



# Affirming Ministries

## Becoming an Affirming congregation:

### A mother's reflections

by LIZ FORDE

*This is part of a talk by Liz Forde at the Parkminster United Church service to celebrate becoming an Affirming congregation. Liz and her husband felt that it was important that the congregation know that people they have known and associated with for many years were part of the GBLT community. Laura gave her mother her blessings to "out" her to the church. The congregation burst into applause as Liz finished speaking. ■*

ver a year ago, I listened to four individuals speak of their truths. I was in awe of them as they stood at the front of our church (Parkminster United in Waterloo, Ontario)

and told us about their lives, while knowing that they could be rejected by their peers. I sat in the pew wondering how I would react if one of my children came out. I thought that I would be great.

I got to learn about how I would do, because last August, after five years of wondering, our Laura came out. My husband, Bob, was great. His response was, "OK." I, however, did not do as well as I had imagined. I spent three days with my jaw hanging open and every conscious moment worrying about what this future would mean for Laura. On the third day I woke up with an amazing revelation. Laura had not changed in any way. The only thing that was different was that I was given a new word to attach to her, *lesbian*.

I knew that there was nothing in Laura's world to create her and make her the sexually oriented person she has become. Laura just is. We, as her family, wonder at what she has to deal with in her life. Spending her life in a wheel chair made her childhood different from others. She has already experienced living on the outside of things and being alone in her surroundings. Living her adult life as a lesbian woman does not make for a time of ease. (Laura is twenty-one and she has been in a wheelchair all her life. Parkminster prayed for her when she was ill at the start of her life and they have celebrated her achievements ever since.)

Coming out has not gone totally smoothly for Laura. Her close friend, Rosie, is from the religious right and she has told Laura that she is going to hell and that she is going to have to face God when she dies. Laura and Rosie can no longer sustain that friendship and Rosie has dropped out of Laura's world.

After Laura told us about her sexual orientation, I phoned Pat, who had been on that original panel as a mother of gay children. Pat told me that often when a child comes out the parents go into the closet. I realized that is what I had done, so once I was aware, I made sure I opened that door and talked to my close friends about

this. Our family is a lucky one; our friends were accepting and without judgment.

Bob and I are grateful to the women and men who have come out before Laura. They have paved the way for us to travel this road more comfortably than some of them were able to experience. Bob and I have been members at Parkminster United for almost thirty years. Parkminster, in becoming an Affirming congregation, declared that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people are welcome and safe here. The weight of the secret has been lifted from many shoulders

Being on the Affirming committee has brought a new awareness for me. I have met with different people and one of the things that stood out for me was the fear. One lovely person, whom we met, helped serve communion at Harcourt United and she was worried that no-one would come and take it from her. She was thrilled because she had to replenish her plate. It saddened me to think that I might have inadvertently been part of a collective who thoughtlessly has made someone feel less than whole. This whole process of inclusion gives us the opportunity to reflect. Have we made someone afraid to be themselves?

This is an exciting time in our church. We have agreed to accept people for who they are. I believe that the more we get to know each other with our secrets removed, the more at ease we will be with each other.

We are all just people doing the best that we can in this challenge to live as good a life as we are capable of living. ■

### Consensus by mail or by email?

"Do you prefer paper or plastic?" In the bid to allow members of Affirm United a choice between email or regular Canada Post as their preferred method of receiving and reading *Consensus*, Affirm's council invites its members to decide between the following delivery options: continuing to receive the newsletter by mail; or opting instead to receive an email link to *Consensus* on our website to either read online, download to your computer, or print it out, saving Affirm United a bit of money and possibly saving a few trees!

If you wish to continue to receive *Consensus* by mail, you need do nothing. If you wish to opt out of the mailed copy and receive *Consensus* online, please contact Membership Co-ordinator John Keddy by email at (marpac2001@rogers.com) and let him know. ■

# Some congregations are raising fences against same-sex marriage

*Eldon Hay of Sackville, New Brunswick, is a member of the Order of Canada and a retired United Church minister.*

**By Eldon Hay**

Nationally, the United Church of Canada is officially in favour of same-sex marriage. But the decision to implement this policy lies with local congregations, not all of whom see this as an obvious issue of justice. Some, in fact, have been quick to build fences to hold off change. In the Spring 2005 edition of a Nova Scotia publication, *Imprints*, the United Church's Rev. Ivan Gregan wrote that the ruling of the Supreme Court in favour of same-sex marriage "caused many congregations to consider their own marriage policies and practices." He said that many in his own congregation "felt pressured to make a marriage policy" ("Marriage—A Holy Estate," 13).

I find it surprising that a congregation would operate for years with no marriage policy at all. Or does the possibility of gays and lesbians asking for church weddings require change to unwritten practices that assume the couple must be heterosexual? I also have to ask whether the bar been heightened in any way.

I wonder about this because certain ministers have told me: "We don't want our church to be a gay church. We don't want our chapel to be the site of gay weddings."

I also know that some congregations, now that same-sex marriage is upon us, have freshly developed policies. These include: "At least one of the couple must be a member or, at least, a faithful adherent." and/or "One of the two must have been baptized." and/or "The couple will submit a letter requesting marriage three months in advance."

On one hand, we have the state: unconditional, gracious. On the other hand, we have United Church congregations erecting fences.

Almost 20 years ago, I made a memorable weekend visit to Toronto. Memorable for two reasons: First, my adult gay son Ron came out to me. Secondly, as chair of a United Church national subcommittee, I presented a report urging the integration of children into the life of the church. That report was accepted, and one of the visible results today is seeing youngsters welcomed at the church family meal, Holy Communion.

For the little ones, it was relatively easy to unfence communion. But for my adult gay son or lesbian daughter seeking to marry in a United Church congregation, fences are raised, or newly constructed.

If gays and lesbians are potential claimants to church

weddings (assumed, I think, but unstated in Rev. Gregan's article), the development of a truly adequate marriage policy must include consideration of the Christian church's long-standing role in the oppression of homosexual persons.

Most of the gays and lesbians I have talked to in the last 20 years (many of whom grew up in the United Church) have experienced religious oppression. Sometimes this was an overt expression of hostility and prejudice from pew and/or pulpit. Much more frequently, it was utter silence.

I am first to agree that United Church congregations are to be thanked for their lengthy debate, good discussions, learning events, and prayers in considering the question of allowing same-sex marriage. But did any of those learning events hear from Christian gays and lesbians—their stories, their learning, their prayers? If not, I sense a serious gap; if not, I weep. ■

## T-shirts



**with logo  
for sale**

**Affirm/S'affirmer**  
UNITED ENSEMBLE

*Affirm United T-shirts, featuring the group's new and wildly active logo on a black background, are now for sale by mail.*

*The youth size price is \$12. All others cost \$20 (small, medium, large, XL, 2XL, and 3XL). The cost of postage is not included and will depend on the size of the package and the shipping address.*

*To order, send address, quantity and T-shirt size(s), and a cheque made out to Affirm United, to Ken DeLisle, 125 Furby St., Winnipeg, MB, R3C 2A4.*

*An invoice for postage will be included with the shipment.*