, including those of different sexual orientations and gender identities, and encourages its member communities of faith and ministries to make a public statement of welcome, inclusion, and justice-seeking by becoming Affirming Ministries. Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble is an independent organization within the United Church. Affirm United created and sponsors the Affirming Ministry Program. Members of Affirm United's national council provided guidance and feedback in the development of this resource, and many Affirming Ministries shared their insights and experience of being Affirming.

Contents

Introduction	1
The Purpose of This Resource	1
How This Resource Is Organized	2
About Language	3
Part 1: Affirming Ministries	5
Affirm United and the Affirming Ministry Program	5
Signs of an Affirming Ministry	10
We're Already Welcoming, So Why Become Affirming?	12
How to Become an Affirming Ministry	15
Sample Affirming Vision Statements from Affirming Ministries	20
We're Affirming, So Now What? Program and Action Ideas for Affirming Ministries	23
FAQs about Affirming Ministries	27
Strategies for Addressing Opposition, Fear, or Concern	30
The United Church of Canada and Issues of Gender Diversity and Sexual Orientation	33
Part 2: Education, Discernment, and Action Planning for Affirming Ministries	35
Openings and Closings	35
Affirming Ministries: The Basics	37
Storytelling Circles	39
The Bible and Issues of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity	41
Activity Sheet: Bible Passages and Daily Living	44
Handout: Instructions for Small Groups	47
What Would It Mean for Our Ministry to Be Affirming?	48
Handout: Case Studies for Small Groups	50
Discerning Visions, Hopes, and Possibilities for an Affirming Ministry	53
Developing an Affirming Vision Statement	54
A Five-Step Process for Developing an Action Plan	56
Explorations for Youth	58
Explorations for Children	60
More Ideas for Learning and Reflection	63
Part 3: Resources for Affirming Ministries	65
How to Obtain Resources	65
General Print Resources	65
United Church of Canada Resources	67
Gender and Sexually Diverse Youth	68
Children	68
Popular Films on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity	70
Documentaries on LGBTQIA+/Gender Identity Issues	70
Two-Spirit Topics	72
Trans Topics	72
Links to Organizations	73
United Church Resources on Aboriginal Peoples and Indian Residential Schools	74
United Church Resources on Antiracism, Racism, and Cultural Identity	74

Introduction

This is a resource for and about Affirming Ministries. Affirming Ministries are communities of faith, regional councils, educational institutions, outdoor ministries, chaplaincies, and other ministries within the United Church and among its partners that publicly declare their commitment to inclusion and justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Although Affirming Ministries make an explicit statement about issues of sexuality and gender, their commitment to justice is far broader. They continually grow and change as they seek to live more fully into God's way of welcome, love, and justice for all creation. Just as God rejoices in the goodness and diversity of creation, so too Affirming Ministries honour and celebrate diversity.

One justice issue is not seen as more important than another, for in our culture of prejudice and power, injustices are interwoven and often mutually reinforcing. Work for change happens in many ways and in many contexts. Affirming Ministries work in many different ways toward the healing and wholeness of creation—challenging bias and discrimination based on appearance, ability, culture, class, or age; working to end racism; promoting economic justice; increasing accessibility; or caring for the planet. Affirming Ministries seek to go beyond issues of gender identity and sexual orientation to work for justice and inclusion for all people.

Affirming Ministries provide information, acceptance, support, and justice-making for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities and for people exploring their place on the spectrum of human sexuality. These ministries declare, in words and actions, that God loves and celebrates all people. And they call upon the rest of the church and society to do the same.

The growing network of Affirming Ministries within the United Church was initiated in 1992 by Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble,¹ an organization that works for the inclusion of people of all gender identities and sexual orientations within the United Church of Canada and society. The United Church of Canada officially endorses the Affirming Ministry Program and encourages its ministries to participate.

Through a process of discernment and reflection, Affirming Ministries discover what it means for them to be inclusive and justice-seeking. They prepare a statement of faith and vision that sets out their ongoing commitment to work for justice on issues of gender diversity and sexual orientation within their ministry, the wider church and community, and to support and participate in the Affirming Ministry Program.

The Affirming Ministry Program encourages United Church bodies (such as communities of faith, regional councils, outdoor ministries, chaplaincies, education centres, and outreach ministries) to study what it means to be publicly welcoming and inclusive. The program provides information and education on sexual orientation and gender identity issues. It also encourages the study of other United Church resources that promote inclusion and justice for other groups that have been historically excluded or marginalized (such as those excluded by ageism, racism, sexism, accessibility, and socio-economic differences).

The Purpose of This Resource

This resource aims to help United Church ministries and missional partners grow and change, to move from merely “welcoming everyone” toward opening their hearts. Opening our hearts, as communities of faith, entails unlocking closet doors of silence, oppression, and shame in the church and in the community; opening hearts and minds to God's vision of justice and wholeness; celebrating the full rainbow spectrum of human diversity; and responding to God's call to love and compassion.

This resource provides information, workshops, and educational information for communities of faith, educational institutions, regional councils, outdoor ministries, chaplaincies, and other ministries in the United Church that

- want to know more about what it means to be an Affirming Ministry

¹ For the sake of brevity and because this is an English-language resource, Affirm United is used in place of the organization's full name—*Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble*.

- are ready to embark on the process of becoming an Affirming Ministry
- are in the process of discerning what it means for their ministry to become Affirming and how they might live that out in word and action
- are existing Affirming Ministries seeking to learn, grow, or recommit themselves to a ministry of inclusion and justice-making

The educational suggestions and program ideas in this resource assume that participants already have a basic level of understanding of issues of sexual orientation and gender diversity.

How This Resource Is Organized

This resource is divided into three parts:

Part 1: Being Affirming Ministries has general information—what an Affirming Ministry is, the process and steps to become Affirming, what is important about being Affirming, action ideas, and signs of affirmation. This section also has background information on the United Church's stance on sexual orientation and gender identity. The articles in this section can be used as general handouts or as resources for the workshops in Part 2.

Part 2: Study and Reflection provides action ideas and learning activities. It has material for the process of study and reflection leading to becoming an Affirming Ministry as well as learning ideas to help ministries and others continue to learn and grow. Part 2 contains the following workshops:

- *Affirming Ministries: The Basics* helps participants gain a general understanding of what Affirming Ministries are and what they do.
- *Storytelling Circles* provides opportunities for participants to share and hear stories of exclusion and inclusion, stories about how issues of gender identity and sexual orientation have touched people's lives, and stories about personal identity, toward building greater empathy, compassion, and understanding for all who have marginalized.
- *The Bible and Issues of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity* explains what the Bible suggests about gender identity and sexual orientation and how scripture has been used to oppress gender and sexual minorities.
- *What Would It Mean for Our Ministry to Be Affirming?* helps ministries examine the implications and the possibilities for them if they become Affirming by exploring such questions as what is the difference between being welcoming and becoming Affirming, what difference might it make to people's lives if this ministry became Affirming, what are some of the fears and concerns, and what are the possibilities and hopes for becoming Affirming.
- *Discerning Visions, Hopes, and Possibilities for an Affirming Ministry* uses scripture texts and art to inspire and generate visions, hopes, and possibilities for becoming an Affirming Ministry.
- *Developing an Affirming Vision Statement* helps ministries to create or to renew their Affirming Vision Statement.
- *A Five-Step Process for Developing an Action Plan* helps Affirming Ministries take action in responses to issues of injustice and exclusion for gender and sexual minorities in the church or in society.
- *Explorations for Youth* is for youth aged 13–18 to explore issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, a biblical vision of inclusion, and what it means to be an Affirming Ministry.
- *Explorations for Children* is for children in grades 1–6 to discover there are many different kinds of families and that God loves all of them; church is a place where God welcomes everyone; in an Affirming Ministry, we tell everyone about God's welcome and inclusion.

Part 3: Resources offers information on how to access a wide variety of additional resources that are available to support Affirming Ministries in their programs. This section includes annotated lists of books, recommended films, organizational contacts, United Church resources on sexual orientation and gender identity, and resources for anti-racism work and on Aboriginal peoples and Indian Residential Schools for ministries that wish to broaden their work for justice and inclusion in these areas. We note that there are many other resources not named to address other areas where people are excluded or marginalized (such as those excluded by ageism, racism, sexism,

accessibility, and socio-economic differences) and encourage those creating the process for their ministry to seek these out.

The resources page on the Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble website (<https://affirmunited.ause.ca/>) is another source of information which is continually being updated.

About Language

Language constantly changes. It also has a powerful impact on how we live with respect to God's creation. The aim of Open Hearts is, as its title suggests, to open people's hearts and minds. We hope you will find this document useful in advancing your ministry's discussions about gender and sexuality, which the United Church believes are God's gifts—with all persons being made in the image of God

While this resource has been revised and updated since its initial inception, no perfect or fully up-to-date version of this resource is possible. By the time this resource is written, certain terms will have gained currency over others. Some may have acquired different nuances or completely new meanings. Furthermore, some people choose words to describe themselves or their relationships that others do not feel comfortable with. Differences in language may be generational, contextual, or a matter of personal preference. If in doubt, ask people what words they prefer to use to describe themselves and their experience.

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble is committed to using the language of sexual orientation(s) and gender identity(ies) to go beyond the use of specific labels and to include all people on the continuum of human sexuality. However, in this resource the term LGBTQIA2S+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer, intersex, asexual, and Two-Spirit people) is often used as an abbreviation. While the term is more expansive than the older abbreviation of LGBT, it is nevertheless imperfect.² But since many sexual minority justice and advocacy organizations use this term (or a version thereof) and for the sake of brevity, we use it, occasionally, to refer to people whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual and/or whose gender identity does not conform to binary male/female categories. The list of terms below is by no means exhaustive.

Asexual refers to a person who does not experience sexual attraction or desire. The person may or may not have spiritual and emotional attraction to others.

Bisexual refers to someone whose sexual and/or romantic attraction is to both males and females. A bisexual person may not be attracted equally to both sexes—people who are primarily attracted to one sex may still describe themselves as bisexual. Bisexuality is a description of sexual orientation and does not imply that the person engages in sexual behaviour with one or both sexes. Some people continue to use the term *bisexual* to describe themselves. Others are more comfortable with terms such as *pansexual*, *omnisexual*, or *queer*.

Cisgender refers to someone whose gender identity conforms with the one that they were assigned at birth.

Gay usually refers to men who have relationships with other men. It is sometimes used as a generic term for men and women; some women who love women call themselves *gay* while others prefer the term *lesbian*.

Gender is what a person lives or experiences themselves to be in society (woman, man, girl, boy, androgynous, etc.).

Genderfluid refers to those whose gender identity and expression are fluid and change depending on personal circumstance or desire.

² Some transgender people do not want "T" to be included with LGB because they see themselves simply as male or female, not of a different orientation. And some folk feel that *queer* should be an umbrella term for everything LGBT encompasses. Others have raised the valid critique that the order of the initialisms reinforces a hierarchy within the LGBTQIA2S+ community wherein lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are privileged in relation to, for example, asexual and Two-Spirit folks. Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble is committed to using the language of sexual orientation and gender identity to go beyond the specific labels but recognizes that this resource would be a lot longer without abbreviations.

Gender Identity is an individual's self-conception as being male, female, both or neither as distinguished from actual biological sex.

Gender Non-Conforming refers to those whose gender expression does not conform to prevailing gender norms.

Homosexual is used in a formal sense. Many people do not use the term to describe themselves, preferring words such as *gay* (men who love men) or *lesbian* (women who love women).

*Intersex*³ refers to people who may have atypical combinations of physical features that usually distinguish female from male—for example, someone with an XY chromosome who appears physically female, XX-male, genital ambiguity, or sex developmental differences. An intersex individual may have biological characteristics of both the male and female sexes. *Intersexuality* is a medical term introduced in the 20th century to refer to people who cannot be classified as clearly male or female.

Non-binary is an umbrella term used by those who do not identify as a man or a woman. Non-binary genders can be understood in a variety of ways. For some, their gender may feel like a combination of man and woman. Others have a sense of their gender being beyond the categories of man or woman. Still others may feel as though they do not identify with any gender at all. *Non-binary* may also refer to gender categories that are specific to a culture that recognizes more than two genders.

Pansexual is a term used to describe those who are sexually or romantically attracted to people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Pansexual people may perceive themselves as gender-blind, meaning that gender and sexuality are not factors that determine their attraction to others. Considered as a subset of bisexuality and sometimes as a sexual identity in its own right, pansexuality refuses the logic of the gender binary.

Queer used to be a derogatory term, but this word is used, often in academic settings, to refer to those who do not conform to traditional gender and sexual stereotypes, constructs, or roles—for example, “queer studies” programs in universities, or “queer theology.” Young LGBTQIA+ folk may often refer to themselves as queer. Queer can sometimes be an affectionate term between LGBTQIA+ people, although it can still be a derogatory term when directed against people.

Questioning is a word often used by youth who are in the process of coming out or are still discerning their sexuality, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Sex as an adjective (in reference to someone's sex) usually refers to body and biology, as in male, female, intersex.

Sexuality or *sexual orientation* refers to a person's sexual desire, love interest, or affiliation—heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual.

Trans and *transgender* are those whose assigned sex at birth is different from their gender identity or gender expression. Some cross-dressers and many intersex people identify as trans.

Transsexual is sometimes used to refer to someone who is transitioning from male to female or female to male, or someone whose biological sex does not match their felt or lived gender. For many people in the transgender community, however, it is seen as an outdated term, and primarily a medical term that pertains to gender-confirming surgery and/or hormone replacement therapy.

Two-Spirit came from the 1990 Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference in Winnipeg, and refers to First Nations people who fulfill one of many mixed or cross-gender roles found traditionally among many

³ The term *intersex* is now preferred over the word *hermaphrodite*. In biology, *hermaphrodite* refers to plants or animals that have reproductive organs normally associated with male and female sexes. Many animal species do not have separate sexes—in sexual reproduction, both partners can act as either “male” or “female.” Most plants are also hermaphrodites. Historically, the word *hermaphrodite* was used for people whose biological sex could not be classified as clearly male or female. When referring to people, the term *hermaphrodite* is considered misleading, derogatory, and outdated.

Indigenous groups. A direct translation of the Ojibwe term *Niizh manidoowag*, “Two-Spirited” or “Two-Spirit” is usually used to indicate a person whose body simultaneously houses a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit. Many First Nations or Aboriginal people are not comfortable using this term, however. The term is not interchangeable with gay, lesbian, or other terms in the LGBTQIA+ initialism, nor is it appropriate for non-Indigenous people to use this word to describe themselves.

Part I: Affirming Ministries

Affirm United and the Affirming Ministry Program

Affirm United is a justice-seeking organization of people in The United Church of Canada, although its work often reaches outside of the denomination. Membership is open to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities who support our work. Affirm United is a worshipping, pastoral, and prophetic community celebrating God’s call to liberation. It declares that all people are created in the image of God and are unconditionally loved by God. The organization strives for full participation and justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the church and in society.

Affirm was founded in 1982 as an organization of gays and lesbians in the United Church. Shortly afterward, Friends of Affirm was formed as a group working to support Affirm’s goals. The two organizations merged in 1994 to form Affirm United.

The aims of Affirm United are:

- Education: to promote greater awareness of sexual orientation and gender identity issues
- Action: to work to end discrimination against people in church, society, and our own organization
- Support: to help people of all sexual orientations and gender identities find support and community within the United Church

Affirm United/S’affirmer Ensemble

- provides educational opportunities and resources that will encourage acceptance of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities by members, communities of faith, and decision-making bodies of The United Church of Canada and its partners, including ecumenical and civil society organizations
- provides resources to support and give pastoral care to people who are LGBTQIA2S+,⁴ to those who are gender non-conforming or genderfluid, and to their families and friends
- builds and sustains a network of support through the Affirming Ministries, national working groups, local groups, and wider society
- encourages the United Church and its partners to act prophetically and pastorally in support of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, both within the church and in society

The Beginning of the Affirming Ministry Program

In 1991, Affirm United established the Affirming Ministry Program,⁵ a network of United Church communities of faith that publicly affirm and support people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. On February 26, 1995, Augustine United Church in Winnipeg became the first Affirming congregation in the United Church. By the end of 1995 there were five Affirming Ministries. There are now over 225 such ministries across the United Church in almost every province and region of Canada, and this number changes constantly.

⁴ LGBTQIA2S+ is a term commonly used by organizations, including The United Church of Canada, working on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity to refer to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer, intersex, asexual and Two-Spirit. See About Language on p. 3.

⁵ Originally, it was called the “Affirming Congregations Program.”

Affirming Ministries provide information, acceptance, support, and justice-making for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities and their friends and families. They declare, in words and actions, that God loves and accepts people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. And they call upon the rest of the church and society to do the same.

Through a process of discernment and reflection—a study process that usually takes about two years—prospective Affirming Ministries discover what it means for them to be inclusive and justice-seeking. They prepare an Affirming Vision Statement⁶ that sets out their commitment to work for justice—naming issues that they are committed to working on, particularly those of gender identity and sexual orientation within their ministry, the wider church, and their community, and to support and participate in the Affirming Ministry Program.

Goals of the Affirming Ministry Program

- to help United Church ministries, partners, and wider society learn and grow as they respond to issues of sexual orientation and gender identity
- to support United Church ministries, partners, and wider society in their ministry to and with people of all sexual orientations and gender identities
- to identify United Church ministries and partners that are willing to publicly declare affirmation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities as full participants in the Body of Christ
- to broaden justice concerns within the church and society

The Affirming Ministry Program acknowledges the hurt and injustice the church has caused to many social groups—not just to LGBTQIA2S+ people but also to Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC), in our racism and fear of those who are different from ourselves, and through our silencing or exclusion of people because of their class and economic background, their age, ability, culture, gender, and ethnicity, or their physical or mental health. The Affirming Ministry Program, while it focuses on issues of gender identity and sexual orientation, seeks to live into a vision of justice and inclusion for all God's people.

Although the Affirming Ministry Program focuses on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, it encourages ministries to broaden their understanding, awareness, and action to include justice, healing, and reconciliation for BIPOC, and work to end racism. Gender and sexually diverse people from ethnic minority groups or those who are Aboriginal, Métis, or First Nations may experience two-fold oppression. They may be marginalized in their own context because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and they may experience racism, isolation, or invisibility within LGBTQIA2S+ networks, where people of White/European origin often predominate. It is vital that groups in Canada that support justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including churches, also address structural and internalized racism, White privilege, and fear of those who are “foreigners” or “other.” Affirming Ministries seek to connect with those working to end racism and White privilege to build networks of dialogue and mutual action around such issues as sexism, classism, or ableism.

⁶ This vision statement may be an addition to or a replacement for the ministry's existing mission statement.



**Affirm
UNITED** | **S'affirmer
ENSEMBLE**

Steps to becoming an Affirming Ministry

This is a summary that begins to answer a question we get all the time: **"Tell us what we have to do to become Affirming."** For full details, see *Open Hearts: Resources for Affirming Ministries*, and other resources, available at www.ause.ca under *Resources* and *Affirming Ministries*.

Before you embark on your journey, please contact the Affirming Ministry coordinators through our website:

<http://affirmunited.ause.ca/affirming-ministry-coordinators/>

To become Affirming, your ministry embarks on an **educational, discernment, and decision process** that helps your ministry be **PIE**:

Public: Be out and proud! Use symbols, signs and words which are echoed inside and outside the church building, in all facets of church life.

Intentional: An Affirming ministry is deliberate in their process of study, education and dialogue with members of their faith community. They ensure that the history of oppression and discrimination by the church is both understood and acknowledged, and that continued growth, education, and celebration are part of its ministry.

Explicit: An Affirming ministry is very clear about who it welcomes. It names queer, trans, and Two-Spirit people and the gifts they bring.

You're asked to look at a variety of areas that may be barriers to those coming to your ministry and community—age, gender, race, ability, class, economic status and, in particular, gender identity and sexual orientation.

Ministry covers communities of faith, regional councils, educational institutions, outreach ministries, chaplaincies, retreat centres, outdoor ministries, and others. We also welcome ecumenical interest. **Resources** for this process are on our website, at www.ause.ca and in *Open Hearts*, our free resource book.

The education and discernment process should include:

- a) Hearing personal stories from within your ministry and the community in order to understand the need for this action
- b) Hearing about and discussing modern theological understandings of scriptures which for years and still today are used to discriminate.
- c) Hearing from Affirming ministries what impact that decision has had on their ministry. Discussing what it might mean for your ministry.
- d) Hearing about and discussing the social justice aspects of why becoming Affirming is important.

This process takes as long as it needs to take. Some take a year; others are longer. Many Affirming Ministries have told us that this process should include as many groups within your ministry as possible. When the ministry feels that it is ready to make a public declaration of its work to be inclusive, several actions need to be put in place by your ministry as outlined below. All

documents should be sent to your Affirming Ministry program coordinator for approval before having them approved by your ministry.

Making public commitments: please send drafts of these to your Affirming Ministry coordinator!

A. *A Vision Statement concerning the inclusion of people of all gender identities and sexual orientations in the life and work of the ministry*

Guidelines for writing your statement are listed in *Open Hearts* at www.ause.ca under Affirming Ministries. It is a useful process for your ministry to write its own statement reflecting the particular community you are a part of, the gifts and commitments you bring to the church and world. Your statement might include inclusivity in a variety of areas (class, race, sex, age, ability). ***A requirement of the statement is that it should specifically include the full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life and work of the ministry.***

This Vision Statement is often agreed upon within the board and then taken to a meeting to be voted on by all members of the ministry. *However, it should be sent to the coordinators of the Affirming Ministry Program first so that it can be approved.*

B. *A continuing Plan of Action for the Ministry once you're Affirming*

This plan, shared widely during the process with the ministry, might include:

- Ongoing work of your committee to reflect on what areas of inclusion can be further worked on.
- Cooperation between this committee and other groups in the ministry to continue the education with new members.
- Ongoing educational events for your ministry and/or wider community.
- Exploring issues of mission and ministry with people of all sexual orientations and gender identities who live in your community.
- Developing workshops for other ministries within your Regional Council.
- Getting involved with the wider community.

C. *An Equal Marriage Policy (for Affirming Ministries that offer marriage services)*

A marriage policy in which couples of all gender combinations are treated equitably.

These three commitments are required. Some ministries go further, and develop things like an inclusive building user policy. Going further is always welcome!

Making your decision

Once you have sent in your equal marriage policy, received approval of your Vision Statement and Plan of Action from your Affirming Ministry Program Coordinator, you must seek approval of your ministry to become an Affirming Ministry through a vote. **For this vote, AU/SE strongly advises a minimum of 75% approval.** Remember the goal is to have everybody be intentionally inclusive. So we encourage all who are actively involved in your ministry to participate in the vote (for example, in a community of faith the process would include both official members and adherents).

Making a commitment to the national Affirming movement

All Affirming ministries are required to become members of Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble through an annual institutional membership. This supports our Affirming Ministries

program, advocacy work, our annual conference, governance, and much more.

We ask you to identify lead contacts to receive information and invitations, and report annually on the ongoing work of your ministry. You are also encouraged to send members to Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble's Annual Conference and General Meeting each summer (information available at www.ause.ca).

Celebrating!

Once the above steps and requirements are complete, we expect you to hold a **public** service of celebration for your ministry, your community and the wider United Church and community. At this service you will receive a certificate from Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble to mark this step toward your ongoing commitment. Following this celebration, you join the growing list of Affirming Ministries throughout Canada and will be listed on the national AUSE and United Church websites.

Signs of an Affirming Ministry

Affirming Ministries are not dramatically different from other United Church ministries. They worship, pray, support, serve, seek, celebrate, learn, work, play, and grow, just like other ministries. But if you look carefully, you may notice certain things don't look quite the same. You will see public, intentional, and explicit statements of welcome, inclusion, and justice-seeking for people whose sexual orientations and gender identities have been historically marginalized and excluded within the church and in society.

While Affirming Ministries are deeply committed to action on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, they are first and foremost justice-seeking communities. They are continually growing and learning, and broadening their witness to God's inclusive love. They are deeply concerned about justice and full inclusion for all God's people. So you will also see other signs of inclusion, welcome, and work for justice as well.

Signs of welcome, such as

- the AUSE logo on the sign board
- rainbow, trans, and other flags displayed in public locations
- scent-free and peanut allergy awareness reminders beside the wheelchair accessibility sign
- signs and announcements that explicitly welcome all sexual orientations and gender identities
- a regular opening statement in the Sunday bulletin that describes an Affirming Ministry and its celebration of diversity
- the Affirm United logo on the church letterhead
- a display case with the Affirming Ministry Certificate
- the Affirming Vision Statement prominently displayed
- people wearing Affirm United buttons or T-shirts, rainbow ribbons, or rainbow stoles
- a community that is visibly diverse in culture, national origin, ability, class, age, and ethnicity

Signs of celebration, such as

- the baptism of a child in an LGBTQIA2S+ family
- a rainbow candle or banner on the worship table
- participation of an LGBTQIA2S+, gender non-conforming, or other culturally specific choir
- an invitation to a same-gender wedding
- an invitation for the community to join in celebrating an interfaith wedding
- an invitation to an intercultural event
- an invitation to an interfaith event
- music with special significance for the LGBTQIA2S+ community
- annual celebration of Affirming Ministry declaration

Signs of inclusion and care, such as

- a marriage policy that states that equal marriages are celebrated
- marriage and baptism forms with gender-inclusive language
- images and pictures on the website of a variety of family configurations
- news about the ministry's involvement in a community housing initiative for affordable housing
- announcements of LGBTQIA2S+ events or activities
- prayers for concerns of LGBTQIA2S+ people, events in the community, etc.
- youth and children leading music and community prayers
- language in worship that is explicitly inclusive of human diversity in many forms
- Sunday school activities and learning resources that honour all kinds of families

- hymns that include all sexual orientations and gender identities or are in different languages to honour the different peoples in the ministry and the community
- a photo directory with all kinds of families
- a notice about plans for a new washroom that is not gender-specific
- a transgender worship leader, teacher, youth leader, or preacher
- intentional inclusion of all ages and abilities in worship, decision-making, and community action

Signs of learning and growth, such as

- a story in children's conversation about a gender non-conforming person or an LGBTQIA2S+ family
- a workshop on lesbian spirituality
- a workshop on Native spirituality
- an invitation to the Affirm United Annual Conference
- magazines, books, and websites on gender identity or sexual orientation
- an adult book club or study group that is reading about being a marginalized person
- a report from a team that recently attended an intercultural church conference
- a workshop on making the ministry's building more environmentally friendly
- newcomers' orientation that describes what it means to be an Affirming Ministry

Signs of justice-making and outreach, such as

- links and resources on the website to information and resources for queer and questioning youth
- a petition supporting city funding for a same-gender senior couples' housing project
- announcements about participation in the wider community through outreach, environmental concerns, or supporting protests for human rights
- announcements about an action campaign for safe schools
- a report from representatives to a community meeting about the health needs of gay seniors
- the development of an anti-racism action plan for the ministry
- requests for volunteers for the local AIDS hospice
- a "coming out to families" support group
- a queer and questioning youth group meeting in the building
- a special collection or worship service on World AIDS Day; Trans Day of Visibility; and others
- participation in Pride Parades

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,⁷ 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

⁷ "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.

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.

How to Become an Affirming Ministry

Following is a summary of the steps usually followed to become an Affirming Ministry:

1. *Start small.* A process to become an Affirming Ministry usually begins with one or two individuals or a small group within the ministry. One person might initiate this by getting together with one or two other people who are interested and open to the idea. For example, a committee within a community of faith, such as the Mission and Outreach Committee, might make a motion to Council or the Board.
2. *Make contact with Affirm United.* Get in touch with Affirm United as early in the process as possible, preferably when the idea of becoming Affirming first surfaces. The Affirming Ministry Program Coordinators (affirmunited.ause.ca/affirming-ministry-coordinators/) can advise and support you, help you locate resources and resource people, give you information on the process and criteria for becoming Affirming, and perhaps help you avoid some common pitfalls or minefields.
3. *Begin to gather information and resources.* This will be an ongoing activity, but it should begin in the early stages. Make sure your library and Affirm display table have books for children and information for youth. See Part 3: Resources for Affirming Ministries.
4. *Connect with other Affirming Ministries.* See the list of Affirming Ministries at affirmunited.ause.ca/find-a-ministry/ and check out some of the ministry websites. Visit or contact an Affirming Ministry near you to talk about what they did to become Affirming and what being an Affirming Ministry means to them. Plan workshops or joint worship events with other Affirming Ministries near you, or with other ministries that are considering becoming Affirming.
5. *Gather useful resources (see the Resources section and Affirm United website).* Build up a library of articles, books, films, and other resources. Begin to read some of the recommended books; watch some of the recommended films.
6. *Form an interest group.* Gather an informal group of interested people to talk about what an Affirming process might look like and why it might be important for your community of faith or ministry. This group can work to prepare a recommendation or motion to your Council or Session or Board. Get the Board (or other decision-making body) on board.
7. *Make a recommendation to your governing body to begin a process of reflection and study to consider to become an Affirming Ministry and to form an Affirming Ministry Steering Group*—a group to plan and lead a process of study, discernment, and reflection. Some people from the original interest group might serve as members of the steering group. It is important to have support for the study process from the ministry's main decision-making body. Ask for a budget to cover costs of events and resources. Keep your governing body informed throughout the process with regular updates and information.
8. *Involve the whole ministry in a process of learning and reflection.* This is the most important step and usually the longest, generally taking 18 months to two years, depending on the culture and experience with diversity of the ministry. Educational resources for this process are offered in Part 2. Engage in a process of education, reflection, and study involving the members, Board, Council, working groups, staff, and committees of the ministry. The process should involve as many as possible of the groups and committees, participants, members, and leaders within the ministry. Ideally, the process will address other justice issues such as racism, economic justice/class, sexism, ability/disability, age, and culture. Through this process, you will:
 - Learn more about issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.
 - Using scriptures, sermons, and conversation, reflect theologically on what it means to be affirming, welcoming, and justice-seeking for gender and sexual minorities.
 - Involve resource people and members of your community who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer, intersex, asexual and Two-Spirit, or who identify as genderfluid or non-binary, in telling their stories and sharing their experiences. In doing so, pay attention to larger diversity issues, and consider how you can engage with a wide spectrum of voices, including racialized people, people with disabilities, etc.
 - Examine how your ministry welcomes, supports, and includes LGBTQIA2S+ and gender non-conforming people within its life and work.

- Have many opportunities for participants in your ministry programs to share their stories, concerns, and ideas about becoming an Affirming Ministry.
 - Assess your ministry’s commitment to ongoing work for justice, care, and support for people of gender and sexual minorities both within the ministry and in the wider community.
9. *Write an Affirming Vision Statement, Action Plan, and Equal Marriage Policy.* If you feel it is the right time for your ministry, begin to prepare a statement of your Affirming Vision—a statement that might replace or be added to your community of faith’s or ministry’s current mission statement. Talk together about what it might mean for your ministry to make a commitment to be fully inclusive and to support and advocate for people of different sexual orientations and gender identities. Be sure to contact Affirm United as you prepare the statement to make sure your ministry meets the criteria in Affirm’s guidelines. Contact the Affirming Ministry Program Coordinators at affirmunited.ause.ca/affirming-ministry-coordinators/ to get feedback on the proposed Vision Statement, Action Plan, and Marriage Policy, and make any necessary changes before seeking your ministry’s approval. These three pieces most likely will be done at different stages. Many have already approved an Equal Marriage Policy and can inform the Coordinators. Many ministries have found it helpful to create the plan of action after the approval of the Affirming Vision Statement. Read Affirming statements from other ministries to get ideas.
- The **Affirming Vision Statement** of faith speaks of a vision for justice, affirmation, and inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life and work of the ministry. The statement may include inclusivity in a variety of areas (class, race, sex, age, ability, etc.). A requirement of the statement is that it should explicitly mention and support the full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life and work of the ministry. This statement becomes part of or supports the ministry’s current mission statement. Since an Affirming Ministry can only live out its commitment with the support of members and adherents (all who attend), ministries will take their statement to a meeting of the whole ministry (e.g. a special meeting or an annual meeting of the ministry) to be considered. If changes, other than grammatical or order of words, are made, consultation with the Affirming Ministry Coordinators is required to ensure that it meets the criteria of an Affirming Vision Statement. The Board or Council has the authority to make final changes and/or send the statement to the Affirming Ministry Coordinators as part of their application to become an Affirming Ministry.
 - The **Action Plan** for the ministry addresses how it will continue to live out a commitment to justice and affirmation. It might include: exploring other justice issues (such as racism), plans to support LGBTQIA2S+ people within the ministry or in the wider community, plans to support gender non-conforming people, joint action with other Affirming Ministries, advocacy or justice work in the community, developing workshops for other ministries within the region, getting involved with local LGBTQIA2S+ justice support or advocacy groups, and continued support for Affirm United.
 - An Equal **Marriage Policy** for the ministry (if it does not already have one) ensures that couples of all gender combinations have the same rights and entitlements if the institution performs marriages. *Seek approval of your ministry to become an Affirming Ministry through a vote.* We strongly advise a minimum of 75%. Remember the goal is to have everybody be intentionally inclusive. So, we encourage all who are actively involved in your ministry to participate in the vote.

Note for communities of faith:

When you decide to vote on applying to become an Affirming Ministry, understand that this vote would be considered a “financial or administrative matter” by The Manual for The United Church of Canada. As suggested in our list of requirements, we encourage communities of faith to include all that attend to be part of this decision (since all who attend will be acting out intentions of an Affirming Ministry). We therefore encourage official members to have a vote to allow adherents to vote as laid out in section B. 3.7.2 of The Manual:

B.3.7.2 When Adherents May Vote

Adherents may vote at meetings of the congregation if

- (a) the full members decide to allow adherents to vote; and
- (b) the vote is on a financial or administrative matter.

10. *Seek Approval of Your Ministry to Become an Affirming Ministry Through a Vote.* There is an annual institutional membership fee to assist in communications and providing resources for the national program. Some

institutions will be able to contribute more and others less. When they join Affirm United, Affirming Ministries are added to the mailing list for communications. Affirming Ministries are encouraged to send participants to the Affirm United Conference and Annual General Meeting. Each Affirming Ministry is entitled to two voting representatives at the Annual General Meeting.

11. *Celebrate.* When your ministry is approved as an Affirming Ministry, Affirm United will recognize this designation at a service of recognition and celebration. Plan a worship service to celebrate being an Affirming Ministry. You may want to send out invitations to the wider community and to local communities of faith to join you for this celebration. Make sure the local LGBTQIA2S+ community hears about it. Someone on behalf of Affirm United will attend to present the Affirming Ministry Certificate and to bring words of greeting from the Affirming Ministries. Following this celebration, the ministry will be added to the list of Affirming Ministries on the Affirm United website.
12. *Announce.* Make public the fact that your ministry has been declared an Affirming Ministry within the United Church by including this information and the Affirm United logo in your publications, on your website, and on your outside signboard. You might wish to send out a press release or write an article for the local church news. Post the Affirming Vision Statement prominently in your building.
13. *Act.* Continue to live out your commitment to justice and inclusion by supporting the work of the Affirming Ministry Program. Ministries are asked to form an ongoing Affirming group or Equity Group with accountability to implement the Action Plan and update it as necessary.
14. *Grow.* Broaden your understanding of issues of justice and exclusion. For example, learn more about racism and develop an anti-racism action plan. Become involved in reconciliation processes with Aboriginal and First Nations people.



The Affirming Process

The goal of an Affirming process:

A public, intentional, explicit welcome for diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

The process is spiritual; reflective; contextual; educational; fully participatory.

It takes as long as it needs to.

It's about stories and struggles; people, not paper.

And it's about transformation.



See over for more details →



The Affirming Process

Encountering the Need

A need, question, or vision leads a ministry to ask how it can be publicly, intentionally, and explicitly welcoming.

Discerning

A group forms to start looking at how to become (more) radically and intentionally welcoming. They consider the Affirming process, and get in touch with the Affirming ministry coordinators.

Embarking

The decision to formally enter the Affirming process is made by the ministry's governing body. A working group is set up.

Engaging

Educating. Story telling. Praying. Hearing fears and hopes. Working with all in the ministry and wider community to discern what being Affirming could look like for your ministry.

Documenting

Before a final decision is made, an inclusive marriage policy, Vision Statement, Action Plan for the future, and more must be created.

Deciding Together

The community discerns how it's going to decide on whether to formally become Affirming. A positive decision needs to include a "yes" from at least three quarters of those involved in deciding.

Joining the Family

Holding a public celebration! Being welcomed formally to our Canada-wide family.

Affirm United/ S'affirmer Ensemble works for the full inclusion of all sexual and gender identities in the United Church of Canada, and beyond.
Learn more! www.ause.ca Twitter: [@affirmunited](https://twitter.com/affirmunited) Email: communications@ause.ca
Look for both our group and our page on Facebook.



Sample Affirming Vision Statements from Affirming Ministries

Find an Affirming Ministry (see <http://affirmunited.ause.ca/find-a-ministry/>) and check out some of the ministry websites for further examples.

Grace United Church, Sarnia, Ontario

We are called to be the Church:

People of all sexual orientations and gender identities

In full participation in the life and work of our ministry.

To celebrate God's presence:

Gathered around a safe and open table and font.

To live with respect in Creation:

Committed to inclusion and celebrating diversity.

To love and serve others:

Respecting and celebrating differences.

To seek justice and resist evil:

Challenging the power of class, race, sex, age, and ability.

To proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope:

Confident that God will guide us.

Trinity United Church, Cannington, Ontario

As the people of Trinity United Church, we affirm and actively support the life experience of all. We aim to provide a safe, nurturing environment where we intentionally welcome all into the total life and ministry of the Trinity family, including but not limited to: persons of any age, colour, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, intellectual and physical ability, family configuration, social or economic circumstance or mental health. All persons are invited to take part in every aspect of church life including membership, leadership, celebrating life passages and marriage. We are publicly committed to working and living together in our journey toward justice for all of God's people.

Sydenham Street United Church, Kingston, Ontario

Vision Statement

As an Affirming Congregation, we seek to be a vital faith community within The United Church of Canada

engaged in spirituality, justice and creativity,

informed by Jesus Christ and the Bible,

and discerning the call of the Trinity

as we celebrate diversity, inclusivity and abundant life.

Mission Statement

We are committed to following Jesus' example as we embrace people of all ages, racialized groups, genders, sexual orientations, gender identities, ethnic origins, political beliefs, economic circumstances and differing abilities and challenges in the ministry and life of Sydenham Street United Church.

We are committed to deepening our spiritual relatedness and honouring the worth of each individual by extending hospitality and pastoral care, and sharing relevant and meaningful worship, spiritual practices, and small group ministry.

We are committed to broadening our outreach/social justice through existing programs, advocacy and new initiatives to address local, national and global needs; and to welcoming the use of our space by those involved in outreach/social justice seeking to live lives of compassion and peace.

We are committed to nurturing and being nurtured by the arts within the congregation and wider community by encouraging use of our facilities by those engaged in any and all artistic endeavours.

Camrose United Church, Camrose, Alberta

Our Vision

To become a safe community where
no one feels alone
and everyone feels at home.

Camrose United Church proclaims an inclusive welcome to all people in the full spectrum of gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnic identity, age, ability and social class. We are committed to being a safe community and we celebrate the gifts diversity brings. All are invited to fully participate in the worship and work of our community.

Sackville United Church, Sackville, New Brunswick

We the community of Sackville United Church feel called to proclaim and live the call of Jesus in our midst. As people at Sackville United Church, we are committed to being a safe, nurturing environment, affirming and including all—those oppressed, those excluded and those marginalized (e.g. by economic status, dietary limitations, race, culture, language, age, ability, mental health, marital status, gender identity, and sexual orientation).

We will join with all people who seek justice, compassion for all the earth, and, love and peace for all people.

In our Song of Faith we celebrate how relationship has taken us from creation through the prophets and the ministry of Jesus. The need for relationship calls us to follow the prompting of the Spirit. We open ourselves to be vulnerable so that through our work of affirmation we may all be one in every aspect of membership, ministry and life experience within our Sackville United Church community.

Gower Street United Church, St. John's Newfoundland and Labrador

The people of Gower Street United Church are committed to doing right by Jesus' teachings: loving, serving, giving generously in our local, regional, and global communities. We envision a vibrant and evolving community where tradition is honoured, change is embraced, and injustice is challenged.

We are dedicated to being welcoming and affirming, engaging participation of all, including people of any age, colour, race, ethnicity, faith, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, marital status, family composition, and social or economic circumstances.

Knox United Church, Brandon, Manitoba

As a faith community, we are committed to sharing God's love and grace and to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ through worship, study, work, action and fellowship.

As the people of Knox United Church, we aim to provide a safe, nurturing environment where we accept and welcome all into the life and ministry of the Knox family: persons of any age, colour, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, marital status, social or economic circumstance.

We are dedicated to being good stewards of God's world, working and living towards justice and freedom for all of God's people.

Justice Stance of the Centre for Christian Studies, Winnipeg

Because we believe that creation is holy and sacred, we commit ourselves to speaking and acting in ways that will promote wholeness and peace. We desire community that is constructive and inclusive, loving and inspiring. We confront language or behaviour that disrespects groups or individuals based on any real or perceived status: people who are young, old, ill, poor, disabled, indigenous, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, refugees, victims of violence, and those who experience racism.

We act out of a model rooted in diakonia, liberation theology and feminism. We hear a call to justice that motivates us to work and struggle for right relationship. We prepare one another for leadership in church and world by evaluating and critiquing the powers and principalities operating in the world and in ourselves. We are committed to creating a climate of respect for all people and to protecting the physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual environment. We stand in the present, looking to our history and tradition to envision a future with hope and passion.

We're Affirming, So Now What? Program and Action Ideas for Affirming Ministries

Being an Affirming Ministry doesn't stop once a ministry has been declared Affirming. Affirming Ministries make a commitment to continue to honour diversity and to act for justice within the church and in the wider society. Here are some ideas to get you started.

Proclaim

State that you are an Affirming Ministry in all publications, promotional materials, worship bulletins, on your website and Facebook. Post the Affirm United logo on your outside sign, all publications, website, worship bulletins, letters, Facebook, etc. Files for the logo will be supplied by Affirm United. Consider what a newcomer or visitor might see as they enter your building/space; make your Affirming stance visible to people who pass by on the street or search the internet. Post rainbow stickers, gay-friendly signs, and indications of other areas of inclusion such as accessibility stickers, hearing devices, "scent aware" signs and posters throughout your building. State what it means to be an Affirming Ministry in your newsletter or other publications, and share news of what you are doing as a community to live out that designation.

Orient newcomers to your ministry's Affirming status—explain what the designation means and why your ministry has chosen to be declared Affirming. Share Affirm United's online newsletters and other information about Affirm United with members, especially people new to your community.

Have a variety of materials on display—buttons, posters, pamphlets, newsletters, books—on issues raised in your Vision Statement.

- Bedford United Church, Nova Scotia, has a permanent display table of colourful and informative material available to members after worship as well as a rainbow weaving, created by a member of the congregation, hanging in their sanctuary.
- Bathurst St. United, Toronto, provided a field-placement site for the first out transgender candidate for ministry in the United Church.
- A rainbow sand sculpture is prominently displayed in Calgary's Wild Rose United Church sanctuary to remind worshippers that this is an inclusive and diverse community.
- The United Theological College, Montreal, gives The Craig Chaplin Award every other year at its convocation to recognize the particular ministries of people from the LGBTQ2 community both within and beyond the structures of the Christian church.
- Hillhurst United Church, Calgary, displays a progress Pride flag that includes trans colours as well as black and brown stripes for BIPOC.
- Sunset United, Regina, created a quilt that hangs in their sanctuary proclaiming *God's love includes all*.
- Lacombe United Church, Alberta, painted a colourful rainbow, similar to a crosswalk, outside the church doors to make it clear it welcomes people from all walks of life.

Support candidates for ministry and let it be known that your ministry would welcome ministry personnel and staff from marginalized communities.

Celebrate

Use language in worship, meetings, business, stories, etc., that explicitly reflects the diversity of humanity and of human families.

Don't just say, "Everyone is welcome," say, "We welcome people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, ages, races, cultures and abilities." Use rituals that pay attention to the diversity of family configurations—pair up senior women's groups and gay youth to serve communion; have single people and children light the Advent candles together. Invite Two-Spirit people to share teachings about Two-Spirit identities and the role of colonialism in contributing to their oppression.

Use hymns by LGBTQIA2S+ hymn-writers; use hymns with explicit themes of welcome and inclusion.

Create liturgies to honour particular occasions in the lives of people—a celebration to welcome a foster child or adopted child into the family of a same-gender couple, a prayer vigil for someone undergoing transition, a commissioning to a team member in the special Olympics, celebrate an anniversary of the welcoming of a refugee family, or a coming-out celebration.

Honour special occasions, such as the anniversary of becoming an Affirming Ministry. Pride Day can be an occasion for workshops, a community meal, a worship service, or guest speakers, as well as an opportunity to march in the parade with your community of faith's Affirming banner or to set up a display at a community fair. International Women's Day (March 8) is a global day celebrating the economic, political, and social achievements of women, past, present and future. It celebrates women's successes, and reminds us of inequities still to be redressed. PIE (Public, Intentional, Explicit) Day (March 14), otherwise known as National Affirming Day, is a chance to serve up pie while celebrating and honouring the full inclusion of LGBTQIA2S+ people in communities of faith across Canada and beyond. The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (March 21) is a day named by the United Nations in 1966 to raise awareness of all forms of racial discrimination honouring the day when 69 peaceful demonstrators were killed in Sharpeville, South Africa who were protesting Apartheid "pass laws." The Transgender Day of Remembrance (November 20) is a day to commemorate those who have been killed in an act of hate and ignorance, targeted because they were transgender or gender non-conforming. World AIDS Day (December 1) is an occasion to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and to offer support for people in your community living with HIV/AIDS and their families and friends. Ecumenical Welcoming Sunday (last Sunday in January) is a day on which all settings in the North American Ecumenical Welcoming Church Movement celebrate the growing number of affirmative ministries across the continent.

Use times of celebration and community time to spotlight local cultures. Invite artistic experiences into your space. Display an AIDS memorial quilt, invite a gay or lesbian choir or a homeless choir to sing, invite an Aboriginal drumming group, or Philippine liturgical dance troupe.

- Members of Augustine United Church in Winnipeg attended "Queer and Faithful," a two-day event about the intersections of faith, race, and queerness featuring LGBTQIA2S+ speakers from diverse religious/spiritual traditions and cultural/ethnic backgrounds.
- Members of McDougall United Church in Edmonton attended Queer Prom, with upward of 150 people stopping by their booth.
- Trinity United Church in Edmonton hosted an all-ages drag show and Q&A, where they learned more about the LGBTQIA2S+ community and raised money to support their continuing Affirming work and related programming.
- A group of Affirming churches in Toronto decorates an elaborate float each year for Toronto's Pride Parade to witness to their inclusive and justice-seeking beliefs.
- First United Church in Kelowna, B.C., has "rainbow potlucks" for LGBTQIA2S+ people and their allies, which are an opportunity to socialize and learn.

Learn

Continue to learn and grow together as a community. Hold workshops on issues of racism or white privilege. Attend a gay and lesbian film festival together, or make this an occasion for a Bible study or workshop. Create a library of books and other resources for people in your community to borrow and share.

Include conversation about issues of justice and equality in conversations with children or in children's Christian development programming. You might use children's books on diversity in families, such as *Families: A Celebration of Diversity, Commitment, and Love*; or talk about bullying or ways children might feel singled out because their family is different, such as in the book *Asha's Moms*.

In youth groups and confirmation classes, provide opportunities to talk about sexuality and same-gender relationships and what it means to be different. Read and discuss the book *The God Box*.

- Affirm United lists workshops on Affirming Ministries under Upcoming Events on its website: www.affirmunited.ca.

Act

Work for justice. Recognize that becoming Affirming is part of a larger commitment to justice and equity. As you work for justice on issues of gender and sexual diversity, consider other barriers, prejudices, and historic injustices of which your ministry is a part. As you become more aware of issues and concerns of sexual orientation and gender identity, listen to other voices that represent a full range of human diversity, such as age, ability, economic circumstance, or ethnic or cultural background.

Seek to become aware of other barriers to being the body of Christ, such as racism and sexism. Continue to educate yourselves and your community, join in collective programs for change such as anti-racism or disability justice coalitions. As an Affirming Ministry, show up and be a visible presence in solidarity with others who are working for justice.

- One of the first things Trinity-St. Paul's United Church, Toronto, did when it became an Affirming Ministry was to form an anti-racism group to explore issues of racism within and beyond the congregation.
- First United Church, Ottawa, has formed a working group to help the congregation participate in the reconciliation and healing process with Aboriginal peoples living with the legacy of residential schools.
- Deer Park United, Calgary, began its process of becoming an Affirming Ministry as a program emerging from its social justice and outreach ministry. It has chosen as its mission focus the concerns of youth, people of other faiths, people in economic hardship, and people of gay or lesbian orientation. This has led to exploring what it might mean for the whole community of faith to become Affirming.
- Some United Church outdoor ministries are exploring what it would mean to be Affirming. In 2020, this is a work-in-progress. News will be posted on the Affirm United website as it is available.

Support action for change and action to support gender and sexual minorities in your community. Offer space for groups to meet, publicize action campaigns or events, and attend protests or public gatherings. Support actions to make schools safe and supportive for queer and questioning youth (such as EGALE's campaign to create gay-straight alliances in schools across Canada).

- Trinity United Church in Cannington, Ont., developed a Users' Covenant for people/groups using their building asking them to abide by their Affirming position on welcoming diversity.
- Port Nelson United Church in Burlington, Ont., presents an annual Youth Award to recognize and celebrate the leadership of young people in the area of being inclusive, particularly pertaining to the needs and concerns of LGBTQ people.

Become a participant in events and issues affecting the wider gay community, such as health advocacy, homophobic violence, housing, funding for gender-confirming surgery, or the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ seniors.

- Toby's Place at Birchcliff Bluffs United Church in Scarborough, Ont., is a safe place for queer, trans, questioning youth to find affirmation that they are loved as they are.
- Dorothy's Place at Birchcliff Bluffs United Church in Scarborough, Ont., is an exciting ministry serving LGBTQIA2S+ seniors.

Have regular letter-writing parties to support human rights for LGBTQIA2S+ people and their advocates around the world. Amnesty International regularly has campaigns to protect the rights of sexual and gender minorities or those who advocate for them. Go to the Amnesty website, www.amnesty.org, and search with a keyword such as homosexuality to choose a campaign.

- Members of Dunbarton-Fairport United Church in Pickering, Ont., are part of a multi-faith group that offers an affirming and accepting worship service for the LGBTQIA2S+ community.
- McDougall United Church in Edmonton has started Haven, monthly evangelical-style worship services led by LGBTQIA2S+ Christians whose spiritual expression does not fit neatly in the United Church's traditional mainline services.

- Hillhurst United Church in Calgary made the singular move, in 2012, of hiring an Affirming Coordinator in order to focus its energies on building a creative, dynamic, and fully inclusive faith community.
- The Affirming Diversity Committee at Royal York Road United Church in Toronto made the decision in 2018 to sponsor two LGBTQIA+ refugees from Jamaica, one of the most dangerous countries in the world for LGBTQIA+ people.

Connect with other ministries in your area, and with wider civil society organizations. Invite other communities of faith or local ministries to educational events at your church, or plan a region-wide event highlighting issues of concern to trans people or people in same-gender relationships.

Invite other United Church ministries and partners to consider becoming Affirming, and offer to help them in the process of discernment by providing resources or speakers or by sharing your own experiences as a ministry. Keep neighbouring communities of faith and your wider community informed about activities or events in your own faith community.

Co-host a regional event on Affirming Ministries or an AIDS awareness event. Take resolutions, concerns, or petitions to larger church bodies.

Connect with your regional council to see if it is Affirming and if there are any Affirming events, workshops, etc., that you might support or be involved in.

Read the Affirm United newsletter, found on the Affirm United website, for many ideas of how ministries are living out their commitment to this justice work.

A Note on Diversity

Seek to be aware of and thoughtful about the diversity of people you are engaging with when learning and building community relationships. Remember that the people you learn with impacts how and what you learn, and be mindful and intentional about including diverse voices in your community of faith's selection of guest speakers, resources to engage with, etc.

FAQs about Affirming Ministries

Q. What is an Affirming Ministry?

A. Affirming Ministries are communities of faith, regional councils, assisted living homes, educational institutions, retreat centres, outdoor ministries and other ministries within the United Church that publicly declare their commitment to inclusion and justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Although Affirming Ministries make an explicit statement about issues of sexuality and gender, their commitment to justice is far broader. They continually grow and change as they seek to live more fully into God's way of welcome, love, and justice for all creation. Just as God rejoices in the goodness and diversity of creation, so too Affirming Ministries honour and celebrate diversity.

Q. Does that mean that Affirming Ministries are only concerned about those issues?

A. Affirming Ministries are not “*gay-only 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 the teachings of Two-Spirit people, respect children's rights, and provide space for addiction support groups.

Q. Who decides whether a church or organization will be declared an Affirming Ministry?

A. The ministry's governing body sends a request, along with its Affirming Ministry Vision Statement, Equal Marriage Policy, and Action Plan to the Affirming Ministry Coordinators (via email). If these documents are approved by Affirm United, the ministry membership then votes to become an Affirming Ministry. Following a positive vote (recommended 75% minimum), the ministry sends a completed membership form and institutional registration fee to the treasurer of Affirm United. The Affirming Ministry Coordinators confirm membership registration and assist the ministry in planning its service of celebration, at which it receives its Affirming Ministry Certificate. The ministry is then added to the national list on the Affirm United website.

Q. What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

A. The Bible says nothing about homosexuality as a sexual orientation because the idea of people having different sexual orientations was not part of the biblical worldview. However, there are several references in the Hebrew scriptures and the Epistles to men having sexual relations with other men and to women having sexual relations with women (e.g., Romans 1:26–27). In all these passages, same-gender sexual relations are said to be wrong. However, this needs to be put in context. Some of these passages cited as arguments against homosexuality also condemn other behaviours we consider acceptable, such as creating images of people, birds, or animals (Romans 1:22) or eating foods such as shrimp that are deemed to be unclean—a practice that is also called an abomination in the Bible (Leviticus 20:25).

Suffice it to say that the theology of radical hospitality and inclusion is complex. It needs to be explored with theological knowledge of the many understandings of scripture and the context of the scripture.

Q. Did Jesus have anything to say about same-gender relationships?

A. The gospels have no references to same-gender relationships or homosexuality. However, Jesus is quoted as saying, “Do not judge” and “Love your neighbour.”

Q. What does the Bible say about gender identity?

A. Although God creates human beings of the male and female sex in Genesis, the creation story says nothing about gender. It is also important to remember that gender is not the same as sex. The Bible does present clear gender roles in which women are subordinate to men, but these must be situated in a historical context in which men had multiple wives, could forcibly marry the widows of their enemies, and hold concubines. There are also many instances of people deviating from traditional gender roles—consider, for example, the contrast between Esau (who is “hairy” and a hunter) and Jacob (who is “smooth” and “stays in the tent” where women stay). It is

Jacob who becomes the chosen one for all of Israel, despite being gender non-conforming. While some cite Deuteronomy 22:5 to censor gender variance (“A woman shall not wear a man’s apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God”), it’s important to keep in mind that it is vastly outnumbered by passages celebrating gender diversity (e.g. Matthew 19:12; Isaiah 56; Acts 8).

Q. Affirming Ministries make a financial commitment to Affirm United. How much money is asked for and what is the money used for?

A. Affirming Ministries typically make an annual contribution of \$100 to \$500 per year to be institutional members of Affirm United, with fees varying depending on the net revenue of the community of faith. The money supports the work of the Affirming Ministry program, pays for six newsletters per year and other communication, helps initiate other Affirming Ministries across the church, and supports Affirm United’s National Council expenses as well as annual conference and annual general meeting.

Q. Do all United Church communities of faith celebrate same-gender weddings?

A. No, the decision is made on an individual basis. Some communities of faith offer weddings to all, some offer weddings only to heterosexual couples, and some permit their clergy to officiate at off-site same-gender weddings.

Q. Do all Affirming Ministries celebrate same-gender weddings?

A. Yes, it is one of the requirements to be declared an Affirming Ministry that a community of faith must offer heterosexual and same-gender couples the same rights and privileges, including weddings.

Q. If our community of faith becomes Affirming, does that mean we’ll be a gay church?

A. No. Affirming communities of faith, like all other United Church communities of faith, have a wide diversity of members and adherents, including heterosexual couples, families, seniors, children, youth, singles, as well as members of gender and sexual minorities. Typically, in most Affirming Ministries the latter are usually more visible, out, and active than average because they’re in a safe and supportive place. Often same-gender couples want their children to be part of an Affirming Ministry because of the supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere they find there. But many heterosexual people choose Affirming Ministries for the same reason—it’s a place where children, youth, and adults can grow in faith in an atmosphere of respect and justice for all people from all walks of life.

Q. Will our ministry lose members or donors if we become Affirming?

A. Some communities of faith do lose a few members when they decide to become Affirming, usually people with a strongly held opinion that homosexuality is evil. However, most ministries grow in numbers and in vitality when they become Affirming. People are attracted to communities of faith that study and grow, are actively living out their vision and mission, and are welcoming to others.

Q. How many Affirming Ministries are there?

A. By the middle of 2020 there were over 220 Affirming Ministries, including communities of faith, regional councils, national organizations, educational institutions, United Church Women structures, a university chaplaincy and an assisted living residence. Some outdoor ministries are exploring how they might become Affirming Ministries. Together, these represent just under 10% of the total number of United Church of Canada ministries. We’re encouraged that the number is growing rapidly, especially in smaller communities and non-community of faith ministries.

Q. Can’t we just say “everyone is welcome”? Why do we need to name sexual orientation and gender identity in our statements?

A. First, we need to be explicit because so many Christians have been so explicit about their exclusion. Second, many churches that say they love or welcome everyone are not at all inclusive or accepting of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. People may have very different understandings of what “all” or “everyone” really includes. And third, people of this marginalized group are often invisible even to those of us that want to offer support. Human rights have been won only when issues of injustice become more visible. Affirming Ministries are public, intentional and explicit (P.I.E.) about what their welcome and justice-seeking really means.

Q. What is Affirm United's relationship to The United Church of Canada?

A. Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble is a partner organization of The United Church of Canada. It is an independently incorporated charitable organization whose membership (mainly United Church members and ministries) is open to those of all sexual orientations and gender identities who support the organization's work. It celebrates the changes in the United Church while continuing to challenge the church to be true to its calling.

Q. Is the celebration where we declare ourselves an Affirming Ministry the end of the process for becoming Affirming?

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 Ministry. 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 creation.

Strategies for Addressing Opposition, Fear, or Concern

Ministries in the process of deciding whether or not to become Affirming Ministries often encounter people who are strongly opposed to such a move.

Sometimes this opposition comes from a misunderstanding about what it means to be an Affirming Ministry, in which case providing clear and accessible information is important. Sometimes it comes from fears—that the ministry will become a “gay church” for example, or that the ministry or people within it will come under attack (vandalism, harsh community response or ostracism, bullying or other repercussions for children). Again, providing information and allowing time for conversation can often help allay concerns. Contact with other Affirming Ministries can also reassure some people.

However, some opposition comes from those who firmly believe that homosexuality is sinful, unbiblical, and against God’s will. Sometimes, but not always, such beliefs are accompanied by a strong hatred of homosexual or transgender people. Fierce debate or trying to force people to change their minds, even with strong arguments and analysis, has not been found to be effective. Sometimes it is necessary to simply live with differences of opinion. The film *For the Bible Tells Me So* (www.forthebibletellsmeso.org) may help you more fully understand the perspective of those who hold these views and the implications for LGBTQIA2S+ people of these beliefs.

The following suggestions come from United Church communities of faith that have completed their own process of study and have made a decision to become Affirming.

Don’t Rush the Process

The number one advice from Affirming Ministries about their own process of becoming Affirming is to take the time needed. It is important to let the needs of your members set the timeline rather than external factors such as wanting to get a decision made. Give people lots of time to get used to new ideas. Don’t force a decision. Some communities of faith decide to live for a year with a new Affirming Vision Statement, as a trial period, before making a final decision. Some communities of faith decide to wait and do further study if the time does not feel right to become Affirming. Be open to the possibility that *now* may not be the right time for the community of faith to become Affirming but there may be other ways to continue a journey of justice and inclusion.

Build Community and Foster Relationships

It is important to continue to build a strong community where there is trust and opportunities for genuine dialogue, and where people continue to become closer to one another as they hear one another’s stories and experiences. You might decide to have “guess who is coming to dinner” evenings or regular community potlucks or social times in which people have opportunities to create fellowship with others they may not know or agree with. Try to make these groups as diverse as possible, reflecting the many communities within your community. Before key decision-making times, hold “home meetings” with people to discuss issues in small groups before a larger meeting.

Create an Ongoing Dialogue

Provide regular feedback and updates on the process in written form as announcements and on bulletin boards. Use worship time—sermons, announcements, “Minutes for Mission”—to explain the process the community of faith is undertaking, to talk about difficult biblical passages, and to define key terms. Provide opportunities for feedback—letters in the newsletter, a congregational blog, an open bulletin board with markers and places to write responses, a comment box, feedback circles for people to share whatever is on their mind. Put up blank sheets in washrooms (yes, one congregation did this with great success) for people to post questions, comments, or concerns. Provide opportunities for people to ask questions, and use this time for *genuine* questions (not opinions or debate). Actively solicit questions and concerns from others.

Clearly explain terms, the process, and definitions of terms. Do this often during the process so people do not get left out of the loop. Don't assume people know what you are talking about. Be redundant—repeat information on the bulletin board, in the newsletter, and in community announcements.

Listen to the Experiences of Gender and Sexual Minorities

Invite guests from local Affirming Ministries to attend or worship with you. Send teams of visitors to local events and to local Affirming Ministries. Provide many opportunities for the voices of people who are gender diverse or sexual minorities to be heard—in sermons, as participants or leaders in workshops, through films and readings, or in small group conversations. See “Links to Organizations” in Part 3 for ways to contact speakers or resource people.

Invite People into a Spiritual Journey

Invite the whole community of faith or ministry into a spiritual journey to learn and grow together. Include prayer and time for silence as part of every conversation, gathering, or workshop. Light candles and use other worship symbols and rituals to create a prayerful tone.

Create an atmosphere of centring and calm. If things get tense, ask everyone to take several deep breaths and remember God's presence. Invoke the presence of the Spirit. Encourage participants to seek to prayerfully open themselves to God's voice and God's vision in their midst. At each gathering or workshop, invite participants to share prayers of thanksgiving or concern for themselves and others.

Make silence a regular part of every meeting. Give people time to centre themselves and clear their minds, especially if there has been controversy or debate.

Give Everyone an Opportunity to Be Heard

Listen carefully to people's concerns. Give them a chance to fully express what they are concerned about before rushing to answer or counter what they say. Include people who hold different opinions and values without compromising a commitment to justice. For example, you can assure everyone that people have a right to their beliefs about the Bible or about what they feel is ethical behaviour. Start with agreeing to the basic understanding that we are all children of God. This allows people to share their differing thoughts while being clear that we do not have the right to judge, condemn, or say negative things about marginalized people—whether they be underemployed, gay, Aboriginal, lesbian, an ethnic minority, trans, bisexual people, radical activists, or stay-at-home parents.

Meet individually with all committees and groups that are part of your ministry. Invite each group to consider how becoming an Affirming Ministry might impact the ministry or work of the group, both positively and negatively. Within these subgroups, encourage conversation about fears and hopes. Invite written responses to these questions as well as sharing during the committee or group time. Encourage attentive listening to one another's stories rather than debating the merits of an opinion.

Acknowledge and Respect Differences of Opinion

As much as possible, create safe space for all marginalized people as well as for those who are opposed to the Affirming process or who don't see this process as an important one. Avoid giving the message that you are trying to change people's minds or beliefs; stress that you will all be learning and growing together. Encourage everyone to share their feelings and experiences and to honestly consider with an open mind what it might be like for your ministry to become Affirming (without necessarily having to agree with the idea). People are often willing to live with something that is important to others, even if it is not their first choice, if they don't feel they are being forced to change their core values or beliefs.

Storytelling can help people share stories and experiences from their own lives, which encourages respect for and understanding of diverse perspectives and beliefs. Include many opportunities for people to share experiences of exclusion or inclusion, times when their faith was challenged, or experiences with sexuality or gender diversity.

Develop Active Listening Skills

Early in the process, set up guidelines or group covenants so that everyone feels they can speak their mind freely. Covenant together to listen to others carefully, using such guidelines as these:

- Listen without thinking about what you are going to say in response. Let people finish speaking before you jump in; pause between speakers.
- If you have spoken a lot, wait and let others say something.
- Share your personal values, experiences, and beliefs without assuming you are right and others are wrong.
- Acknowledge that there will often be many different points of view on a topic.
- Encourage respectful listening rather than debate.

Encourage people to “own” their beliefs and opinions—to speak about themselves and speak in particular without imposing their views on others or without speaking for others.

Model the use of “I statements”—statements that are about one’s own personal feelings or experiences rather than generalized opinions. Thus, someone can say, “I believe it would be wrong for me to...” or “I feel very uncomfortable when...” or “I understand this Bible passage to mean...” without making sweeping judgments such as “It is wrong to...” or “The Bible says that...” or “All people who...are...” or “Everyone thinks that....”

Encourage people to talk about how they are feeling rather than what they think about an issue as a way of diffusing argument and encouraging different points of view.

Ask people not to judge one another’s contributions by responding with phrases such as “That’s right” or “I agree/disagree” but rather to listen for what the other person is saying. Avoid setting up situations where there is likely to be vigorous debate or argument.

Don’t let the extroverted types do all the talking. Instead, pause during group discussions to let people think in silence before responding or writing down responses, break into small groups, or have times when everyone in the group gets a chance to respond to a question by going around the circle. Have people talk in pairs, talk with someone they don’t know, or meet in groups of three, etc.

The United Church of Canada and Issues of Gender Diversity and Sexual Orientation

How the United Church Makes Policy Decisions

The General Council is The United Church of Canada's national governing body. It meets every three years. Its members are elected from all across the church by United Church regional councils. General Council is presided over by the United Church Moderator, who is elected by the General Council for a three-year term. General Council considers recommendations (called *petitions*) from regional councils, and it makes decisions about national policy. Major policy changes happen only after extensive study and consultation across the church involving all communities of faith. United Church policy evolves and develops over years out of numerous recommendations and reports.

Following are summaries of important United Church policies on issues of gender diversity and sexual orientation:

Inclusion and justice for all sexual orientations and gender identities

The United Church believes all sexual orientations and gender identities are “a gift from God, part of the marvellous diversity of creation.”⁸ The United Church of Canada officially supports the full inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. It says that all people can be or become members of the United Church. And all members are eligible to be considered for lay or ordered ministry. The United Church ordains and commissions ministers of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

This has not always been the United Church position, however. In 1988, the United Church affirmed that all people, including people who were lesbian or gay, could be members of or ministers of the church. In 2000, the United Church renounced a statement it made in 1960 that homosexuality is a sin. It looked for ways to offer healing for the damage caused by its historic stance on homosexuality.

Since the 1970s the United Church has called for all people, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, to be given equal rights, including full access to housing, healthcare, employment, and education.

Families. The United Church recognizes that a *family* is not always a mother, father, and children. The church affirms and supports a wide diversity of family configurations, including same-gender couples, with or without children, and singles.

Marriage. The United Church believes that it is God's intention for human relationships to be “faithful, just, loving, health-giving, healing, and sustaining of community and self” (*Membership, Ministry, and Human Sexuality*, 1988). This applies to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. The United Church affirms that a marriage is a lifelong commitment between two people regardless of gender and that marriage vows should be made with an intention of permanence.

Same-gender marriage, or equal marriage. In 2003, the United Church of Canada called on the Canadian government to recognize same-gender marriage, here called equal marriage, in federal law. The United Church officially supports marriages between same-gender couples. Since each individual United Church community of faith sets its own marriage policy, not all communities of faith permit equal marriages. And no minister is forced to conduct equal marriages against their conscience. However, many communities of faith and clergy in all regions and all major cities of Canada celebrate marriages for same-gender couples.

Affirming Ministries. In 2000, the United Church made an official statement in support of the Affirming Ministry program of Affirm United and urged its member communities of faith to become Affirming. The United Church continues to produce resources to help the church become inclusive of and justice-seeking for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. It offers resources to support same-gender families and transgender people. In

⁸ *Record of Proceedings of the 37th United Church General Council, 2000* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2000), p. 168.

1994, United Church General Council thanked Affirm for the leadership it has offered the church in promoting justice for all people regardless of sexual orientation.

LGBTQIA2S+ youth. The United Church has expressed particular concern for the support and protection of gender and sexually diverse youth. In 1997, for example, the United Church requested that all its Conferences urge school boards in their jurisdictions to place the words “sexual orientation” in their non-harassment policies and to have books and other resource material sensitive to sexual minority issues in all their libraries. The church urged teachers’ unions to promote tolerance and provide education on sexual minority issues, and the church provides resources for United Church communities of faith to take action to support gender and sexually diverse youth.

Two-Spirit people. The United Church of Canada supports Two-Spirit justice. In 2017, as part of a joint presentation with Affirm United, about 40 LGBTQ people, Two-Spirit people, and straight and cisgender allies gathered from 11 countries on the shores of Lake Couchiching, Ontario, on the territory of the Chippewas of Rama First Nation. Their aim was to support one another and work toward the inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in all parts of the world. Two-Spirit participants offered leadership.

The Bible. The Bible is central to The United Church of Canada, and thus the church believes that engaging with the Bible is crucial for the Christian community. When we read the Bible, our interpretation is deeply influenced by the place, culture, nation, and community in which we live. Each reading of scripture is an invitation to discover new insights about God’s love and vision for all creation. The Bible should not be used to promote hatred or condemnation of gender and sexually diverse people or same-gender relationships, any more than the Bible should be used to condone slavery or to support the subjugation of women, children, or the environment. How we interpret the Bible is most clearly seen in how we live.

Part 2: Education, Discernment, and Action Planning for Affirming Ministries

This section offers educational activities and ideas to help you and your ministry

- Explore issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Engage with the Bible.
- Discover what it might mean to become Affirming.
- Take stock of your ministry or discover how you can become more inclusive or affirmative.
- Write an Affirming Ministry Vision Statement or Action Plan.
- Plan activities to support, care, or create justice for LGBTQIA2S+ people.

There is no one path to becoming Affirming. These ideas are offered as tools to be selected, adapted, and used in a variety of ways. For example, you might have one-day sessions, a series of workshops, an ongoing short study group that meets after worship, or scheduled discussion sessions following a theme developed in the preceeding worship (sermon) time.

Openings and Closings

The following are suggestions for opening and closing workshops and other gatherings during the discernment process to become an Affirming Ministry:

Preparing the Space

Set up the space to feel attractive and inviting. Arrange a comfortable circle of chairs, bring flowers, light a candle, etc. Pay particular attention to physical comfort—do you need to provide juice or water, a snack? Is lighting adequate but not glaring? How is the temperature? Arrange any supplies you need for the activity or workshop.

Welcome participants. Greet everyone warmly by name, and encourage others to help you create an atmosphere of listening and respect. Make sure any guests or newcomers are introduced and that everyone knows one another. You might consider using name tags. Have a time of silence as you light a candle. Encourage people to settle into the space and feel at home.

Opening Prayers

God of all love, breathe on us your spirit of compassion. Open our ears to hear your voice speaking through human voices. Open our eyes to see your image in the face of each person here. Open our hearts and minds to experience your presence and your wisdom. Amen.

Come Holy Spirit, be with us in this place.
Come tender Spirit, and guide us in the way of love.
Come wise Spirit, and fill us with your truth.
Come Spirit of justice, and stir us to compassion.
Come Holy Spirit, be with us in this place.
Amen.

God, you are love. You are the love in families; you are the love between friends; you are the love that makes all the people of the earth one family. We give thanks for love, we give thanks for families, and we give thanks for you! Help us to love one another as you love us. Amen.

Welcoming God, you invite us into this time and this place, greeting us with open arms. Help us to listen with Spirit-filled discernment and to speak with Spirit-filled care. May we hear your voice in the voices of one another and see your face in the faces of one another. May what we do and say here together become part of your work of love and justice and healing in our world. Amen.

Be at home here. Welcome one another as God welcomes you. Let us pass the peace of Christ to one another.

Closing Prayers

Share a blessing passed from one person to another around the circle: "You are loved, you are holy, you are whole," or "Go in peace, go with strength, go in the presence of God who is love."

God of grace and truth, be with us as we leave this place. Open our hearts to experience your tender love for us. Open our whole beings to experience your great love for all creation. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Holy One, we seek your way of goodness and justice. Help us to experience your wisdom and hope. Inspire us with your possibilities and fill us with your love. Amen.

Affirming Ministries: The Basics

The following is an introductory workshop to help participants gain a general understanding of what Affirming Ministries are and what they do. This workshop will take between one and three hours, depending on the options you choose.

Leader Preparation

Choose from the three options the ways you will share information in the group about Affirming Ministries:

- *Option A: Invite a guest speaker.* See “Links to Organizations” in Part 3. Ask the speaker to make a presentation to your group about the Affirming Ministry he or she is a part of, covering such topics as why the ministry chose to become Affirming, what it means for them to be Affirming, what it was like to go through a process of study and discernment, how their ministry changed and grew in the process, and what it is like for them to be an Affirming Ministry.
- *Option B: Watch the video “P.I.E., Riverside United Church’s ‘Being an Affirming Church’” or other introductory videos found on the AUSE website at <https://affirmunited.ause.ca/videos>.*
- *Option C: Use written information about Affirming Ministries.* Make copies of “Affirm United and the Affirming Ministry Program,” “We’re Already Welcoming, So Why Become Affirming?” “FAQs about Affirming Ministries,” and “Sample Affirming Vision Statements from Affirming Ministries,” all from Part 1.

Activity Instructions

Ask participants to respond to these questions in small groups, with someone recording on a piece of newsprint:

- What do you know about Affirming Ministries?
- What questions do you have about Affirming Ministries?
- What fears or concerns do you have about our ministry becoming Affirming?

Gather in the whole group and compile information people already have, posting the newsprint pages and noting the information, questions, and fears/concerns listed. Explain that you are going to share some information in the group about Affirming Ministries. It may not answer all the questions, but hopefully some of them will be addressed. Remind the group that this is an introductory session and that there will be many more opportunities to talk and learn more.

Option A: Guest from an Affirming Ministry (1 hour)

Introduce your guest and have her or him speak to the group. Include time for questions and conversation. At the end of your time, ask:

- What questions remain unanswered?
- What else would you like to know or talk about (in a future session)?

Option B: Film/Video Screening (1 hour)

Watch one of the introductory videos listed on the Affirm United website (<https://affirmunited.ause.ca/videos>), such as the Riverside United Church film available on YouTube.

- Discuss:
 - What stood out for you in the video?
 - What did you discover about what it means to be an Affirming Ministry?
 - What questions or concerns arose for you as you watched the film?

Option C: Use Written Information about Affirming Ministries (45 minutes)

Distribute “Affirm United and the Affirming Ministry Program,” “We’re Already Welcoming, So Why Become Affirming?” “FAQs about Affirming Ministries,” and “Sample Affirming Vision Statements from Affirming Ministries” from Part I. Ask people to read the handouts and discuss these questions:

- What information was new to you?
- What questions remain?
- What new questions or concerns do you have about Affirming Ministries?

Storytelling Circles

A storytelling circle is a workshop in which all participants have an opportunity to share their own personal stories; to listen to one another's stories of struggle, hope, growth, and change; to affirm diversity as people made in God's image; and to experience being heard and affirmed for who they are. Hearing and telling stories helps building greater empathy, compassion, and understanding as people come to appreciate the diversity of human experience and identity.

Leader Preparation

Decide the focus of the storytelling (see options above). Invite participants to sign up for the storytelling circle. Contact participants ahead of time and encourage them to come prepared to share a personal experience. Ask them to think of a concrete personal experience that they are willing to tell the group, something they can talk about comfortably. Make sure they know the focus for storytelling.

The ideal group size for a storytelling circle is between 5 and 15 people. If you have more than 20 participants, you will need to have more than one storytelling time, either by dividing the group and having two sessions simultaneously or by having the whole group experience two sessions of storytelling together. From past experience, people tend to adapt the length of their storytelling to the size of the group. Stories usually take between three to five minutes, though some can take a little longer.

Each storytelling circle should have a particular focus or theme. Three are suggested below. Each of these can be the topic of one or more storytelling sessions of 1.5 to 2 hours each.

1. When have you experienced exclusion or discrimination? Focus for storytelling: share an experience of a time when you felt excluded, discriminated against, hurt, or treated unjustly because of some aspect of who you are (e.g., colour, class, ethnicity, gender, orientation, age, ability, social location, other).
2. How have issues of sexual orientation or gender identity touched your life? Focus for storytelling: Share a way in which the issue of sexual orientation or gender identity touched or impacted your life in some way (e.g., as an LGBTQIA2S+ person; as a friend, family member, neighbour, or colleague of someone who is LGBTQIA2S+; because of a particular experience such as working in health care; other).
3. What is my identity? Focus for storytelling: share a concrete personal experience of a time or event in your life that illustrates some facet of your own identity (e.g., your age, economic background, cultural or national origin, etc.).

Activity Instructions

Remind the group of the focus for storytelling.

Share the following guidelines for storytelling, and invite the group to add to these and agree to them:

- Share a story from your own experience, not someone else's.
- Don't try to give your whole life story—tell a particular story.
- Do not give opinions or talk about general ideas—be specific and talk about an experience.
- Give details of what happened, including how you felt—tell the story with flavour, colour, texture. Describe the scene or set the stage so that others can enter into the experience with you.
- Listen with full attention.
- Do not worry about what you'll say when it's your turn.
- Turn off your inner judge or critic as best you can and listen openly.
- Do not interrupt.

Invite participants into a time of holy listening. Say that all who wish to do so will have a chance to tell a story from their own life experience. At the end of each story there will be a pause for others in the group to respond with brief affirmations.

Ask one person to begin.

After each story, have a time when others in the circle can share affirmations. Remind the group that affirmations are words of gratitude, nods, or brief comments such as, "I liked your description of..." or "I really connected with your experience of..." They are not judgments, rebuttals, or discussions of the person's story, nor is this a time to talk about your own experience.

Continue to have each person tell his or her story. Pause for stretches or a refreshment break as needed.

Reflection Time

After all the stories, give participants a time to write or think quietly for themselves about what they heard and how it touched them.

For the discussion time, divide into small groups if the group is large, or remain in the whole group.

Suggested Discussion Questions

- What was a highlight from the storytelling time for you?
- What story seemed to resonate or connect with your own story in a particular way? Why?
- Is there anything in what you heard that troubled you? that challenged you?
- What questions are you left with?
- What general themes did you notice, or what issues seemed to appear several times during the storytelling time? (Record ideas on newsprint.)
- What do these stories tell us about what it might mean for our community to become welcoming and affirming of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities? (Record ideas to refer back to in your ongoing discernment process.)

The Bible and Issues of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

This workshop focuses on the role and significance of scripture in discussion of issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Participants will explore what they believe about the Bible, what the Bible says about this topic and how it has been interpreted, the role of the Bible as an ethical guide, how the Bible has been used against LGBTQIA2S+ people, and how the Bible might be a “text of terror” or of blessing for gender and sexual minorities.

Activity 1: Bible Beliefs Continuum (20 minutes)

Leader Preparation

With masking tape, make a long line down the centre of the learning area (at least 8 feet long, preferably longer). At one end of the line post a piece of paper on which you have written a check mark and the word AGREE. Write large so this can be seen clearly from the other end of the line. At the other end of the line post a piece of paper with the word DISAGREE and a big X.

Prepare some statements about the Bible, such as the following:

- My faith as a Christian is based on the Bible.
- The Bible cannot be read literally.
- The Bible is the word of God.
- The Bible is interpreted differently in every time and place.
- The Bible can't be understood without understanding the setting in which it was written.
- The Bible is the most important book in my life.

Activity Instructions

Gather the group near the midpoint of the line. Explain that you will be reading some statements about the Bible. Explain that one end of the line is the “agree” end and the other is the “disagree” end. Tell participants that they will be asked to choose where they are on the line for each statement you are going to read. If they really strongly disagree, they are to go the disagree end. If they strongly agree, they are to go to the agree end. If they are not sure or have mixed opinions, they are to place themselves somewhere along the line. Say that there is no right answer. This is an activity to share different points of view and ideas.

Read the first statement and have people move to different points on the line. Pretend you are a roving reporter out on the street. Ask a few participants at different points on the line about why they responded as they did. Repeat for a different statement, asking different people to share the reasons they placed themselves as they did. Continue for five or six statements, or until you think the main ideas about how people feel about the Bible have been raised.

Discuss:

- What do you think the Bible says about gender identities and sexual orientation? (Explain that this is not a time to debate what's in the Bible—you will have other opportunities to look at what the Bible says in detail. This is a time to share general impressions.)
- How do you feel scripture calls us to respond to people of different gender identities and sexual orientations? How did you come to believe what you do about this?
- What role do you think the Bible should play in a decision to become (or *in our life as*) an Affirming Ministry?

Activity 2: The Film *For the Bible Tells Me So* (2 hours)

Leader Preparation

Obtain a copy of the film *For the Bible Tells Me So*: see www.forthetellmeso.org or order it from a company such as Amazon.ca. Set up viewing equipment, and arrange for someone to be on hand who is skilled in offering

support and pastoral care in case this film is upsetting for some viewers. Be especially aware of any in the group who may have experienced violence or assault or who have had a suicide in their family—the film does share a family experience of suicide.

Activity Instructions

This is an American film about a diversity of U.S. church families. It offers an excellent overview of biblical passages and themes dealing with sexual orientation and is a very useful film for introducing the topic. It will be especially helpful for people who are not sure what the Bible really says about the topic, for people who want to know how to respond to those who claim the Bible says homosexuality is a sin, and for those who think the Bible justifies condemning same-gender relationships.

Introduce the film *For the Bible Tells Me So* by explaining that it is about the Bible, the religious right and homophobia, and the human implications of different ways of looking at scripture, as told through the lives of five people and their families. Warn everyone that the film has some sections that are potentially disturbing or hard to watch.

Show the film.

Invite workshop participants to pair up with someone else in the group and talk about their initial responses to the film. Ask them to share together how this film connected with their own life experience. They might begin by talking about a scene or story from the film that particularly stands out for them.

Gather back in the large group. Invite people to discuss how they respond to this film. Use other questions for discussion, such as:

- How has the Bible been used to harm or justify hurting people who are LGBTQIA2S+?
- What did you learn or discover that was new for you?
- Which parts of the film troubled you?
- What questions or concerns did this film raise for you?
- How do you feel called to respond to this film?
- How might the Bible be used for healing or justice?

Activity 3: Reflection on the Bible as Ethical Guide (40 minutes)

Leader Preparation

Bring Bibles, pens, and copies of the activity sheet, “Bible Passages and Daily Living,” that follows.

Activity Instructions

Hand out copies of the activity sheet and ask participants to respond to each text. Have Bibles available if people want to look up any of the texts.

After people have responded, invite conversation using discussion questions such as the following:

- What biblical text or story is important to you in your daily life? Why?
- Do you think it is possible to live exactly as the Bible commands? Why or why not?
- Do you think some parts of the Bible are more important than others? If so, which ones, and why?
- What role does the Bible play in your own ethical decision-making?
- Do you think we can use the Bible as proof of a particular point of view on sexual orientation? Why or why not?

Activity Sheet: Bible Passages and Daily Living

Following are some selected passages of scripture. Mark each one in the appropriate column to indicate how closely you obey or live out this biblical instruction in your daily life.

How do you live out this biblical law?	I always do this	I obey the spirit of it	I should, but often don't	I ignore it	I should not do this
Sell everything you have and give the money to the poor. (Lk 18:22)					
Slaves, obey your masters. (Eph 6:5; Col 3:22)					
Pray without ceasing. (1 Thess 5:17)					
Love your enemies. (Mt 5:44)					
Wives, be subject to your husbands. (Eph 5:22)					
Love your neighbour as much as you love yourself. (Lk 10:27)					
Do not charge interest on loans, except loans to foreigners. (Deut 23:19-20)					
People who have sexual relations with others of the same sex deserve to die. (Rom 1:26-32)					
Women should keep silent in the church. (1 Cor 14:34)					
Do justice and love kindness. (Mic 6:8)					
Don't plant two different kinds of seed in the same field. (Deut 22:9)					
Don't associate with sexually immoral people. (1 Cor 5:9)					
If a man lies with a male as with a woman they shall be put to death. (Lev 20:13)					
Do not steal. (Ex 20:15)					
You shall not wear tattoos. (Lev 19:26)					
Don't eat shrimp (Deut 14:9)					
If a man claims the woman he married is not a virgin and her family can't prove her virginity, she should be put to death (Deut 22:19-20).					

Activity 4: Litany of Lament and Longing (1 hour)

Leader Preparation

Bring Bibles for everyone, markers and newsprint, tape, and a piece of paper on which you have written the following passages: Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; Deuteronomy 22:5; Romans 1:18–32; I Corinthians 6:9–10; and I Timothy 1:9–10.

Activity Instructions

Hand out Bibles, and ask people in turn to read aloud each of the biblical passages you have listed.

When they have finished, ask the group to make a list of what the texts say:

- What behaviours are condemned or condoned?
- What should be the punishment, if any is stated?
- How have these texts been used to hurt, condemn, or justify oppressing gender and sexual minorities? (Record ideas on newsprint.)

Ask people to work in six small groups or pairs to create a litany of lament (a lament for a hurt or injustice against LGBTQIA2S+ people that connects to this text) and longing using each of these texts as a starting point. Divide up the six texts among the groups.

Examples of laments:

- We lament gay-bashing and violence against trans people.
- We lament name-calling in schools.
- We lament the shame felt by those who feel condemned by God.
- We lament that gay teens are kicked out of their homes.
- We lament the signs that say “God hates fags.”

Examples of longings:

- We long for children to discover that gay is not a bad word.
- We long for queer, trans, or questioning youth to experience kindness and support.
- We long for the streets to be safe for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.
- We long for our churches to celebrate the gifts of their LGBTQIA2S+ members.

When groups have each prepared laments and longings, bring everyone together and share a collective litany of lament and longing following this format:

1. A text is read.
2. The laments for that text are read.
3. The longings for that text are read.

Have a time of silence after the litany or sing a hymn from *Voices United*, *More Voices*, or options on the Affirm United website.

Activity 5: Reading the Story of Sodom and Gomorrah as a Text of Terror (1 hour)

Leader Preparation

Bring Bibles, newsprint, and markers; copy the handout “Instructions for Small Groups” that follows.

Activity Instructions

Explain that people will be invited to read the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, a story that is often used to speak of God's judgment on and condemnation of non-heterosexual relationships.

Sodom is the town where Abraham's nephew, Lot, lives. The passage you will read comes after a long conversation between God and Abraham, in which God laments the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham tries to bargain for their protection. Finally, God agrees not to destroy the towns if 10 good people can be found there. Ask people to read Genesis 19:1–29. Then ask the group: What behaviour is condemned? What is the punishment? Record ideas on newsprint.

Ask people to divide into five groups. Give each group their group number and a copy of the handout "Instructions for Small Groups." Assign groups one of the following perspectives to represent:

1. a gay teenager who is trying to decide whether or how to tell his church-going parents that he is gay
2. an adult man who is living in a committed same-gender relationship
3. a mother of a teenage daughter who was recently sexually assaulted
4. a 10-year-old child of a lesbian couple
5. a man who has recently come out to his congregation as bisexual

Ask each group to consider how the person whose perspective you have been given might hear this text. Ask groups to assign someone to take notes of their conversation.

Gather back in the large group. Ask groups to report briefly on some of the ideas they discussed.

Discuss: How might you challenge someone who uses this passage to invoke God's judgment on all LGBTQIA2S+ people?

Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible speaks of what she calls "texts of terror"—biblical texts in which women experience abusive male power (*Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Fortress Press, 1984). Trible says that developing a theology of blessing for women entails coming face-to-face with the horror in the Bible. In what way do you think this passage is a "text of terror" for gender and sexual minorities? How might we respond to this text in ways that help create a theology of blessing for gender and sexual diversity?

Handout: Instructions for Small Groups

Your group has been asked to represent the perspective of one of the following:

1. a gay teenager who is trying to decide whether or how to tell his church-going parents that he is gay
2. an adult man who is living in a committed same-gender relationship
3. a mother of a teenage daughter who was recently sexually assaulted
4. a 10-year-old child of a lesbian couple
5. a man who has recently come out to his congregation as bisexual

Discuss the following questions:

- How might the person whose perspective you have been given feel if she or he heard the Genesis 19:1–29 text?
- What message might the person hear in the text?
- What might trouble, disturb, or terrify?
- What questions might the person raise? (For example, a mother of a teen who has been sexually assaulted might wonder why Lot is not condemned for offering his daughters to be raped. An adult in a same-gender relationship might question why this passage is used to condemn all LGBTQIA2S+ people when it is clearly about gang rape.)
- What message or response would you want to give to that person about this passage?

Ask someone in your group to take notes of your conversation.

What Would It Mean for Our Ministry to Be Affirming?

This workshop helps ministries to examine the implications and the possibilities for them if they become Affirming, exploring such questions as what is the difference between being welcoming and becoming Affirming, what difference might it make to people's lives if this ministry became Affirming, what are some of the fears and concerns, as well as the possibilities and hopes for becoming Affirming.

Activity 1: Find a Home Here (30 minutes)

Leader Preparation

Bring the song "Let us build a house" (#1 in *More Voices*) or "Find a Home Here" by Mary-Ellen Kish (available on the Affirm United website). Lay out newsprint on tables and lots of brightly coloured markers or oil pastels (these are like wax crayons but more vibrant).

Activity Instructions

Ask participants to gather at a table with one of the sheets of newsprint and one or two other people. Ask them to draw a picture of what it feels like to "be at home" in a place or situation. Invite playful interaction—stick figures are fine.

Sing "Let us Build a house" #1 in *More Voices* or "Find a Home Here" by Mary-Ellen Kish.

Use the following questions to have a conversation about being at home:

- In what settings or situations do you feel fully "at home"?
- What helps you feel at home in a group or a situation?
- What might make you feel unsafe, guarded, or unable to really be yourself in a situation?
- What do you think are some of the barriers to helping everyone feel at home in our faith community? What are barriers to full inclusion?
- If our faith community were to fully welcome others as Christ welcomes us, what might stay the same? What might change?

Activity 2: But We're Already Welcoming (35–45 minutes)

Leader Preparation

Make copies of "We're Already Welcoming, So Why Become Affirming?" in Part I.

Activity Instructions

Hand out copies of the text and have people read it. Use the following questions for discussion and conversation:

- What are some of the main differences between being generally welcoming and being an Affirming Ministry?
- In what ways is our community of faith already close to being an Affirming Ministry?
- What might be hardest or most challenging for us as a community if we become an Affirming Ministry? What would be the biggest changes for us?
- What changes do you think would be the most important for gender and sexual minorities in our faith community? For gender and sexual minorities in the wider community?
- What changes do you think would be the most important for other marginalized people in our faith community? For other marginalized people in the wider community?

Activity 3: Case Studies

Leader Preparation

Choose three or four case studies to use, and make copies of the handout “Case Studies for Small Groups” on the next page.

Activity Instructions

Divide into three small groups. Explain the process and note that each of these case studies is based on a real event. Choose three case studies that are appropriate to your setting. Give each group one of the case studies and ask them to respond to these questions:

- What pain or injustices do you observe in this situation?
- What needs to change?
- Imagine this situation exists within or in close proximity to your ministry setting. What difference, if any, might it make to this situation if your ministry became Affirming?

Ask groups to report back on their conversations.

Activity 4: If We Were Affirming...

Leader Preparation

Write the following phrase on a sheet of newsprint or a whiteboard. “If (*name of your community of faith or ministry*) became Affirming, we might....”

Activity Instructions

Hand out writing paper and pens and ask people to complete the sentence as many ways as they can in five minutes. Encourage people to write quickly the ideas that come to mind.

Then, ask people to share their sentences with one other person in the group.

Ask people to respond to the following questions about becoming an Affirming Ministry:

- What do you think would be different if we became an Affirming Ministry?
- What would stay the same?
- What are you most afraid of?
- What are you hopeful about?
- What might be some potential benefits of becoming an Affirming Ministry? (*Encourage everyone to respond. Even if they are not supportive of the idea, they can still suggest possible benefits.*)
- What might be some of the potential risks or negative consequences of becoming an Affirming Ministry? (*Encourage everyone to respond. Even if they are supportive of the idea they can still suggest possible risks or negative consequences.*)

Handout: Case Studies for Small Groups

Read the case study your group has been given. Discuss the following questions:

- What pain or injustices do you observe in this situation?
- What needs to change?
- Imagine this situation exists within or in close proximity to your ministry setting. What difference, if any, might it make to this situation if your ministry became Affirming?

Case Study 1

Melissa has been a member of the same United Church community of faith for all of her 67 years. It is a neighbourhood church where almost everyone has known one another since childhood. Melissa and her husband George have two children now in their thirties, Kate and Kevin. The children grew up in the church but now live in a city 200 km away. Kate is married and has two children of her own. She visits regularly and comes to church with Melissa whenever she is in town. (George doesn't attend church.) Four years ago, Kevin told his parents that he was gay and living with another man. George forbade Kevin to ever set foot in their house again and forbade Melissa to have any contact with her son. Melissa loves Kevin and talks to her son often by phone, when her husband is away. But she has not seen him since that fateful conversation. And although people often ask after Kevin, she has told no one, not even her minister or her closest friends, why her son no longer visits them. She is deeply afraid that if they find out, they will reject Kevin, and her as well.

Case Study 2

As a child, Angela attended a church where it was not uncommon to hear homosexuality condemned (along with drugs, prostitution, drunkenness, gambling, and adultery). She knew homosexuality was an abomination even before she knew what it was. Angela had a deep sense of spirituality as a child and teenager. She felt very close to God and loved going to church—the worship and sense of community she found there were important to her. As a teen, she was very active in the church youth group, led Bible studies, read and led prayers in worship, taught Sunday school, and dreamed of someday becoming a minister. It wasn't until she left town to go to university that she came out as a lesbian. Because she is convinced that homosexuality is incompatible with being a Christian, she has never gone back to church. She tries not to think about spiritual matters. When she does, she feels a deep sense of loss and anguish about her estrangement from God and from her faith community.

Case Study 3

Ana has been attending this United Church for four years now. She is a refugee with no family in Canada other than her son. She has been seeking a spiritual home, and found in this congregation a good place to worship. She comes and goes every Sunday but is always greeted as if it was her first visit, showing her the way for tea and conversation. With a strong faith commitment she is yearning to participate more actively in the life and work of the church, but no one seems to really notice her. Once she took courage and asked to help serve tea and cookies after the service, but they hesitated because there was no one available to help her with English. She wouldn't know how to do the serving the right way without a translator. She leaves the church every Sunday discouraged and feeling even more isolated. She wonders if there is something wrong with her.

Case Study 4

Kathy, age 15, is best friends with another 15-year-old, Will. Although he has never told her in so many words, Kathy knows that Will is gay (and he knows that she knows). Will and Kathy hang out together a lot; most people think they are dating, and Kathy and Will go along with the illusion. Will does so because he is afraid, and Kathy does so to protect her friend. Will is an avid hockey player, and his teammates often make jokes and malicious comments about "queers" and "fags." The same thing happens at school and in the community. Kids who are suspected of being gay are bullied, beaten up, and called names. Lately, Will seems to be getting more and more depressed. He often tells Kathy how much "life sucks" and how he wishes he could just "end it all." Kathy has no idea whom she might talk to or how to support Will.

Case Study 5

Robert has been married to his wife Anne for 12 years, although he was previously in a long-term relationship with a man. Ann knows about that relationship. Although Robert and Ann have a monogamous relationship, he has always considered himself bisexual because he has strong feelings of attraction toward both women and men. He is very troubled and hurt by how negative most members of his congregation are about gay, lesbian, or bisexual people—especially comments that have been made in his presence recently that “those people are all pedophiles” or “God hates queers.”

Case Study 6

Hazel is a third generation Canadian. When she says she is Canadian, she always get asked, “But, where are you really from?” She wonders how many generations are needed to obtain the “right” to be a Canadian for a person of colour. She constantly struggles with a sense of never belonging or no space to claim her full identity. At her community of faith, she is the only visible minority person, and this brings a sense of loneliness to her because she is considered different—and not in a positive way. Even when she was born and grew up here....

Case Study 7

Rosemary (formerly “Robert”) has been living as a woman for eight years. She is active in the life of her community of faith as a lay worship leader and chair of the worship committee. Rosemary has recently started coming out to a few people in her community of faith as a trans woman. She feels supported and encouraged by the responses she receives but is surprised by how little people seem to know about transgender issues and by how few people even knew that she was trans. “I would have thought it was pretty obvious,” she muses. When she goes into hospital for surgery to complete her transition, she realizes that lack of awareness about trans issues is widespread. The hospital spiritual care workers know nothing about it, and she is stung by a very negative remark from a minister from another United Church community of faith who visits her in hospital. She raises with her own minister the possibility of doing a workshop for local United Church ministries on trans issues and pastoral care. After months of planning and working with a nearby United Church education centre the workshop finally happens. Although it was well publicized throughout the region, only a handful of people attend. Rosemary is very surprised, hurt, and angry at this lack of response. She concludes that the United Church isn’t open to learning about trans people “because the church doesn’t know we even exist, let alone have needs or concerns.”

Case Study 8

Lisa and Ann are a lesbian couple who have recently moved to a new town. They are looking for a church home for their family—theirselfs and their two six-year-old twins. They decide to check out the United Church closest to their home to see if it might welcome them. Lisa goes one Sunday to see what it’s like. After worship, she introduces herself to the minister. She tells him that she and her partner, another woman, are looking for a church home. He doesn’t even respond, and a moment later he turns away to talk to another congregant. She introduces herself to one of the choir members and asks if this congregation is open to same-gender couples. “We welcome anybody,” the choir member assures her. “We just don’t like to make a big deal about it.” When Lisa tells Ann about the conversations, Ann is adamant that this church is not one she would want to take their kids to. “I’m not even sure I want to bother looking elsewhere,” Ann concludes. “I’ve had it up to here with church.”

Case Study 9*

An Indigenous woman named Susan attends a congregational workshop on listening to and discerning the needs of LGBTQIA+ and Two-Spirit people. She doesn’t speak until the end of the workshop, and then she says, “This was my first time inside a United Church. I came because you were talking about Two-Spirit people. My child recently committed suicide. I am speaking now because I have seen that you all would have loved and accepted my Two-Spirit baby if he was still here.” She then stands and shares a poem that she has written for her deceased child, grieving deeply and weeping. She leaves the workshop, still crying, and attends Sunday worship at the same church the next day.

Case Study 10*

Jude is a teenager and high school student in rural central Canada born a girl and questioning their gender. Although Jude attends a youth gathering for the national church where they experience a sense of welcome and affirmation, they dread returning to their home congregation, where they experience challenges in talking openly about their personal struggles. “It’s a little difficult talking about these things with people at church. Especially the old people who don’t have an interest in youth,” they admit. “Also, people at church act so perfect... I wish people at church were comfortable to be vulnerable and less guarded, to share when they are not perfect. That way I would know that I could be vulnerable with them too, cause I have a lot of questions.” Jude has experienced the threat of physical harassment as a non-binary person, and fears for their physical safety.

* from Iridesce: The Living Apology project, a three-year joint project of Affirm United/S’affirmer Ensemble and the United Church of Canada.

Discerning Visions, Hopes, and Possibilities for an Affirming Ministry

This workshop uses scripture texts and art to inspire and generate visions, hopes, and possibilities for becoming an Affirming Ministry.

This activity can be repeated with different texts as an ongoing study or discernment process or as a way to introduce a scripture text at the start of an event or workshop. The process will take about 45 minutes to an hour.

Leader Preparation

Bring Bibles, pens, and paper. Select art responses that participants will choose from (see options below), and bring art supplies or resources as needed. Choose one of the following texts and post it on a sheet of newsprint so participants can refer to it:

- Jesus and the woman of Samaria (John 4:1–15, 27)
- Jesus and the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21–28)
- The good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)
- The great dinner (Luke 14:15–24)
- Peter's dream (Acts 10:1–34)

Activity Instructions

Begin by suggesting that we sometimes want to use the Bible to bolster or prove a particular position on issues of race or sexual orientation, poverty, or patriarchy. Because it contains such a diversity of texts, voices, and opinions and because so much depends on interpretation, the Bible can be and has been used to justify almost anything. Suggest that, for this session at least, we not use the Bible to prove or defend. Instead, we will engage with a text imaginatively, prayerfully, and humbly in order to open up visions, hopes, and possibilities that emerge from the story.

Read aloud the text you have chosen slowly and clearly.

Invite participants to choose an artistic medium that they will use to respond to the text. Suggest they choose something that feels fun or comfortable. Assure them they don't have to be artists and no one will judge their work. Give participants at least 20 minutes (30 is best) to work with the art medium and to let their imaginations be as free as possible as they respond to the text they have heard. Have Bibles available so people can read the passage again for themselves if they wish.

Gather back. Invite participants to share what they have created if they wish.

Ask: What hope, possibilities, inspiration, or vision did you find in this passage of scripture that might help our community respond faithfully to issues of being welcoming and justice seeking for marginalized peoples? Read the scripture passage again as people think about this question. Then have people respond. (Record their ideas on newsprint to refer back to as you continue your process of visioning and discernment.)

Options for art response: play with clay, doodle with oil pastels, dabble in watercolours, move your body to a piece of music, write in a journal, or sketch with charcoal.

Haiku (a three-line poem)

The first line has five syllables, the second line seven, and the third line five.

Running through rain drops
Glistening wet, autumn, wood
Leaves drenched in colour

Developing an Affirming Vision Statement

This workshop provides activities and a process for helping a ministry to create or to renew their Affirming Vision Statement

Usually the Affirming Ministry steering committee takes the lead in this process. Following is a suggested process for developing an Affirming Vision Statement for your faith community or ministry:

Use one or both of the two activities (below) to gather ideas.

1. Invite various groups, committees, and your board or council to suggest responses to the following questions: How are we called to act with justice and compassion for gender and sexual minorities and others who have been marginalized or silenced? How will we seek to live out that call?
2. Compile a list of ideas about what seems to be most important to include in your Vision Statement from the work of the groups and committees and also from any other workshops or learning events.
3. Look at sample statements from other Affirming Ministries for ideas about what you might want to say (see p. 17 of this document and websites listed on www.affirmunited.ca). Review the information in Part I, especially “Steps to Becoming an Affirming Ministry” (p. 7) and “How to Become an Affirming Ministry” (p. 14). Continue to list ideas about what is important to say in your Vision Statement.
4. Assign one or two people to write a first draft of the statement.
5. Work with the statement in a small group to polish and refine it.
6. Share the statement with Affirming Ministry Program Coordinators to get feedback and make any necessary changes.
7. Take the statement to your board or council for approval and then to a meeting of all members and adherents of your organization.

Activity 1: What Would Jesus Say?

Leader Preparation

Arrange for someone to lead the hymn “What Would Jesus Say?” by Mary-Ellen Kish (see <http://affirmunited.ause.ca>) and make copies of the words. Bring pen and paper for keeping notes.

Sing another hymn from *Voices United* or *More Voices*.

Activity Instructions

Sing the hymn “What Would Jesus Say?” or another song of your choice

Ask for volunteers to read the following texts aloud: Luke 6:36–37; Matthew 9:9–10; Luke 4:18–19; John 14:27; and John 13:44.

Say that although we cannot be absolutely certain, we can begin to imagine what Jesus says to LGBTQIA2S+ people in our own setting. Pause for a moment, and then have participants share responses. Ask:

- What messages of hope, support, affirmation, or blessing might we want to offer, in Jesus’ name, to LGBTQIA2S+ people, to gender non-conforming people, or to others in our community?
- How do we convey those messages to our own faith community?
- How might we share that message in the wider community around us? (Keep notes of ideas that are suggested for use as you begin to develop a Vision Statement.).

Activity 2: Look at Other Statements for Ideas

Leader Preparation

Enlarge and print out “Sample Affirming Vision Statements from Affirming Ministries” in Part I. Post them in different parts of the room along with a sheet of newsprint. Give everyone a yellow highlighter and a marker for comments.

Activity Instructions

Ask people to move freely around the room reading the statements you have posted on the walls. As they read the statements, ask them to highlight any words or phrases they particularly like and to post any comments on the newsprint beside each statement.

Ask people to gather at the statement that feels closest to what they think their ministry should make. Discuss with others there and record on newsprint. Ask:

- What do you like about this statement?
- What you would add, delete, or change?

Gather back in the whole group to share feedback and ideas.

Ask: What are the most important things our Vision Statement should convey? (Keep newsprint notes and notes of responses to this question for use in developing your Vision Statement.)

A Five-Step Process for Developing an Action Plan

This workshop provides a simple process for helping a ministry develop a plan for taking action on their Affirming Vision Statement—a continuing plan of action for the ministry once it is declared Affirming.

This process works best if you have access to a computer and a projector, for quick recording and sorting of the ideas. It can also be done with newsprint and markers. Have scissors, tape, and several different colours of markers available to make categorizing easier. The process does not have to be done in a single session. In fact, it probably will take two or even three meetings to complete.

Ahead of time, have group members read “We’re Affirming, So Now What?” in Part I.

Step 1. Read Your Affirming Vision Statement Aloud

Talk about what this vision means to you. Ask each person to think of one tangible way your faith community or ministry might live out this vision. Pause to let people think. Record ideas.

Step 2. Make a List of Strengths and Resources

Make a list of your community’s strengths, resources, and assets—things that will help you live out your Affirming Vision Statement. Include people, contacts or networks, your building, resources, access to information, skills, staff, etc.

Step 3. Brainstorm Ideas for Living Out Your Mission

Hint: Don’t censor yourselves when brainstorming by commenting or critiquing. Save that for later. Let the brainstorming ideas flow fast and free, and record them on newsprint. Go wild in your imagination. When your list is complete, ask questions for clarification.

Step 4. Categorize the Ideas

This is usually the longest step. It is a process of eliminating what you won’t do, confirming what you will definitely do, and, from the remaining ideas or possibilities, planning what you might do. As you sort the ideas, you will find you need to discuss pros and cons and in some cases flesh out the ideas further. When it comes to choosing a major project or ongoing action, look for something that seems to inspire energy and enthusiasm. Don’t discard good ideas, but don’t try to take on too much at once.

Go through the list of ideas and put them into categories. If you are using markers and newsprint, use a different colour for each category. Here are five possible categories you could use:

- a. *No.* These are ideas that are not supported by the group, ones that are not realistic, not feasible at this time, don’t fit who you are as a ministry, don’t fit your Affirming Vision Statement or your strengths. Some of the “no” ideas might be good ideas, just not now for your particular ministry. Create this category first and it will shorten your sorting task. Pull these ideas from the list or cross them out.
- b. *Yes.* These are actions that you will definitely do, though some of them may take a bit more time, effort, discussion, or planning. Some of these will be ongoing things that are automatically part of your involvement as an Affirming Ministry—for example, paying the annual membership fee or forming an Affirming committee—but that need to be set in motion. Some are ones that can be easily accomplished within a short timeframe and that you would like to see done right away—adding a notice in your worship bulletin, changing your letterhead, putting the Affirm United logo on your sign, adding a note to your website. Others may be things that take more planning or discussion. Circle these in red or highlight them.
- c. *Let’s work on this.* One (or possibly two) major action idea(s) for a major project, action task, or initiative for your ministry. This will take further planning and work over a longer period of time, including further conversation to flesh out the ideas. Choose ideas that fit well with things your ministry is already doing and that are consistent with your strengths and resources. Put an asterisk beside these ideas.
- d. *Maybe later.* These are ideas that you don’t want to lose but you don’t see acting on right now. Put these ideas in brackets.

You may need to take a break at this point to prepare a more detailed description of the ideas, gather more information or input, or let the ideas percolate before making a final decision.

When you have finished this process, set aside the list of “nos” and “maybe later” and you will have a list of ongoing action ideas for your Affirming Ministry. Assign someone to summarize your work and polish up the wording, and your Action Plan is ready to present to the Affirming Ministry coordinators and then to your governing body for a decision. Some ministries take this to the membership for approval also.

Your Action Plan could look something like this:

- Form an ongoing Affirming Committee, accountable to the governing body, to find ways to help our community live out its Affirming Vision Statement and to provide a link with Affirm United and other Affirming Ministries (e.g. through board meetings, meeting periodically with other committees about further ways we can support each other’s work in being an Affirming Ministry).
- Support three members to attend an Intercultural Conference and plan on how they will share information learned with the governing body and different ministry groups.
- Connect with a community group dealing with anti-poverty issues.
- Continue to make public that we are an Affirming Ministry by using the Affirm United logo on our website, in our newsletter, and in our bulletins. Have visible signs that we welcome people of all gender identities and sexual orientations on all our signboards. Put a monthly ad in community newspapers.
- Have a study group or workshop annually to explore some aspect of ministry with marginalized people.
- Support two members to attend either an Affirming Ministry Conference or the Annual Affirm United/S’affirmer Ensemble Conference/AGM.
- Celebrate the anniversary of becoming an Affirming Ministry each year with a community worship service, and participate in the Pride Festival (take our Affirming Ministry banner).
- Over the next two years, explore ways our faith community might help to support the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ seniors in our area, particularly related to housing and spiritual care.

Step 5. What, Who, and When

When your Action Plan has been approved, you will need to review it to make sure it gets implemented. This entails looking at

- What needs to be done next to make this happen?
- Who will take responsibility for this?
- When will this be done? (Timelines, even if only approximate, are important for task completion.)
- Each year, reflect on further actions and different areas of education to make this a living document.

Examples:

- Action: Put notices in newsletters and on the Web to say we’re Affirming.
- What: Gather wording used by other Affirming Ministries, prepare a draft sentence, take to the communications committee.
- Who: Bill will research and prepare a draft statement; Lillian will talk to chair of communications.
- When: Before our April meeting.

Explorations for Youth

The following workshop suggestions are for youth aged 13–18 to explore issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, a biblical vision of inclusion, and what it means to be an Affirming Ministry.

Activity 1: Watch the Film *One of Them* (40 minutes)

Leader Preparation

Set up viewing equipment and borrow a copy of the film *One of Them* (National Film Board of Canada, 2000; see www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/collection/film/?id=33969).

Activity Instructions

Show the film. Invite conversation using questions such as the following:

- How realistic do you think the issues are in this film?
- When it comes to issues of sexual orientation or gender identity, how is your high school similar to the high school in the film? How is it different? How hard would it be to get a gay–straight alliance going at your school, or if there is one, did the creation of the alliance meet with any opposition?
- How much support would/does an LGBTQIA2S+ teen experience at your school? What about a gender non-conforming or genderfluid teen? What kind of harassment or subtle negative pressure might they face? How would it be or how is it for LGBTQIA2S+ teens here at our church?
- What do you think might need to change here at church or at your school for it to be a “safe space” for LGBTQIA2S+ teens? (This may mean talking about what makes a space safe.)

Alternative: Have youth watch one of the other suggested films in Part 3: Resources for Affirming Ministries, such as *OUT: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth* and *In Other Words*.

Activity 2: Peter’s Dream (35 minutes)

Leader Preparation

Read Acts 10:1–34 and prepare to tell a paraphrased version. Bring Bibles, pens, and paper and, optionally, props for drama such as biblical costumes and animal masks.

Activity Instructions

Read aloud Acts 10:1–34 or tell a paraphrased version to the group.

Invite youth to work together to create a skit that tells this story. If your group is large, have two groups each create a drama to present. Encourage youth to have fun. There’s lots of room for creativity (think of all those animals bundled up in a sheet).

Explain that for Peter certain things were against the laws of his faith, including eating foods that were considered unclean, such as shrimp or pork, and associating with people who were not Jewish (this included eating with or giving hospitality to Romans). The early church members were Jewish, and Gentiles (people who were foreigners/not Jewish) were not part of their community. It was a big decision for the church to change its mind about this.

Ask the group to consider the following questions:

- Why do you think Peter might have hesitated to meet with Cornelius?
- Have you ever changed your mind about someone after first impressions? In what other situations have you changed your mind about things?
- How significant do you think this was for the early church to start including people who weren’t Jewish? Can you suggest some possible arguments for or against including Gentiles in the church?

- Over its history, which other groups of people has the Christian church said weren't welcome in the church or weren't part of God's family?
- What do you think this Bible story might have to say to our church today as we consider becoming an Affirming Ministry?

Option: Have youth create a second drama that begins with a congregation trying to decide whether to include and support people who are LGBTQIA2S+. Someone has a dream....

Activity 3: Listen to a Speaker (40 minutes)

Leader Preparation

Arrange for a speaker to come and talk with your youth about gender identity or sexual orientation, or what it might mean for your faith community to be Affirming. Possible speakers: a youth from a nearby Affirming Ministry, a youth from a gay-straight alliance or LGBTQIA2S+ support group at a local high school, someone from PFLAG or a parent of a young adult who has come out, someone from a local counselling centre or resource centre that deals with youth concerns around sexual orientation and gender identity, a teacher who is positive and open about these issues (see "Links to Organizations" in Part 3).

Activity Instructions

Invite the speaker to address the group. Encourage the group to ask questions. Invite the group to consider some of the particular issues or concerns LGBTQIA2S+ and gender non-conforming youth face.

Ask: How can we make our faith community a safe space for youth of all sexual orientations and gender identities?

Activity 4: Create a Youth Resource Webpage (one or two sessions)

Leader Preparation

Arrange for the use of computers with Web access. Post or write down the links for PFLAG (www.pflagcanada.ca), Egale (www.egale.ca), and Affirm United (www.affirmunited.ca). Consider setting up a blog, or arrange to post the material on your church's website.

Activity Instructions

Explain that the task is to create a webpage (or blog) with information for LGBTQIA2S+ and gender non-conforming youth in your community—information, resources, people they could talk to if they need support, etc.

Invite youth to begin by imagining that gender and sexually diverse teens in their community don't know anyone to talk to about their sexuality and need information and support. What might the teens need to know? Whom could they talk to? Suppose the teens' families aren't supportive or the teens are getting harassed at school—where could they turn for help? Suppose the teens think God might hate them because they are gay, or that churches would all reject them. What messages of support might you write?

Make a list of resources or information that might be needed. Make notes of other things you might want to put on the webpage.

Then, begin to brainstorm what information and resources you might post on your webpage or blog. Who would be helpful people in the community to talk to, what resources or information groups are close by (if any), which are the closest Affirming Ministries? Use the PFLAG, Egale and any other sites you know of to begin hunting down information and resources. Invite youth who are familiar with blogging or creating webpages to help organize and post the information you find.

This task will probably take more than one session. Assign follow-up tasks for people to do before you meet again. When your page is ready, post it and link to your community of faith's website.

Explorations for Children

These activities introduce children in grades 1–6 to what it means to be an Affirming Ministry:

- There are many different kinds of families, and God loves all of them.
- God welcomes everyone.
- In an Affirming community, we tell everyone about God's welcome and inclusion.

Activity 1: "A Rainbow Is Dancing" (20–30 minutes)

Leader Preparation

Arrange for someone to teach children the song "A Rainbow Is Dancing" (see hymns for Affirming Ministries on the Affirm website,). Other possibilities include "My Love Colours Outside the Lines" (*More Voices*, #138) or a rendition of the popular song "True Colours" by Cyndi Lauper. Bring rainbow-coloured scarves.

Activity Instructions

Teach children the chorus and first verse.

Explain that the song reminds us that everyone is welcomed by God to be part of our ministry (community of faith, outdoor ministry, children's group) family. It doesn't matter who they are, where they come from, or what their background is.

Write the words "God welcomes everyone, no matter..." on a sheet of newsprint, and invite children to suggest phrases to complete the sentence (e.g., no matter how old you are; no matter what kind of family you live in). Record the children's ideas. If no one mentions them, include ideas such as "no matter whom you love, no matter what kind of family you have, no matter if you're gay or straight," etc.

Invite children to use the scarves to make up a movement or dance to go with the song that shows everyone being welcomed into God's family, the church. Sing the chorus and the first verse again, along with the movements.

Activity 2: Make a Handprint Rainbow (15–20 minutes)

Leader Preparation

Post a large sheet of mural paper at a height easy for children to reach. In pencil, sketch a rainbow shape across the paper with wide bands for the different colours. Pour blue, red, purple, green, orange, and yellow finger paint into shallow dishes (such as pie plates). Bring paint smocks, water, and towels for cleanup.

Activity Instructions

Invite children to make a large rainbow by dipping their hands in the finger paint and making handprints on the mural paper in bands of colour. Do this with three or four children at a time. You will need lots of helpers.

Talk with the children about rainbows by asking questions such as: When have you seen a rainbow? What makes a rainbow? Does anyone know a song about rainbows? What is the Bible story about a rainbow? What was the rainbow a sign of? (God's promise never to destroy the earth or hurt the people of the earth.)

Explain that just as a rainbow needs lots of different colours to be complete, the human family needs lots of different kinds of people. Invite conversation about differences between people in the human family. Say that the rainbow is an important sign for people working to end racism because it reminds us that people of all different colours, nationalities, cultures, and backgrounds are part of the human family. And the rainbow is an important sign for people working to end discrimination against people who are gay, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual because it reminds us that no matter who we are or whom we love, we are all part of God's family.

If your ministry has put up rainbow signs to let everyone know of God's welcome for people of all gender identities and sexual orientations, invite children to look for rainbows around the facility.

Activity 3: Peter's Animal Dream (15–20 minutes)

Leader Preparation

Read Acts 10. Practise telling the story of Peter's dream (below). Bring a Bible.

Activity Instructions

Explain that you are going to tell a story from the Bible. Open the Bible to Acts 10. Say that this is a story with lots of different kinds of animals. Invite children to each choose an animal sound to make. Explain that during the story, they must listen for their animal to be mentioned, and they will make their animal sound three times. If you say "all the animals," everyone makes their animal sound together. Practice the sounds (make a note for yourself of the animals the children choose). Tell the story of Peter's Animal Dream (below).

Peter's Animal Dream

Peter was a good friend of Jesus. After Jesus died, Peter continued to follow Jesus' way. He told people about Jesus. He helped bring together groups of people who became followers too. These groups were the first churches.

One day, Peter got a message from a man named Cornelius. Cornelius wanted to hear about Jesus, and he asked if Peter would come to supper at his house to tell him all about Jesus. But there was a problem. Peter was a Jew, just like Jesus, but Cornelius was a Gentile. Ever since he was a little child, Peter had been taught to stay away from Gentiles—and never, ever to eat a meal or go inside their houses.

Peter thought about the problem. Cornelius was a fine person and all he wanted to do was learn about Jesus, but still, he was one of "those" people. "Nope," thought Peter to himself, "I can't go. He's a Gentile, and you know what they say about Gentiles." Then Peter laid down for a nap.

And as he slept, Peter had a dream. He dreamed about animals. He dreamed about _____ and _____ and _____. (*Name the animals the children have mentioned, and have children make animal sounds as their animal is mentioned.*) In Peter's dream, all the animals (*pause for all animal sounds*) were wrapped up together in a great big sheet. The (*name of an animal*) was together with the (*name of another animal*) who was beside the (*names of other animals*).

Peter was shocked. All the animals (*pause for animal sounds*) were crowded together. They were making a lot of noise, but they seemed to be having a great time. No animals were afraid, and no animals were eating other animals. All the animals (*pause for animal sounds*) were together.

Peter woke up. He could still remember all the animals (*pause for animal sounds*) in his dream. He thought and thought. Could his dream have anything to do with Cornelius? (*Pause the story to ask the children what they think.*)

"I get it," said Peter to himself. "If all the animals (*pause for animal sounds*) in my dream could get along, then it should be the same in our new church. Jesus would want everyone included, and that means Gentiles too."

Peter looked at the sun high in the sky. "I'd better get going," he thought, "if I'm going to get to Cornelius's house in time for supper."

Invite conversation about the story using questions such as the following:

- What did Peter think his dream meant?
- Why do you think Peter changed his mind?
- What do you think may have happened next in the story?
- What do you think Jesus would have wanted Peter to do?
- How can we let other people know that God welcomes everyone?

Activity 4: What Is a Family? (45 minutes)

Leader Preparation

Bring a children's picture book that shows same-gender families, such as *And Tango Makes Three*; *Asha's Mums*; *One Dad, Two Dads*; *Who's in a Family?* *Mom and Mum Are Getting Married*; *Daddy's Roommate*; *It Feels Good to Be Yourself*; *When Aiden Became a Brother*; *The Family Book*; *In Our Mothers' House* (see "Children" in Part 3: Resources for Affirming Ministries). Bring modelling clay in a variety of colours.

Activity Instructions

Invite the group to talk about families. Ask questions such as

- Who is in your family?
- What makes a family a family?
- What are some of the good things about being a family?
- Why are families important?

Invite the group to use modelling clay to make a large crowd of people grouped into all different kinds of families. Let the group work together. Encourage creativity and playfulness. Families could be all blue, all male or all female, some may have just one person, some may have lots of kids and two adults, etc.

Remind the children that some families have two dads or two moms, some families have two men who love each other, some families have two women who love each other, and some families may have only one person. Sometimes family members are related and sometimes they aren't. The most important thing is that people in a family love and care for one another. Love is what makes a family a family.

Read a story about a same-gender family to the children. Invite open-ended conversation about the story using prompts such as

- What did you like about this story?
- What did you notice?
- Did anything surprise you?

Look at the illustrations and invite children to notice things they may not have seen the first time around.

Invite the children to join you in saying a prayer for families or to pray for their own family in a time of silence.

Sing the chorus of a song: M.E. Kish's "A Rainbow is Dancing" (Affirm United website) or "Come in, Come in and Sit Down" (*Voices United*, 395).

More Ideas for Learning and Reflection

Film Nights

Have regular film nights to watch Hollywood films about issues of sexual orientation or gender identity. After watching a film, invite people to share their reactions, feelings, and thoughts. Some suggested films and discussion possibilities are listed under “Popular Films on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity” in Part 3 and on the Affirm United website.

Invite LGBTQIA2S+ Guests

Invite regular participation in worship, leadership, or education from people of differing family configurations, sexual orientations, or gender identities. Invite guests to share their experiences, but also have them take a leadership role in some aspect of your worshipping or community life. Provide social time for members of the community to meet informally and ask questions or get to know the guest a little better.

Guest speakers can be obtained by contacting a local Affirming Ministry, a local PFLAG group, an LGBTQIA2S+ group such as Egale, or a local AIDS support organization. You can also contact Affirm United to ask for suggested speakers or contacts. Invite a speaker from a local high school gay–straight alliance to come and talk with your group about how issues of sexual orientation or gender identity particularly impact youth.

Provide Opportunities for Action

Even before your ministry is declared Affirming, it is helpful to provide opportunities for members or participants to take meaningful action on issues of sexual orientation or gender identity. Research shows that attitude change is profoundly influenced by what people do (and not much at all by other people trying to convince us to change our minds).

Simple actions people might be invited to take: donating to a special offering on World AIDS Sunday, donating supplies for a local AIDS hospice or support group, signing a petition advocating for a safe schools policy with your local school board (or a petition on another issue), buying a button to support a gay youth project, baking cookies for an LGBTQIA2S+ fundraising event, hosting a fundraising concert of a local LGBTQIA2S+ choir, putting up stickers at one’s workplace that indicate welcome and acceptance for gender and sexually diverse people, buying a gay-positive bumper sticker, writing a letter to raise a concern.

Connect with Other Affirming Ministries

Make contact with nearby Affirming Ministries. Have regular visits to and from local Affirming Ministries, or use phone, e-mail, or Facebook to share experiences and talk about what it means to be Affirming.

These contacts can help diffuse some of the fears your members may have about becoming Affirming and build bridges for later community action and collaboration. They will also support and energize you in your process.

Read the Affirm United newsletters for great ideas about what other Affirming Ministries are doing. It will be sent electronically to your Affirming Ministry regularly and will be on the Affirm United website.

Share Community Time

Hold potluck suppers, dinners, music fests, dessert evenings, or other kinds of community celebrations that are gay-positive but with no explicit educational agenda. Discussion and debate are important, but it is equally important to build community and celebrate being together.

Walk the Talk

Invite people to act “as if” your ministry was welcoming of all people even before you become Affirming. Often people will say that the ministry is already welcoming and so doesn’t need to become explicitly Affirming. Encourage the congregation to act on what it says by considering and noticing ways it can be more affirming and supportive of gender and sexually diverse people.

Take Stock

Take a congregational inventory and look at places and situations in which an LGBTQIA2S+ person, a gender non-conforming or genderfluid individual, a child in a same-gender family, or a parent of a gay, lesbian, or trans child might feel less than fully welcome (e.g., the forms you use for a baptism, the way your marriage policy is stated on your website, the images and pictures in your newsletter or around the building).

Acknowledge LGBTQIA2S+ Presence

Use language that acknowledges the presence and participation of LGBTQIA2S+ people in your midst rather than language that talks about “us” and “them.” Even if there are no out people involved in your programs or community of faith life, they are certainly there somewhere—adult children of some of your members; cousins, friends, or members of extended family of your program participants or those who use your facilities; friends of your youth members; neighbours down the street; co-workers of your members; and of course, people in your community of faith or ministry who are not out.

Use the Arts

Give people a chance to experience different aspects of gay culture, such as art tours, the Shower of Stoles (<http://welcomingresources.org/sosp.htm>), a gay theatre experience, a visiting LGBTQIA2S+ choir or dance troupe, etc.

Part 3: Resources for Affirming Ministries

These resources are suggested to help communities of faith and other United Church ministries grow in their understanding of issues of gender and sexual diversity and take action. There are also suggested resources to help you extend your understanding of and action on injustices against Aboriginal peoples (including the legacy of residential schools) and racism. You know your community and the issues that may need to be addressed to be a justice-seeking, welcoming ministry; we encourage you to call the United Church Resource Distribution (UCRD) store at the General Council office to ask for suggestions of resources for the topics you identify that need to be addressed.

Every effort has been made to ensure that items listed here are currently available. This is a selective list, not a complete bibliography. It does not include many excellent resources that are out of print or are of primarily historical or academic interest.

Be sure to keep an eye on the Affirm United website (<https://affirmunited.ausc.ca/>) for more resources in both print and video.

How to Obtain Resources

United Church resources can be ordered through United Church Resource Distribution (www.ucrdstore.ca). Most of the following resources can also be ordered through independent bookstores, Chapters.Indigo.ca, or Amazon.ca.

Many United Church regional councils and Affirming Ministries have LGBTQIA2S+ books, films, and other resources. Public libraries also carry these resources, and librarians are often happy to help. LGBTQIA2S+ organizations such as PFLAG are other sources of information and resources.

The United Church of Christ, an American denomination similar to The United Church of Canada, also carries LGBTQIA2S+-related resources published by The Pilgrim Press or the Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ. See www.ucc.org/lgbt/resources.html or openandaffirming.org/resources/.

General Print Resources

Baird, Vanessa. *The No-Nonsense Guide to Sexual Diversity*. 2nd edition. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007.

A short, readable introduction to sexual diversity issues, with a global perspective. Covers topics including transgender people, history of sexual diversity, science, religion, homophobia, and action.

Coren, Michael. *Epiphany: A Christian's Change of Heart and Mind over Same-Sex Marriage*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2016.

From the posterboy of Catholic conservatism, a major change of heart and soul on one of the church's most controversial and intractable stances.

Countryman, L. William, and M.R. Ritely. *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2001.

At the heart of this book is the experience of lesbian and gay Christians as they discover who they are, accept their sexuality as a God-given gift, deal with scripture, and reclaim their place in the church.

Duncan, Geoffrey, ed. *Courage to Love: Liturgies for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002.

An anthology of worship materials that allow gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender men and women to affirm their sexuality. Poems, prayers, stories, litanies, same-gender blessings, marriage ceremonies, celebratory material, and communion and baptism liturgies.

Habib, Samra. *We Have Always Been Here – A Queer Muslim Memoir*. Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2019.

A memoir of growing up Muslim and Queer in Pakistan and Canada that weaves together the threads of the author's family history with her sexuality, faith, and culture.

Hinnant, Olive Elaine. *God Comes Out: A Queer Homiletic*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007.

Practical suggestions about how to initiate liberating conversation about sexual differences, especially useful for preaching.

Knox, Amanda Jetté. *Love Lives Here – The Story of Thriving in a Transgender Family*. Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2019.

An inspirational story of embracing two trans people in a family—a spouse and a child. This story shows what's possible when you “lead with love.”

Kundtz, David J., and Bernard S. Schlager. *Ministry among God's Queer Folk: LGBT Pastoral Care*. Berkeley, CA: Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry and Pilgrim Press, 2007.

Written by two self-described “queer people of faith,” this handbook covers the basic skills religious caregivers and ministry students need to be effective, enlightened, and supportive pastoral care providers to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) people within as well as outside their communities of faith and communities.

Prashaw, Rick, with Adam Prashaw. *Soar, Adam, Soar*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2019.

In *Soar, Adam, Soar*, his father, a former priest, retells Adam's story alongside his son's own words. From early childhood, through coming out first as a lesbian and then as a man, and his battles with epilepsy and refusal to give in, it chronicles Adam's drive to define himself, his joyful spirit, and his love of life, which continues to conquer all.

Robertson, Brandon. *True Inclusion: Creating Communities of Radical Embrace*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2018.

In *True Inclusion*, public theologian and pastor Brandon Robertson shares how to move your church from mere welcome to radical embrace. Pointing to a clear biblical imperative for radical inclusivity in the sanctuary and in the public square, Robertson presents a paradigm-shifting vision of community “where nothing is simple, nothing is easy, but everything is beautiful.”

Robertson, Brandon. *Our Witness: The Unheard Stories of LGBT+ Christians*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018.

Written by two self-described “queer people of faith,” this handbook covers the basic skills religious caregivers and ministry students need to be effective, enlightened, and supportive pastoral care providers to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) people within as well as outside their communities of faith and communities.

Swanson, Ruby Remenda. *A Family Outing – A Memoir*. Toronto: Cormorant Books Inc., 2016.

Ruby Swanson's life changed when her sixteen-year-old son walked to her office, closed the door, and with his hand still on the doorknob said, “I'm gay.” Despite her initial reaction of shock, fear, and denial, Ruby became a public advocate for equality and acceptance of the LGBT community. *A Family Outing* is the story of Ruby's experiences. She addresses the deeply homophobic time in which baby boomers grew up, the emergence of the gay rights movement, and how the AIDS epidemic transformed the LGBT landscape.

Turney, Kelly, ed. *Shaping Sanctuary: Proclaiming God's Grace in an Inclusive Church*. Chicago: Welcoming Church Movement, 2000.

A Spirited ecumenical collection of prayers, liturgies, blessings, music, essays, sermons, and more produced by the Welcoming Church Movement (programs like Open and Affirming in various denominations). Includes study guide.

VanderWal-Gritter, Wendy. *Generous Spaciousness: Responding to the Gay Christians in the Church*. Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2016.

Wendy VanderWal-Gritter believes we need a new paradigm for how the church engages those in the sexual minority. How can we navigate our journey together and nurture unity, hospitality, humility, and justice? It's called generous spaciousness. This book offers a framework for graciously discussing diversity; the church can be a welcoming place for a variety of perspectives on the matter of human sexuality. It also advises on implementing generous spaciousness in churches and organizations.

Wearing, Alison. *Confessions of a Fairy's Daughter – Growing up with a Gay Dad*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2013.

The story, situated in Peterborough, Ont., is of a gay man's coming out told mainly in the words of his daughter but also in his own words, those of his wife and finally in the words of the present family—a story from four perspectives.

White, Mel. *What the Bible Says—and Doesn't Say—about Homosexuality*. Abilene, TX: Soulforce, no date.

In this 24-page online booklet, White addresses how historic misinterpretation of the Bible has left a trail of suffering, bloodshed, and death and shows that the prophets, Jesus, and the biblical authors say nothing about homosexual orientation as we understand it today. They neither approve of it nor condemn it, but they are clear about this one thing: as we search for truth, we are to love one another. Available as a free download at www.psa91.com/pdf/whatthebiblesays.pdf.

United Church of Canada Resources

Huntly, Alyson. *Of Love and Justice: Toward the Civil Recognition of Same-Sex Marriage*. Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2003.

This congregational guide for study and action predates Canada's federal equal marriage legislation, so some information is out of date. However, the four workshops it contains are still current, and can help a congregation or group to explore civil recognition of same-sex relationships from a faith and justice perspective. The booklet also offers a process for congregational decision-making on same-sex marriages. Available on United Church Commons at commons.united-church.ca.

The United Church of Canada. *Celebrating Gender Diversity: A Toolkit on Gender Identity and Trans Experiences for Communities of Faith*. Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2019.

This resource has been created to help individual members and communities of faith to deepen their understanding of gender identity, help them create welcoming and affirming communities, and integrate trans people's gifts and capacities for ministry into the life of the church, including liturgy and expressions of worship. Access excerpted brochures on Celebrating Trans and Two-Spirit People in Communities of Faith, Radical Welcoming and Gender Identity, and Facts about Pronouns, as well as the document in its entirety, at <https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/being-community/gender-sexuality-and-orientation#downloads>

The United Church of Canada. Gender, Sexuality, and Orientation web page: <https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/being-community/gender-sexuality-and-orientation>.

Includes a video; an overview of what we believe; concrete ideas on what you can do; links to resources for learning more; related partners programs and groups (including on social media); links to blogs on gender, sexuality and orientation; and a variety of resources to download (including the resource below).

The United Church of Canada. *Mandate magazine*. A special issue on *The Affirming Journey*. Spring 2018.

Where is The United Church of Canada on its Affirming journey? This issue focuses on LGBTQIA2S+ justice, laments our church's prejudicial past, and looks to a future that includes people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Includes valuable congregational resources, from worship to workshops, on moving toward spiritual affirmation, healing, and renewal for all.

The United Church of Canada. *Marriage: A United Church of Canada Understanding*. Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2005.

A comprehensive overview of the United Church position on marriage, including same-sex marriage. Highlights changes in the church position over the years and the current theological understanding of what our church believes about marriage. Available as a free download from [United Church Commons at commons.united-church.ca](http://UnitedChurchCommons.ca).

The United Church of Canada. *Moving toward Full Inclusion: Sexual Orientation in The United Church of Canada*. 2nd edition. Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2014.

Prepared for United Church ecumenical partners, this resource gives an overview of the United Church understanding of issues of sexual orientation. It includes a summary of who the United Church is and how we

make decisions; the United Church position on sexual orientation, membership, ministry, and same-sex marriage and how the United Church came to this position; and a summary of the United Church history of evolving understanding of sexuality and scripture. Includes stories, case studies, and discussion questions. Available at <https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/full-inclusion.pdf>.

The United Church of Canada. *Passion and Freedom: A Resource for Couples*. Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2013.

A participants' workbook and companion to the leaders' guide, below. Available through www.ucrdstore.ca.

The United Church of Canada. *Passion and Freedom: A Resource for Ministers and Leaders*. Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2013.

A faith-based resource that addresses all stages of a committed life partnership, both heterosexual and same-sex. Offers an overview of pastoral issues, some orientation to common underlying patterns, and practical ways to encourage couples to find and live out their call from God in the world. Available through www.ucrdstore.ca.

Gender and Sexually Diverse Youth

(Note: not all these resources are suitable for young readers)

Bain, J. *So Your Child Is Gay: A Guide for Canadian Families and Their Friends*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2000.

This Canadian book written for Canadian families deals with issues surrounding children who are gay. An informative and supportive guide for parents.

Corneau, Michelle. *The Eagle's Path*. Nanaimo, BC: Strong Nations Publishing, 2017.

Anna explores what it means to be Mohawk, her own identity and the identity of others as she learns to follow the Eagle's path. She learns how her culture has taught many generations to value honesty, wisdom and courage in their day-to-day lives. Anna also learns about two-spirit people when her best friend tells her that she likes other girls. This revelation leaves her full of questions, and with support from her wise and loving mother, she understands the value in accepting everyone for who they are.

Francis, Brian. *Fruit: A Novel about a Boy and His Nipples*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2000.

This is a humorous, profound, insightful, and moving novel about a 13-year-old boy coming to terms with his sexuality. Set in the 1980s, which adds to the delight of this brilliant Canadian novel. On the CBC Canada Reads shortlist in 2009.

Garden, Nancy. *Annie on My Mind*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982.

A novel about the romantic relationship between two 17-year-old New York City girls, Annie and Liza. This award-winning book has been continuously in print since its first publication.

Goldman, Linda. *Coming Out, Coming In: Nurturing the Well-Being and Inclusion of Gay Youth in Mainstream Society*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

This book describes the process of "coming in" to a welcoming and nurturing family, from both the teen's and the parents' perspective. Linda Goldman has been a school guidance counsellor and child and adolescent therapist. She is a parent and a member of the national group PFLAG. The book has information, exercises, anecdotes, resource lists, and tools to create nurturing and safe spaces for LGBT youth.

Sanchez, Alex. *The God Box*. Toronto: Simon and Schuster Children's Publishing, 2009.

Lambda Literary Award-winning author Alex Sanchez tackles a subject ripped from the headlines in this exciting and thought-provoking exploration of what it means to be both religious and gay.

Tigert, Lianne McCall, and Timothy J. Brown, eds. *Coming Out Young and Faithful*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001.

Life stories and reflections on faith, church, and spirituality by gay, lesbian, and transgender youth.

Children

Following are recommended full-colour picture books showing issues and experiences of families of all gender combinations, appropriate for children in kindergarten through grade 5.

Elwin, Rosamund, and Michele Pause. *Asha's Mums*. Toronto: Women's Press, 1990.

Asha is a Black-Canadian girl who is sent home from school with a form requiring parental permission for a class trip. When the form comes back signed by two women, the teacher sends it back. A classroom discussion ensues about having two mums. Some kids say their parents believe having two mums is wrong. But Asha tells her classmates, "My mummies say we're a family because we live together and love each other." Themes: same-sex parenting, homophobia, diverse families. This book, along with *One Dad, Two Dads* and *Belinda's Bouquet*, was banned by the Surrey School Board. The ban was later overturned by the Supreme Court of British Columbia.

Herthel, Jessica, and Jazz Jennings. *I am Jazz*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers. Penguin, 2014.

A trans girl's story in her own words with pictures by Shelagh McNicholas.

Hoffman, Mary, and Ros Asquith. *The Great Big Book of Families*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2011.

Featuring homes and holidays, school and pets, feelings and family trees, this book explores every aspect of family life with warmth, wit, and sensitivity, challenging preconceptions and inviting discussion.

Jopling, Heather. *The Not-So-Only Child*. Cobourg, ON: Nickname Press, 2008.

A book about diversity of families.

Kelly, Sheila M., and Shelley Rotner. *Families*. New York: Holiday House, 2015.

Celebrate diversity with a picture book for young children about the many faces of contemporary families. Big or small, similar or different-looking, there are all kinds of families. Some have one parent, some two, and many include extended family.

Lukoff, Kyle, and Juanita, Kaylani. *When Aidan Becomes a Big Brother*. New York: Lee & Low Books, 2019.

When Aidan Became a Brother is a heartwarming book that will resonate with transgender children, reassure any child concerned about becoming an older sibling, and celebrate the many transitions a family can experience.

Parr, Todd. *The Family Book*. New York: Little, Brown, 2010.

For very young children. Depicts a variety of families, some big and some small, some with only one parent and some with two moms or dads, some quiet and some noisy, but all alike in some ways and special no matter what.

Polacco, Patricia. *In Our Mothers' House*. New York: Philomel Books, 2009.

A story of a wonderfully unique family with two moms and three adopted children, living by its own rules and held together by a very special love.

Richardson, Justin, and Peter Parnell. *And Tango Makes Three*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015.

A true story of two male penguins in Central Park Zoo that discovered each other in 1998 and have been together ever since. They build a nest together but are unable to produce an egg. They are given an egg that needs to be cared for and, with complete devotion, incubate the egg and care for the newborn chick, Tango. Tango and her two fathers snuggle, swim, and play together in the penguin house with all the other penguin families.

Setterington, Ken, and Alice Priestly. *Mom and Mum Are Getting Married*. Toronto: Second Story Press, 2004.

A little girl finally gets her wish to be a flower girl at the wedding of her two mothers. The wedding is a celebration of love and being a family that takes place in the presence of a community of supportive friends and family.

Stewart, Paul, and Jane Porter. *Brian the Brave*. Herefordshire, Great Britain: Otter-Barry Books, 2019.

A story about sheep discriminating against each other until a life-threatening event brings them together under the leadership of Brian the brave sheep.

Thorn, Theresa, and Noah Grigni. *It Feels Good to Be Yourself*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2019.

Some people are boys. Some people are girls. Some people are both, neither, or somewhere in between. This sweet, straightforward exploration of gender identity will give children a fuller understanding of themselves and others. With child-friendly language and vibrant art, *It Feels Good to Be Yourself* provides young readers and parents alike with the vocabulary to discuss this important topic with sensitivity.

Popular Films on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

These films are available through commercial video rental outlets and public libraries.

Billy Elliot. Dir. Stephen Daldry, 2000. 110 minutes.

A talented young boy becomes torn between his unexpected love of dance and the responses of his family. The film shows how rigid, binary gender stereotypes have an impact on the protagonist, Billy Elliot.

Breakfast on Pluto. Dir. Neil Jordan, 2005. 128 minutes.

In the 1970s, a founding lad, Patrick “Kitten” Braden, comes of age by leaving his Irish town for London, in part to look for his mother and in part because his transgender nature is beyond the town’s understanding.

The Kids Are All Right. Dir. Lisa Cholodenko, 2010. 106 minutes.

Jules (Julianne Moore) and Nic (Annette Bening) have been together nearly 20 years and have two kids by artificial insemination. Life takes an interesting twist when their teens decide to contact their biological father. An entertaining and thought-provoking take on same-sex couples.

Moonlight. Dir. Barry Jenkins. 111 minutes.

A young African-American man grapples with his identity and sexuality while experiencing the everyday struggles of childhood, adolescence, and burgeoning adulthood.

Normal. Dir. Jane Anderson, 2005. 110 minutes.

Roy and Irma are a devoted couple living a normal life in rural Illinois until Roy announces his plan to have a sex-change operation.

A Single Man. Dir. Tom Ford, 2009. 100 minutes.

Based on Christopher Isherwood’s novel of the same title. The story takes place in California in 1964 and recounts a day in the life of a gay university professor who is grieving the loss of his long-term partner. Reveals the impact of homophobia on the protagonist’s life.

TransAmerica. Dir. Duncan Tucker, 2005. 103 minutes.

The story of Brea, a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual whose life takes an unexpected turn when she learns that she has a son, now a teenage runaway hustling on the streets of New York.

Documentaries on LGBTQIA+/Gender Identity Issues

Many of these films are available to buy from the UCRD store (www.ucrdstore.com) Some can be purchased through large online distributors such as Amazon. Some National Film Board films can be obtained through www.onf-nfb.gc.ca or from public libraries.

Affirming PIE Day, Affirming Connections and Affirm United/S’affirmer Ensemble, 2019.

Join pie-loving hosts Stéphane and Pam as they introduce us to PIE and as Affirming ministries tell their stories about their **P**ublic, **I**ntentional, and **E**xplicit work and welcome for the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

Anyone and Everyone. IronZeal Films, 2007. 57 minutes.

An intimate portrait of families who have a child who is gay. The families are from diverse backgrounds and various religious denominations. Parents talk about their struggles and pain but above all their love for their

child and how that has shaped their response. Scene selection (22 scenes) allows for flexible use. To view a trailer or obtain a copy of the film see www.anyoneandeveryone.com.

Apples and Oranges. National Film Board of Canada, 2003. 17 minutes.

This film raises children's awareness of the harmful effects of homophobia and gender-related name-calling, intolerance, stereotyping, and bullying. In the course of a lively in-class discussion among elementary students and an equity educator, children's paintings magically dissolve into two short animated stories. *Apples and Oranges* challenges young viewers to think about their responses to people and families that are different from their own. For ages 8–12. For more information: <http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/en/our-collection/?idfilm=51090>

For the Bible Tells Me So. Dir. Daniel Karslake, 2007. 98 minutes.

This award-winning documentary shows how the Bible is wielded in hatred against LGBT people by the Christian right and reveals that religious anti-gay bias is based almost solely upon a misinterpretation of the Bible. Through the experiences of five Christian families, we discover how people of faith handle the realization of having a gay child. The film is profound, challenging, and deeply moving. It inspires action. Scene selection allows for flexible use (12 chapters) and special features. Note: License for Educational Use—Use of the Study Guide and Advocacy Training Curriculum must accompany the public showing of this film. No admission can be charged. For more information, see www.forthebibletellsmeso.org. For purchase go to www.amazon.ca or other mainline distribution networks.

In Other Words. National Film Board of Canada, 2000. 27 minutes.

This video speaks directly to teens and offers a valuable tool to teachers, counsellors, and community youth leaders who want to explore the homophobic language heard inside and outside schools—the words themselves, their origins, how young people feel about them, and how to overcome the hurt and anger they cause. For ages 13 and up. For purchase: https://www.nfb.ca/film/in_other_words/

One of Them. National Film Board of Canada, 2001. 25 minutes.

A group of teenagers is planning Human Rights Day at their high school. Some believe that homophobia should be included, alongside racism and sexism, as a form of prejudice and oppression. With a focus on homophobia and discrimination, not sexual behaviour, the dramatization prompts viewers to examine their own responses and promotes discussion of what makes for a safe school environment for all students. For ages 13 and up. For purchase: https://www.nfb.ca/film/one_of_them/

Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth. National Film Board of Canada, 1993. 78 minutes.

Out explores the struggles and victories of gay and lesbian youth in Canada. Through explicit interviews with gay and lesbian youth from varied cultural and racial heritages, issues of discrimination as well as the compounding problems of confronting racism and sexism are sensitively addressed. This video has two parts of about 20 minutes each. Part 1 highlights the relationships between the youth interviewed and their families. Part 2 focuses more on what it is like to be lesbian or gay in our society. Not currently available for purchase from the NFB but it can be borrowed from some libraries.

Sticks and Stones. National Film Board of Canada, 2001. 17 minutes.

Children learn from subtle clues what society thinks about gender roles, same-sex parents, and family differences. The children in this video describe how it feels to be teased when their families don't follow traditional gender roles. They talk about why bullies indulge in name-calling, and what should be done about it. For children of all ages. For more information: https://www.nfb.ca/film/sticks_and_stones/

That's a Family! GroundSpark Video, 2000. 35 minutes.

Children from various family configurations describe their family activities and explain the meaning of words that relate to their situation (e.g., "guardian," "divorce," "lesbian," "adoption"). They talk about other people's reactions to their family unit and their own feelings about what people say, but they all agree that a family is "people who love each other and take care of each other." A discussion/teaching guide is provided. Groundspark also has other excellent video on diversity issues, including the groundbreaking *It's Elementary*. Videos can be live-streamed or purchased from GroundSpark: <https://groundspark.org/our-films-and-campaigns/thatfamily>

Transfigurations: Transgressing Gender in the Bible. Peterson Toscano, 2017. 60 minutes.

Peterson Toscano has shaken up Bible scholarship and received high praise for his groundbreaking, genre-bending, gender-blending Bible interpretations. By unearthing the gender stories of people in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, Toscano's one-person performance deepens well-known (and lesser-known) Bible stories and presents an array of Bible characters with an array of genders.

Two-Spirit Topics

Film

Deb-we-win Ge-ken-am-aan, Our Place in the Circle. National Film Board, 2008. 22 minutes.

Lorne Olson's short documentary presents a vision he had of two-spirited people dancing, laughing, and smiling. His vision spurs him to rediscover the strength of the past to better face the challenges of today. This funny and buoyant film documents his touching journey.

Two Spirits. Riding the Tiger Productions, Say Yes Quickly Productions, and Just Media. *Two Spirits*, 2011. 90 minutes.

Two Spirits interweaves the tragic story of a mother's loss of her son with a revealing look at a time when the world wasn't simply divided into male and female, and many Native American cultures held places of honor for people of integrated genders.

Print

Chacaby, Ma-Nee. *A Two-Spirit Journey: The Autobiography of a Lesbian Ojibwa-Cree Elder*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2016.

A Two-Spirit Journey is Ma-Nee Chacaby's extraordinary account of her life as an Ojibwa-Cree lesbian. From her early, often harrowing memories of life and abuse in a remote Ojibwa community riven by poverty and alcoholism, Chacaby's story is one of enduring and ultimately overcoming the social, economic, and health legacies of colonialism.

Trans Topics

Film

Call Me Malcolm. The United Church of Christ and Filmworks, 2004. 90 minutes.

A documentary feature film about a transgender seminary student and his struggle with faith, love, and gender identity. As Malcolm shares his own story, and through the stories of others we meet, the film offers a glimpse into the real lives of real people who are transgender. Includes a six-session study guide. For more information and downloadable study guides, see www.ucc.org/lgbt/callmemalcolm.html.

Print

Mollenkott, Virginia. *Omnigender: A Trans-religious Approach*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007.

Through an exploration of trans identity and intersexuality Mollenkott shows that our insistence on only two sexes is erroneous. She argues that the binary gender construct has been harmful to individuals and society, causing bigotry and hatred toward those who can't or won't fit into one of the two gender categories. Mollenkott's omnigender paradigm seeks to honour the diversity of the gender rainbow.

Tanis, Justin. *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2003.

Tanis, an ordained minister and scholar, provides the reader with a strong validation of gender-variant people in the church and in society as he tells the story of his own journey and the journey of others. Provides solid scriptural background.

Websites

As you browse through these sites you will soon see how many of them are linked to one another. You will also notice that there is some dissension in the ranks. Have you ever known anyone to agree with everything anyone else says? As always, when browsing, be aware that there are many sites that purport to be trans friendly. Unfortunately it is a fact of life that many take advantage of the word “transsexual” to lead you into pornography sites. Some of these are downright dangerous in that they capture your contact information, resulting in your computer being used as part of their transmitting network. *Never* click on a link if you inadvertently find yourself on such a site! Exit immediately. All the links on the following sites are rigorously tested and checked by the site managers, who are very aware of the threat from porn sites.

All Mixed Up: www.genderpsychology.org

Andrea James: www.tsroadmap.com

One of the most extensive transgender maps on the Web.

Anne Vitale: www.avitale.com

The Antijen Pages: www.antijen.org

Specifically for young people, especially trans kids.

Dr. Anne Lawrence: www.annelawrence.com

Lynn Conway: <http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/conway.html>

Check out her “Successful TransMen” and “TS Women’s Successes” pages.

Press for Change: www.pfc.org.uk

One of the oldest and most informative sites.

Trans-Health: www.trans-health.com

Transsexual: <http://transsexual.org/index.html>

Links to Organizations

Dignity Canada/Dignité: www.dignitycanada.org

A Roman Catholic organization that challenges its church’s views on gender and sexuality.

Egale Canada: www.egale.ca

A national organization that advances equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-identified people and their families across Canada. This website is an excellent source of resources and action ideas. Egale’s Safe Schools campaign works to promote equity and safety in Canadian schools for youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans-identified.

Lutherans Concerned North America: www.reconcilingworks.org

An organization on LGBTQIA+ concerns in the Lutheran church.

PFLAG Canada: www.pflagcanada.ca

A national charitable organization founded by parents who wished to help themselves and their family members understand and accept their non-heterosexual children. PFLAG supports, educates, and provides resources to parents, families, friends, and colleagues with questions or concerns and works to create greater social tolerance and justice. The website has resources and information on transgender and sexual orientation issues, including a comprehensive list of books and resources on a wide range of topics including rainbow families, parenting, transgender and intersex issues, gay youth, religion, and Two-Spirited people. It has first-person stories and factual information and lists of PFLAG chapters, including names and phone numbers of contact people across Canada (a good source of speakers).

Queering Christian Voices: An Ecumenical Coalition in Canada: www.queeringchristianvoices.ca

With the aim of envisioning a world where all gender and sexually diverse people are treated justly and equitably, this coalition group seeks to amplify a Christian voice that advocates for all gender and sexually diverse people within Christian contexts and the public sphere. A joint effort of Affirm United and Generous Space Ministries, the coalition currently includes representatives from LGBTQIA+ and Two-Spirit advocacy groups as well as individuals from over 20 Christian denominations.

The United Church of Canada LGBTQ2S Solidarity Fund. Staff contacts: Sarah Charters at fdn@united-church.ca and Jim Hodgson at jhodgson@united-church.ca.

The United Church is launching a new way to support the work of Mission & Service partners in favour of LGBTQ rights and inclusion around the world. This UCC Foundation Fund supports projects that advance respect for the human rights of LGBTQ2S people, provides safe spaces for those at risk, and promotes inclusion in society, church, ecumenical and interfaith spaces.

The United Church of Christ Coalition for LGBT Concerns: openandaffirming.org

A ministry of the United Church of Christ to support and expand a network of open and affirming communities of faith of the church, similar in ethos to The United Church of Canada. The coalition has a national staff person and produces many excellent resources for study, congregational life, worship, faith, and action on LGBT issues. The website has many useful resources for communities of faith, LGBT folk, and their friends, families, and allies.

United Church Resources on Aboriginal Peoples and Indian Residential Schools

The Children Remembered: <http://thechildrenremembered.ca>

A website initiated by the United Church's Steering Committee on Residential Schools. Here you will find photographs from the collections in the United Church's national archives in Toronto, to make them more accessible to survivors, First Nations communities, and other interested people.

The United Church of Canada: www.united-church.ca/aboriginal/schools

Over the last 20 years, the United Church has begun a directed, prayerful, and concerted effort to become more informed and responsive to the harmful effects of the residential school legacy. The United Church website has complete resources for individuals, communities of faith, and other church ministries on this legacy, as well as related material on the Doctrine of Discovery, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, etc. Visit <https://www.united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/reconciliation-and-indigenous-justice>.

United Church Resources on Antiracism, Racism, and Cultural Identity

The United Church of Canada policy on antiracism (2000) declares that racism is a sin and violates God's desire for humanity. The policy statement can be downloaded from [The United Church of Canada Commons website](http://www.united-church.ca/commons/antiracism).

The United Church has produced a number of antiracism resources, including the following:

Ending Racial Harassment: Creating Healthy Communities of faith. Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2008.

This booklet offers guidelines to help church members, ministers, and congregational committees recognize, understand, and stop racial harassment. A workshop outline is included. Groups are encouraged to develop action plans including personal steps, steps taken as a congregation or community, and a close look committee or group meetings. Download at no charge from www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/handbook_racial-harassment.pdf

That All May Be One: A Resource for Educating toward Racial Justice. Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2004.

Download excerpts from this now out-of-print booklet at no charge from www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/that-all-may-be-one-excerpts.pdf. For other United Church resources and information see www.united-church.ca/racial-justice.

The Canadian Ecumenical Anti-Racism Network (CEARN), of which the United Church is a part, has produced a number of racial justice resources to be used on or around March 21, the International Day for the Elimination of

Racial Discrimination. Download resources from www.councilofchurches.ca/social-justice/undoing-racism/anti-racism-network/.