

OUR AFFIRMING JOURNEY

As of April 2021

Welcome to “Our Affirming Journey.” We hope you find the information informative, helpful, and interesting. You are welcome to contact one of the Affirming Ministry Team members to discuss this further and/or to ask questions. The members (Mary Faith Blackburn, Harold Imes, Naomi Isaac, Jenny Nicholson, Karen Scott, and Susan K Thomson) can be contacted through the [church office](#).

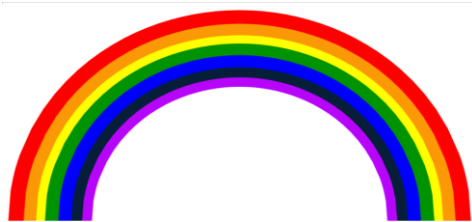
On May 26, 2020 St Paul’s council approved establishing an Affirm Task Group who would then research what is involved in getting the process started for St Paul’s United Church to officially become an Affirming Church. In March 2021, the Task Group became the Affirming Ministry Team which reports to / is part of St. Paul’s Church Council.

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WHAT IS AN AFFIRMING CHURCH?

An Affirming Church is a church which *publicly*, *intentionally*, and *explicitly* welcomes all people regardless of *gender identity* and *sexual orientation* to *participate fully* in all aspects of church life.

Publicly:	Using signs, symbols, and words both inside and outside the church to show that this is an Affirming Church
Intentionally:	A church on their affirming journey needs to be deliberate and specific in their process of study, education, and dialogue with members of their faith community. They need to discuss and understand the harm caused by previous discrimination, and they need to plan for continued growth, education, and inclusiveness.
Explicitly:	An Affirming ministry is very clear about whom it welcomes
Gender Identity:	A person’s “ <i>self-conception as being male, female, both or neither as distinguished from actual biological sex.</i> ” *
Sexual Orientation:	Refers to a person’s romantic or sexual attraction
Participate fully in all aspects of church life:	Gender identity and sexual orientation have no bearing on a person’s eligibility to be a member, volunteer, committee member or chair, council member or chair, or minister

*Quote is from “Open Hearts 2020”

Note: Additional definitions can be found In the Introduction of the [Open Hearts](#) document.

By the end of 2020 there were more than 34 Affirming Churches in Alberta and more than 220 in Canada; more than 100 United Churches across Canada were in the process of becoming Affirming. As



The Pride Flag, designed in 1978 by Gilbert Baker

of February 2021, in Alberta there were no Affirming Churches north of St Albert and Edmonton.

THE PROCESS

In 1982 a group of gay and lesbian people in the United Church formed “Affirm”, which merged a few years later with “Friends of Affirm” to form [Affirm United/S’affirme Ensembler](#).

Affirm United works “*for the full inclusion of people of all gender identities and sexual orientations in the United Church of Canada and in Society.*” * They provide resources, support, education, and encouragement to organizations (mainly United Churches) who wish to be inclusive and safe places for LGBTQIA2S+ people. Affirm United is the body who will determine if our church is ready to ask the congregation to vote on whether St Paul’s United Church will be an Affirming Church. Affirm United has a detailed resource book called “[Open Hearts](#)”, which our Affirming Ministry Team refers to frequently.

*Quote is from Affirm United’s website <http://www.ause.ca/>

There are 7 steps in the affirming process (from p. 19 of [Open Hearts](#)):

1. *“Encountering the need*
A need, question, or vision leads a ministry to ask how it can be publicly, intentionally, and explicitly welcoming.
2. *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.
3. *Embarking*
The decision to formally enter the Affirming process is made by the ministry’s governing body. A working group is set up.
4. *Engaging*
Educating. Storytelling. 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.
5. *Documenting*
Before a final decision is made, an inclusive marriage policy, Vision Statement, Action Plan for the future, and more must be created.
6. *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.
7. *Joining the family*
Holding a public celebration! Being welcomed formally to our Canada-wide family.”

We are currently in step #4 (March 2021).

Step #4, “Engaging”, is where we all learn about the importance of being an inclusive ministry and what it would mean for St Paul’s and the wider community. We do this by listening, hearing stories about exclusion and inclusion, discussing, reading, researching, praying, understanding, and learning. The journey to being an affirming church is not fast and will take as long as it needs to; 1 – 2 years or more is not unrealistic; due to the current limits on social gatherings it may take longer.

The final decision would be made by a congregational vote; Affirm United states that “A *positive decision needs to include a “yes” from at least three quarters of those involved in voting.*” *

*Quote is from p.19 of “Open Hearts”.

WOULD AN AFFIRMING CHURCH LOOK DIFFERENT?

There would be visible signs both inside and outside the church so that everyone inside and outside the building will know that we are an inclusive church and a safe place for members of the LGBTQ+ community. This could include banners - including a banner displaying the Affirm United logo (click [here](#) to see an image), flags, window stickers, books about LGBTQ+ issues in the library, rainbow candles etc. It is up to each individual church to decide for themselves how elaborate the visible signs will be. People outside the building must know what we stand for and visible signs and symbols will achieve this.



Presently the church has outward signs that indicate and welcome people with walking/mobility challenges. The church indicates that by having a ramp available for entry into the church and an elevator to get from the top floor to the lower floor. In addition to this, there is a designated place, in the centre of the sanctuary, for wheelchairs, inviting these individuals into the service as full participants.

WOULD SERVICES BE DIFFERENT?

Services would not need to be radically different, and the Worship Ministry Team would make that determination. There may be more awareness and care taken to use inclusive language in liturgy, hymns, sermons, announcements, and notices.

THE MINISTRY TEAM'S ACTIONS.

The Affirming Ministry Team has met monthly since June 2020. Our goal is to learn about what an Affirming Church is and what needs to be done to guide the congregation to the final step of voting on whether or not to be an officially Affirming Church. Initially we spent time learning about the affirm process, some of the LGBTQIA2S+ issues, and what being an affirming church would mean for St Paul's and for the LGBTQIA2S+ community in Grande Prairie.

From September – November 2020 we met with five of the church groups and teams (Council, UCW Unit 1, UCW Unit 2, the Worship Ministry Team, and the Ministry & Personnel Ministry Team). At these meetings we explained and discussed the affirm processes and what being an affirming church means and learned about some initial concerns. In January 2021, due to Covid-19 restrictions, we changed to a **monthly series of Affirming Open Chat sessions on Zoom on the second Wednesday of each month 7:00 – 8:00 pm** so that we could continue reaching out to congregants even though we could not meet in person. Going forward, days and times may vary. Details will be emailed to congregants on a regular basis.

From June 2020 – January 2021 we submitted nine articles to six editions of “News from the Pews” and have interacted with the Grande Prairie Pride Society. With assistance from others, we prepared handouts and activities for the St Paul's table at the annual Grande Prairie Pride Carnival which was, unfortunately, cancelled at the last minute due to Covid-19. St Paul's has participated in the Carnival since its inception.

In 2021 we shall continue with the Affirming Open Chat Zoom format and will add gatherings in person when we are permitted to do so. In February, a transgender man joined us and talked, among other items, about his journey to be the person he is today. In March, we heard from another transgender man who talked about not only his journey but also how he felt when a church embraced him as his authentic self after a different church had driven him away. In future sessions we plan to include videos and hopefully more individual presentations about how important total inclusiveness is for LGBTQIA2S+ people and our church community. In April, our minister, Rev. Gord Waldie, discussed certain passages of Scripture that have been used as “clobber passages” against LGBTQ+ people. Since March, these sessions have been recorded, and if you would like to listen to them you can contact any member of the Affirming Ministry Team and they can arrange to share the recording of the chat with you.

WE ARE ALREADY A WELCOMING CHURCH. WHY DO WE NEED TO BE AN AFFIRMING CHURCH?

The following article is from St Paul's newsletter

"News from the Pews", the November/December 2020 edition.

Written by Affirming Ministry Team member Mary Faith Blackburn.



An Affirming church is one that publicly declares their commitment to inclusion and justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. And it is more: Affirming churches seek to work for justice and inclusion for all people. At the moment we are concentrating on sexual orientation and gender inclusivity, because we have much to learn, but this

process will take us further. What does it mean to be justice-seeking, and inclusive? Consider this situation, my grandson is allergic to peanuts. As you know, some people with peanut allergies have died from contact with peanuts. Therefore, I am very careful about what I offer him to eat. I used to have to read all labels when grocery shopping, and still do have to read many labels. Even ice cream may have been in contact with peanuts or peanut oil or made in a facility that contains peanuts! Sometimes I give up on buying a certain product because it is too difficult to read the small print to tell whether or not it is safe for my grandson. I am thankful for those manufacturers that mark their products as peanut free. This marking tells me I can give these granola bars or other products to my grandson without fear, and so I buy those particular products over and over again.

LGBTQ2S people have been badly hurt for many ages. Others have not understood the diversity of creation and attacked the very soul of LGBTQ2S people. Our own United Church has struggled with diversity for generations, and still has a long way to go to be truly welcoming. I know at least three dreadful stories, situations that occurred in Grande Prairie churches, in the last few years. These voices of exclusion, condemnation, and hatred have been loud and persistent within the church and society. Understandably, hurting people are very careful where they go for nurture, and what places and people they trust. Sometimes it is easier to avoid certain institutions, like churches, and go repeatedly to the places that they are sure they are safe, however limited those places may be.

Affirming Ministries talk about PIE. PIE stands for Public, Intentional, and Explicit. LGBTQ2S people are more likely to enter a space that displays the equivalent of that Nut Free symbol. In other words, a large rainbow flag at the entrance, people wearing Affirm United buttons or T-shirts, a rainbow banner, as well as other signs of inclusivity of all peoples, such as scent-free and peanut-free signs as appropriate, a ramp/lift, a place for wheelchairs, marriage and baptism forms with gender inclusive language, and a visible involvement in community projects. These are just a few signs of P.I.E. that may be welcoming for LGBTQ2S and others seeking a community of justice.

We have just begun this journey and have a distance to travel. We have much to learn, and the Affirming Ministry Team hopes to help guide us on the way. If you are a reader, we have books to share, and titles to recommend. We are working to bring short videos and speakers to worship and to Zoom platforms.

It will help our planning if you are able to complete a Survey Monkey questionnaire that will be posted soon. All are welcome to participate.



THE TRANSGENDER FLAG, DESIGNED IN 1999 BY MONICA HELMS
THE THREE COLOURS REPRESENT BABY BLUE FOR BOYS, BABY PINK FOR GIRL AND WHITE FOR THOSE WHO ARE TRANSITIONING, INTERSEX OR CONSIDER THEMSELVES AS HAVING AN UNIDENTIFIED GENDER



PROGRESSIVE PRIDE FLAG, DESIGNED IN 2018 BY DANIEL QUASAR
THIS FLAG INCORPORATES BOTH THE PRIDE AND THE TRANSGENDER FLAGS AND ACKNOWLEDGES THOSE WHO ARE BLACK, INDIGENOUS OR PEOPLE OF COLOUR

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

→ Videos / documentaries

- [On Affirm United website](#)
- Documentary on Netflix: *A Secret Love* – Amid shifting times, two women kept their decades-long love a secret. But coming out later in life comes with its own set of challenges

→ Websites

- <https://www.qchristian.org/> “Q Christian Fellowship is cultivating radical belonging for LGBTQ+ Christians and allies.” – website has several resources and informational and relational guides.
- <http://www.ause.ca/> Affirm United’s website, good resources.
- <https://www.generousspace.ca/> Generous Space Ministries – “Generous Space works to dismantle religious-based harm, pursue intersectional justice, and celebrate LGBTQ2+ lives in both the church and our world.” They have a number of resources as well.

→ **“News from/for the Pews”** (The St Paul’s Newsletter) At the links below you will find the pages from our past newsletters that reflect some of the discussions that have happened since we began our Affirming Discerning journey. They contain book reviews / book suggestions, opinion pieces, education pieces, video suggestions and more.

- [Issue 04, 2020](#)
 - The Affirming Process;
 - Why I Joined the Affirming Task Group
 - Resource suggestions
- [Issue 05, 2020](#)
 - The Affirming Task Group Want to Listen to You
- [Issue 08, 2020](#)
 - Definitions
 - I set out my Christmas nativity scenes this evening.
- [Issue 01, 2021](#)
 - Called to be the Church
 - Affirm Open Chat Sessions
 - Affirming Book Corner
- [Issue 02, 2021](#)
 - Recent Events
 - Affirming Book Corner