

Why would a small rural congregation bother with becoming Affirming? Apr 18/2015

Motivation

Over the last number of years, many United Church congregations have toyed with the idea of becoming Affirming. Most congregations want to give the message that they are inclusive and welcoming. Most congregations think they are already welcoming.

Our small Grafton and Castleton congregations near Cobourg Ontario, had thought of it over the last number of years; Castleton even 6-7 years ago had Conference staff person Rev. Dr. Jackie Harper do a workshop on it for them. But they had always shied away from it, fearing that it might cause friction, – even with their long history of justice and community involvement. 20 minutes apart, Grafton with 40 attending and Castleton with 20 have been served by a retired part-time minister.

The spark that reinvigorated new energy for becoming Affirming, came from the 2012 Bay of Quinte Conference annual meeting, and its decision to become an Affirming conference. Returning from that conference annual meeting, the next Sunday I reported to both congregations that the conference had decided to become Affirming, and basically asked our congregations “Why aren’t you Affirming? Because though of course it's still not easy for everyone, isn’t there is a sense it is almost motherhood anymore? -and certainly not the controversial issue it was a dozen years ago.” And it was helpful to be able to point to some neighbours who had already modeled the journey or were in process.

And yes, we are an extremely welcoming church to most people, but we had never really gone out and actually declared that LGBT and other marginalized people are welcome. So I asked: Are they welcome in this congregation? The congregations were teased to wonder about it.

That could have been the end of the matter.

But people did wonder about it. Sure those old concerns remained. But there was interest and there was energy and there were conversations. Now, it is true that it started with two or three people who had some passion for it, and without them it might not have happened. But from the Sunday spark from the minister, people started to talk and inquire about why it was important, what difference does it make, and what the heck is the process to become an Affirming congregation anyway?

Process

Our work plans show that it was a two-year process - and it likely needs to be. Right away it was important to realize that it's a direction that is still seen as radical by some, still taboo in a few places and in some minds, and to be mindful that a few people may still have a level of discomfort with the whole topic. Just because a few people are comfortable, passionate and ready to go, doesn't mean that the whole world is on your bus – yet. So it takes time, persistence, and energy.

We had a committee of four, along with Rev. Lander. That fall our committee attended an Affirm workshop sponsored by the Affirming Ministries Action Group of Bay of Quinte Conference. We listened as other Churches outlined their experiences and shared their wisdom and “lessons learned”. We played the “Stars” game and heard heart-rending stories from people who had been rejected and shunned by their Churches for their sexual orientation. We collected the resources available. We came away full of enthusiasm, with a beginning understanding of the process and how we might apply all this to our particular situation. It was a great start.

We, as a committee, did spend some personal time reviewing pertinent materials to be sure we were all on the same page and would be able to answer questions if they arose, or at least know where to find the information. And Rev. Lander included references and discussion points in his Sunday sermons and prayers, giving spiritual guidance and keeping the issues in the forefront.

Following this, the committee developed a work plan with target time-lines to guide our work. Applying good marketing principles we realized that congregational awareness was the first step to getting people thinking and talking.

We chose a distinctive logo for the process – a rainbow fish. We set up a resource table in the church where we all meet for coffee after the service - with displays and messages that changed regularly. We just created the messages, printed them out on the computer and tacked them up. Not terribly sophisticated, but relatively easy to do. A suggestion /comment box was available with a promise that all questions would be addressed. Committee members also made themselves available to answer any questions or concerns.

After spending some time (months) creating the awareness, our next step was to get people together to delve into the issues more fully and give people an opportunity to talk through their thoughts and feelings, reflect on how it feels to be different, to be “outside” and feel unwelcome in certain situations. After all - We have all experienced that at some time in our lives.

So, in the spring, the committee led a well-attended workshop where we used videos of other church’s experiences; played a powerful simulation game "Coming Out Stars" (google Coming out Stars activity) to experience how isolated people can feel in a church that can often seem exclusive. At the beginning of this meeting, we acknowledged that it is a sensitive topic, that people may have strong feelings and that, as a group, we needed to make sure the meeting felt safe and respectful for everyone. That seemed to set the tone.

We devoted a significant amount of time for discussion, questions, and answers. In this inclusive atmosphere all were able to have their issues or concerns dealt with. Anonymous written feedback/evaluations of the workshop were completely positive, with many expressing how much they had learned and urging us to go forward.

Next step on the plan was the marriage policy. Early the next fall the Council voted for all weddings at our Church to be acceptable- regardless of sexual orientation. (Perhaps it has helped that in our minister’s previous Toronto church, the marriage policy was approved 10 years ago so he had the wording pretty well down pat - in that church there was only one same gender wedding in the several years following, which was incidentally the current Premier of Ontario.)

And we added words to our mission statement to welcome and respect everyone’s individuality and dignity regardless of age, gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, differing abilities, ethnic background or economic circumstances. There was no contention. All this was reflected on our Charge website.

Shortly after this Rev. Philip Cable, a well-loved candidate from the congregation whose orientation would not have been known in those earlier years, movingly preached our anniversary service, supporting our journey.

And then, the next significant action was to put a vote to our annual meetings in the spring in each of the two congregations. The Committee members were armed and prepared – and, yes, nervous - for what I'm not sure, because in each place there was limited discussion and each congregation passed the vote to become Affirming, and each was unanimous.

So - we put a rainbow candle on the communion table and a big rainbow flag at the back, which no doubt elicited some coffee hour conversations. We added appropriate welcome signs to the doors and placed rainbow decals on our Church sign and the highway directions signs. One of the committee members established a liaison with the local PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) group and attends their meetings regularly to dialogue, support and act as a representative of the Charge.

Our joint celebration service in June, 2014 had Rev. Philip Cable again preaching. Youth members of the PFLAG group also spoke of their experiences locally and thanked the Charge for their support. Everyone was invited to wear a small rainbow ribbon and during the service everyone came forward and attached their ribbon on two rainbow cross banners which still hang in each church. The Communion table covering was a striking rainbow cloth. A celebration lunch followed with a rainbow cake.

We put our mission statement on our website home page <http://www.castletongraftonuc.com> as well as a rainbow flag, and not just a still one but an active one fluttering in the breeze, visually expressing that it is a continuing process. We are at the moment putting up a new sign in front of the Grafton church which will have the United Church logo and the Affirm logo. Castleton is celebrating 150 years this year and an artist in the congregation has made a special banner with rainbow waves at the bottom to celebrate this focus.

This may all sound very simple, maybe even miraculous, and it was not as challenging as it has been for some congregations. So we could wonder why it was not as horrendous as some fear, and why it could even be

unanimous. We did not expect it to be unanimous, though we would not have proceeded if we did not think we could come close, and we would likely not encourage others to either.

Possibly a factor might be that the charge had gone down to part-time ministry so their financial situation was not the only thing they thought of, and it is not as likely to fly if survival and finances are the main concerns rather than mission.

Congregational Culture

At least for us, there were no LGBT people on our committee, so any issue or optic of personal agenda was small; indeed the one person who had been a sex educator tried to stay in the background.

The tone of the congregation or charge has a lot to do with how well this process will succeed. Maybe it's just happenstance that we're the first multipoint charge in Ontario to become Affirming, but it is important to have good relationships within the charge before entering such a process. This charge has had its ups and downs over the years like most, but they are presently a very much a together charge, the two points even at some distance get along very well, with congregational members appreciating each other. And it's not that we all agree on almost anything, because we don't, but we have decided to care about each other, and we know that for a fragile congregation to survive, we have to be tolerant and indeed affirming of each other's idiosyncrasies.

It likely doesn't make a lot of sense to take a position of being an Affirming congregation to the world so to speak, if we are not affirming within our congregations to one another. For to become Affirming is not just to be welcoming to LGBT folks, but to be welcoming and inclusive to all, period. It's also pretty hard to become Affirming in practice, if one is not also affirming in theology.

Theology

Affirm is not likely to fly if God is seen as a law and order punishing God, but probably will if God is seen as a compassionate God of grace. And if the rhetoric in the congregation is that God required Jesus to die in our place, then God is a law and punishment God, for that would mean that if Jesus didn't go to the cross, we would have had to, which for most people is just unthinkable.

The Affirm process will not be easy if the theological focus is sin. Indeed if you ask any congregation as we did, to think of two or three words to describe your children or friends,... how many came up with the word sinner? So if we do not think of our children in the language of sin, why is it that we think that's the first thing that comes into God's mind in reference to us, God's children?

Our theology has to be in some sense progressive. None of the biblical laws, the 10 commandments included are ultimate, for Jesus said all need to be interpreted by love, by his summary of all the laws with the golden rule. When Jesus quoted the Scriptures, he never did so in chapter and verse; nor do rabbis or Jews today.

Our Sunday by Sunday prayers reach out to the hurting, the sidelined, so that all people know they matter.

We tried in our focus to be gentle, to listen, so that as much as possible everyone could know they mattered and belonged to God's envelope of care.

Overcoming Fears

There were fears and nervousness. We of course wondered if we might lose people because of the process. One or two wondered if we were putting principle over the bottom line and would not only lose members but their contributions.

But we think actually the opposite has happened. As far as we are aware, no one has left. And the word is out in our community that we are open and welcoming. It's not just that we happen to think we are a welcoming congregation, but we have declared that to the community.

Have we had an influx of LGBT people who have started attending? Not that we know. There have been no same gender weddings in the last year because of it. But what we have noted is that we have had some new people coming, because the rainbow decal on our doors speaks to the fact that we welcome diversity. So we have welcomed people who have been made to feel uncomfortable in their previous Churches or who were hesitant to approach a Church before, due to (for example) their non-traditional marital status, their race, their regularity of

Church attendance, mixed faith. We continue the liaison with PFLAG, demonstrating the Charge's support and commitment to the principles. So there are unexpected spin-offs to this Affirming business – when you declare to the whole community that you are ready to welcome the world.

For us - Becoming Affirming is not a graduation, but an ongoing process. We know that we need to continue to talk, to learn, to understand and to remind ourselves of what we have committed to by becoming an Affirming Charge.

It is likely, at least in part, that because the congregation responded to the tease of becoming Affirming, that they also responded to the tease of – “Would they be interested in welcoming a Syrian refugee family?”

This suggestion was made to them about a month before our Affirm celebration service, so how to complicate things, but in the week or so following the service we had our first meeting to inquire about sponsorship. Three months later our Syrian Muslim family of 5 arrived. We have since raised almost \$30,000, and contributed major volunteering walking beside them on the journey. Affirming means justice.

I've wondered too, if our Affirm focus has had an influence on our approach to baptism. We've had a few baptismal requests from families with nothing to do with the congregation, living at a distance, and no intention to become involved in any church. Our board's response, knowing how hurtful and alienating being turned down can be, is to say that it is a sacrament of God's, so what right do we have to refuse it?

Becoming Affirming is a powerful and faithful thing for any congregation to do. But it is important to be affirming within, before we can be Affirming without. If there is rancor within, there must be some loving ways of dealing with that first. Becoming Affirming may not solve other problems any more than having a baby will save a marriage. On the other hand, we ought not let a couple of a strong voices dictate a very truncated meaning of gospel, to prevent justice.

Conclusion

And maybe talk of Affirming, which is clearly gospel, is a way to change the channel and the tone, to a bigger picture faith, regardless of how long it takes. Becoming Affirming is gospel. Such a process is not to be rushed, but we are called to love the world, and therein is the joy of being children of God. Affirming really means: “Love your neighbour”. Go for it!

David Lander david@lander.ca