

If dialogue is respectful, then disagreement can be accommodated as we seek peace and justice-love for all.

Inclusive and intentionally welcoming churches

The process of improving outreach and pastoral care for GLBT persons and their families and friends is similar to improving outreach to any group who is not within the congregation.

One of the keys is to be *inclusive*, to work under the agreement that all persons are welcome -- that there is something of God in all of us.

For this to be effective, we need also to be *intentional* in our welcoming of people who are different. This means trying to explicitly *recognize* everyone, newcomers and familiar people who come out to us, as having distinctive fears and hopes.

It is also essential that we create the sense of church as being a *safe place* where people can be honest and share their distinctive gifts and where needs can be discussed openly, in a relationship of trust, without fear of rejection.

In the United Church of Canada, congregations and other courts that have undertaken a process of education about GLBT realities, and decided to declare publicly their welcome, can be certified by Affirm United/S' affirmer ensemble to be "*Affirming Ministries*."

***"Then you will know the truth,
and the truth will set you free."
John 8:32***

Bibliography for Further Reading

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"Coming Out" as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender within a Christian Community

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You are probably familiar with the expression of "coming out of the closet", which refers to the increasingly prevalent action of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender [GLBT] persons when they reveal or declare their sexual orientation or gender identity to their family, friends, colleagues and/or the general public.

This can be a very unsettling experience for the person risking being so honest in our intolerant and sometimes homophobic and trans-phobic society. It can also be unsettling for those who learn the honest reality about someone they assumed was heterosexual, or assumed was male, or female, because of their body's sex characteristics. This is even more difficult for people who hold a very conservative or traditional view of what response the churches expect in such a situation. What has been a purely academic or speculative situation suddenly becomes an encounter with a flesh and bone reality, a very personal relationship event.

When such a situation occurs within a church or faith community, it can have far reaching repercussions. It may force parents of the GLBT person into or out of their closet -- to support their child or deny the reality. It may force the congregation members to re-think their attitudes toward people who are different.

Why is "coming out" important?

While all people seek to conform to certain societal standards in order to achieve a

sense of "belonging", we also seek to be recognized as individuals. When you are so recognized, you cease to be a *nobody* and you become a *somebody*.

It is this kind of basic recognition that LGB people seek when they come out, or when T people transition. It is also an act of integrity to be who they truly are and to share that reality with those they trust and respect. Many want to be acknowledged and known as the distinct beings God created them to be, and not assumed to be like everyone else.

Keeping secrets and wearing a mask is how folks can live in the closet, but ***there is no room for dancing in a closet and it's dark in there***. Sadly, the closet can be a necessary evil for those who still fear for their safety or livelihood in a homophobic and trans-phobic church and society.

Keeping secrets is both stressful and destructive to human relationships. By coming out, GLBT folks are trying to maintain the integrity of their relationships – and being true to who God made them.

Why can't lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people just keep quiet?

In our community, people regularly talk about their "private lives" -- their spouses, their family, their weekend activities with specific persons, etc. What most "out" GLBT folks are doing is exactly the same thing: talking about their significant relationships and activities, or expressing

their innate sense of gender. In this, they are behaving no differently from anyone else.

Coming out as an opportunity for ministry. Within the context of our church's ministry, this openness is both a challenge and an opportunity.

Any open discussion of sexuality or gender variance is disturbing to some people. Social standards and church teachings on issues such as marriage and divorce, gender roles, premarital sex, and homosexuality have evolved over the last decades and will continue to do so. Some find this change uncomfortable and others find it refreshingly honest.

Such open discussion about our interpersonal relationships and 'putting a face on' issues to make them relational and concrete is a critical component of spiritual growth and ministry.

But what about disagreements?

The church is not of one mind on many issues, including minority sexual orientation and gender identity. Churches are made up of people and not everyone believes the same thing. Effective ministry in this area may be less about reaching consensus on the answers than it is on simply permitting the faithful to ask questions. We are all on a pilgrimage together and if we are to travel as companions, then we will engage in:

- welcoming
- searching/questioning, and
- sharing/learning