

Hillhurst Affirming Process

Approved Affirming Statement:

Hillhurst United Church commits to be an inclusive community of faith that follows in the Way of Jesus under the banner "whoever you are, wherever you're at, we welcome you on the journey".

We strive to accept each other as we are and welcome the ministry and participation of all persons regardless of age, gender identity, health, race, sexual orientation, differing abilities, religious or ethnic background or economic circumstance.

We hope that in all that we do, including our worship and community life, God's unconditional love is experienced. We do this trusting God is with us on the journey.

Frequently Asked Questions:

WHY DO CHURCHES ADOPT AN AFFIRMING STATEMENT?

To be Affirming is to recognize that each individual in our community is worthy of being ministered to with respect to who they are, seen in light of the teachings of Jesus. Social constructs of any kind may blind us to the individuality of another person, preventing us from seeing them as Jesus taught us. Ministries with all persons who may feel separated from the church are important. In our time, ministry to and by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals is one of the largest tests of the inclusiveness of the church. We are better equipped to face other issues of separation when we have faced this one.

When a congregation is designated as Affirming, it is making a public statement to all who arrive there that it has taken on a period of reflection regarding barriers to participation and belonging. This can be an important reassurance to someone who is unsure of whether the church is a place in which they can feel safe to be themselves, whether they will be required to hide a minority sexual orientation or gender identity. In the past, the Church, in its broadest definition, has actively sought to exclude GLBT individuals and families. The Affirming process seeks to address the harm done by that active exclusion.

WHAT IS REQUIRED TO BECOME AN AFFIRMING MINISTRY?

A statement of faith concerning the inclusion of bisexuals, transgender individuals, lesbians and gay men in the life and work of the Ministry

1. A continuing plan of action for the Ministry
2. A commitment to the Affirming Ministry Program nationally
3. An inclusive marriage policy (required since February 2007)

WHERE DOES THE PROGRAM COME FROM?

Affirm United is a national program for United Church congregations and ministries that has been in place since 1992. This program is envisioned as a means of support and education for justice-seeking Ministries. (Their website is <http://affirmunited.ca>)

WHAT ABOUT OTHER MINORITIES – IS THIS A PROGRAM FOR THEM, TOO?

In order to become an Affirming Ministry, a congregation must go through an educational process that reflects on what it means to be inclusive and evaluates our openness to the ongoing work of being intentional about how we both welcome and include others within the life and work of our ministry. The national kit says “We hope that you will look at a variety of areas that may be barriers to those coming to your community, agism, sexism, racism, ablism, classism and in particular to the Affirming Ministry the issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. The advice we have received from many Affirming Ministries is that this discussion must include as many groups as possible.” This is borne out by Affirming Statements adopted across Canada.

HOW MANY AFFIRMING MINISTRIES ARE THERE IN CANADA?

Of approximately 4000 congregations in Canada, 38 are designated Affirming.

***NOTE: As of Oct, 2011 this number is now 67 congregations, plus 13 educational institutions, retreat centres and United church courts.**

HOW HOW MANY AFFIRMING MINISTRIES ARE THERE IN ALBERTA?

Three are in Edmonton. Deer Park, Knox and Wild Rose United have become Affirming Congregations in Calgary. Scarboro and Symons Valley have recently adopted Affirming statements. There are several other Calgary congregations that have a group looking into this. **** Note : As of Oct 2011, there are 15 Affirming Ministries in Alberta!!**

WHAT MAKES AN AFFIRMING MINISTRY DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER IN WHICH PEOPLE ARE UNPREDJUDICED AND WELCOMING?

As the national program reminds us, to be in ministry to and with all involves an attitude of sensitivity and openness to the gifts and graces of each person in the body of Christ. It requires an appreciation that teaching and learning are a two-way process of mutual listening and understanding. This is not always easy and takes some specific efforts to hear others' stories. An Affirming ministry is one that is making an intentional effort to listen and learn from people who have been silent in the past.

WHAT HAS BEEN HAPPENING AT HILLHURST?

An introductory message was delivered at Hillhurst's 2006 Annual General Meeting on Pentecost, June 2006. A group of congregation members interested in participating in a process of discernment met over the course of the subsequent 7 months, holding informal conversations regarding the nature, need and process of an affirming initiative. Representatives from this group first met with the Hillhurst Church Board on January 17, 2007 and preliminary authorization was granted for the Affirming Committee to proceed with exploratory discussions, and to make known to the congregation that such discussions were underway.

The formal aspect of the discussion was launched on February 13, 2007, when written information was made available to the congregation outlining the basis and aims of the Affirm United program, and a sampling of Affirming Statements was posted and circulated. At the March 18, 2007 Annual General Meeting, there was a discussion of the role of the Affirming discernment process at Hillhurst. Written information was provided. Educational events on sexual orientation and gender identity, led by the Calgary Sexual Health Centre, were held on May 10 and 13, 2007 and on January 13, 2008. A group of people met on Monday, March 31, and had a spiritually enriched conversation about issues facing gay people and their place in the church. The April 27 worship service was dedicated to Affirming (see the church website for Archived sermons).

In addition, informal discussions have continued, and worship services have included a variety of opportunities to meditate both on our own inclusiveness generally and on our openness to GLBT participation and ministry specifically.

There was an opportunity to view a DVD about 3 Affirming congregations in 3 provinces of Canada, and to meet with representatives from Calgary's other Affirming congregations on May 26, 2008 at 7:00. This was an information-oriented meeting, and an opportunity to discuss questions about the practical implications of adopting an Affirming statement.

The final draft of Hillhurst's Affirming Statement was circulated starting May 18. A vote to adopt the statement was held at our AGM on June 22, 2008, and was passed by the congregation.

WHAT ABOUT SAME-SEX MARRIAGE?

The congregation's leadership made a decision on this before the introduction of Affirming in June 2006. The Board of Hillhurst United passed a vote on April 11, 2006 to make this a church that will solemnize same-sex weddings. The Affirming statement would be a sign of the congregation's commitment to full inclusion in marriage as part of full participation in congregational life.

WHAT'S NEXT?

We will proceed with an application to Affirm United; their involvement ensures that the Affirming name identifies a congregation that is truly a place where people will find hearts that are open as well as doors that are open. A service of celebration would follow that, likely in the fall. Our website and publicity materials would identify us as Affirming thereafter.

Our ongoing work of learning will continue in the fall of 2008 with a focus on practicing hospitality, hearing one another's stories, creatively managing conflict, and seeing God's light in one another. The learning gained through our discussion of sexual minorities will take us into our efforts to address homelessness in Calgary and much much more.

There will be continued opportunities to view the Affirming DVD, and the documentary For The Bible Tells Me So, both of which are on loan here.

There will be further opportunities to learn how to provide a welcome to, and receive the spiritual gifts of, those who may not be able to count on a welcome in all churches, and in particular those who are bisexual, transgender, lesbian or gay.

And - whatever else the Spirit brings our way.....

“In God's family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslim and Christian, Pakistani and Indian, Buddhist and Hindu - all belong....God's dream wants us to be brothers and sisters, wants us to be family...In our world we can survive only together. We can be human only together..”.

Desmond Tutu