

Background to the AUSE membership increase, 2020

Current Context

The Affirming Ministry Program is a central part of who AUSE is and what it does. And it's blossoming. In 2017 we set a new record when 35 ministries became Affirming in that year; 2019 will see very similar numbers. At the end of 2015, we had 95 ministries in the Affirming process. As of our July 2019 AGM, we had 150. We want that number to grow. At this time, less than ten percent of all ministries in the United Church are Affirming, but every new ministry makes a positive difference, and a positive difference is our focus.



These numbers are amazing. In fact, they were unthinkable only ten years ago. And this also creates growing pains. We are still a volunteer-led movement, and face the same dilemmas of a shrinking and overly busy volunteer base as the rest of the church. Each ministry in the process is accompanied by a volunteer throughout its journey. When needed and asked, AUSE will find volunteers to help with questions, conflicts, resourcing, and pastoral care. As the numbers in the process grow, the volunteers at the heart of the process are carrying more and more work. At the same time, the demand for timely and professional communication is growing. We need to plan on hiring additional support staff to help with the workload and expansion of the Affirming Ministry Program.

It may look like the numbers of new ministries should cover growing costs. And they do help. But as one example, our record year in 2017 created \$3500 in additional revenue. That isn't enough to allow us to commit to even a half time staff position.

If we don't raise membership fees significantly, we will eventually deplete our existing reserves because we have a small deficit each year in supporting a part-time essential communications resource. We express deep gratitude to both members and donors, who have helped us increase capacity over the past five years. But as growth becomes more sustained, it's clear that existing resources cannot meet capacity needs.

How the membership fee increase works:

The 2019 AGM approved changes to increase the membership fees as follows:

- that community of faith (congregational) membership fees for Affirming Ministries be 1/20 of 1% of net revenue, to a maximum of \$500 and a minimum of \$100. Net revenue is the basis on which the United Church bases its congregational assessments. This figure is submitted on the Statistics form each year. For budgeting purposes, Ministry Treasurers will have a password to access this figure from the United Church website. Affirming Ministries and members will be invoiced by Affirm United in the spring of each year.
- that regional council membership fees be \$1,000
- that non-congregational ministries which are Affirming pay what they can between \$100 (the former flat membership fee) and \$500
- that individual/household membership fees increase to \$50 (while retaining the option of a reduced or free membership fee if need is indicated.)

While understanding that this decision may cause concern, AUSE feels that the new membership fees for communities of faith, based on this formula, will be more equitable. We know many ministries have very constrained budgets. Below we explain more about what your membership fees have been supporting, and offer some more information on what increased fees would support.

What your membership fees and donations have been supporting, 2015-2019

See the following for additional details, and please share with your ministry:

[2018-2019 annual report](#): Click on the link, or see www.ause.ca, About Us/ Bylaws and Annual Reports

2018 year in review: <http://affirmunited.ause.ca/2018-in-review-what-your-support-has-accomplished/>

A ten hour per week Communications Coordinator: our single biggest expense. This has made a significant difference to the quality and diversity of our communications **and is the reason for the significant growth in the Affirming Ministries Program**. The job: To promote the Affirming Ministries Program and improve AUSE's external communications and engagement through channels like a regular newsletter, new resources, a website and social media that are frequently updated; provide prompt and helpful responses to some of the many emails we receive; support our very busy Affirming Ministry Coordinators; support Affirming Ministries and those in the process by finding them supports; and provide support to our annual conference and other key events.

PIE Day 2019 (and 2020): www.pieday.ca This first-time project was designed to give everyone a chance to have fun, eat dessert, and talk about how we be PIE: Public, Intentional, and Explicit in our radical hospitality, especially for LGBTQIA+ and Two Spirit people. In particular, this project was designed to resource ministries who are already Affirming, and may be struggling to keep that commitment fresh and active. Thanks to a *Gifts with Vision* grant, we had the funds to cover the video that accompanied PIE Day. But everything else about this national project is supported by your memberships and donations.

One "in-person" Council meeting per year: Council members gather once a year in February from across the country with all expenses paid. This is important to our work and cohesion, but this also means Council members have been paying out of pocket to attend the year's second meeting at the summer conference. Council also meets for four 2 hour meetings via conference call each year.

Website: www.ause.ca maintenance, security, hosting, and other fees: all the hidden costs that accompany communication.

What your increased membership fees will allow us to do over time:

At the 2020 annual conference we hope to engage in visioning that would allow a much more complete route forward. For now, these are elements that Council has begun to discuss

Hire a *full time staff person*, eventually

Provide honoraria for Affirming Ministry Coordinators, who are currently volunteers and carry the vast majority of the Affirming program work.

Offer much more *support to already-Affirming ministries*. For example, PIE Day 2020 (Saturday 14 March 2020) is one small element, as are continued website development, regular communications, an active social media presence and group forum, and more.

Support our *annual conference*: continue to build on expanding numbers, making the space as diverse, equitable, and accessible as possible.

Provide for *two Council meetings annually* with expenses covered for all Council members.

Contact information: We encourage you to raise any concerns and questions you may have with the Council. Here are the lead contacts:

Michiko Bown-Kai, co-chair: ausecochair@gmail.com

Anne Wood, treasurer: annew@cogeco.ca

Thank you for all you as supporters and members have offered this growing movement of trans, non-binary, Two Spirit, intersex, asexual, pansexual, bi, lesbian, gay people and communities—and our cisgender and heterosexual allies. You are the reason for our name: ensemble (together) and united.

Mark 4:30-32 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV): The Parable of the Mustard Seed

30 Jesus also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?
31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;
32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

