

Affirming FAQs

Q. What is an Affirming Ministry?

A. “Affirming” is an official designation from our denomination, the United Church of Canada, that signifies we have spent an intentional period of time (one year) exploring our inclusivity; it’s a time when we ask whether we are going to just say or embody those radically inclusive words of “welcome, wanted and accepted,” and not only towards each other but to people for whom ‘church’ is not an easy place to be. An “Affirming Church” is a church that recognizes being welcoming and hospitable takes more than politely shaking hands, and does the hard, vulnerable and intentional work of creating a space where all are made to feel welcome, wanted and accepted. These churches strive to continually grow and change as they seek to live more fully into God’s way of welcome, love, and justice for all creation. Just as God rejoices in the goodness and diversity of creation, so too Affirming Ministries honour and celebrate diversity.

Q. Does that mean that Affirming Ministries are only concerned about those issues?

A. No. Affirming Ministries are not "*gay churches*" or "*single-issue communities*." They have a strong commitment to faith and spirituality, to being a caring community and to other areas lacking justice. Presently, the RDLUC Affirm Team is focusing on mental health, sexuality and gender, and cultural/ethnic diversity. While that will be our focus, it will not be the only thing explored, highlighted or talked about. Because those are issues present in our community and world, we will, however, be spending time on them. We will still honour the scope of our faith as well as our values of Christian community, faith and spirituality, outreach and justice, and caring for one another.

Q. How’s it work?

A. On October 9th we will vote whether or not to participate in this process. It's not a vote to become an Affirming church, it’s a vote to enter the process. We will then spend the year beginning the conversation (the idea is that this conversation will never stop) by focusing on three things which we experience first hand in our community and society: mental health, sexuality/gender, and cultural/ethnic diversity. We’ll spend time learning about these issues; hearing stories from community members and others who are trying to reconcile faith and church with their mental health, sexual orientation/gender, or ethnicity/culture; exploring what Jesus and our scriptures would say about these things; being vulnerable with our questions, concerns, and ideas; talking about what being ‘the church’ means and looks like; hearing from churches who have gone through this already; and asking what being Affirming would look like at RDLUC. This will take us a year. And while it will not be the only thing we do and talk about, it will be a consistent and pervasive conversation. Sound like a lot? It is and it’ll be tough at times. But living out and owning a faith of love asks for nothing else, and we know God’s Spirit will be guiding us as we go. In October of 2017 we’ll have another vote, this time answering a question like: “Do we want to embody the love of God and strive to be welcoming, wanting, and accepting of all people?” If 75% or more of us answer with a resounding ‘yes!’ we will celebrate this brave move forward in our faith and begin to do what it takes to be the kind of Church that

means it when it says: "You're welcome, wanted, and accepted here! Come in. God's house is your house!"

Q. If our congregation becomes Affirming, does that mean we'll be "a gay" or fill-in-the-blank church?

A. No. Affirming congregations, like all other United Church congregations, have a wide diversity of members, including heterosexual couples, families, seniors, children, youth, singles, as well as LGBT people. Typically, in most Affirming Ministries, LGBT people, people who struggle with anxiety, or people who are of a minority culture, are usually more visible, honest, out, and active than average because they're in a safe and supportive place. We have experienced many people choosing to join Affirming Churches for that exact atmosphere—it's a place where children, youth, and adults can grow in faith in a place of respect and justice for people from all walks of life.

Q. Can't we just say "everyone is welcome"? Why do we need to name or focus on certain things, people or groups?

A. No. If only it were that easy! We can't just say it because Jesus didn't just say it. Jesus knew that 'all are welcome' because God loved everyone and that God's world is one where *everyone* has a place and *everyone* has enough, but he also knew our world doesn't work that way. To help fix that, Jesus specifically went to and named those who had been pushed out, marginalized, and made to feel unwelcome: the gentiles, women, children, the poor, the doubters, the Samaritans, and the ill and lame. It was by naming them and going to them, that not only were they affirmed and heard the Good News that they were loved and welcomed, but those in the centre could realize that as well and begin to do the important work of making space for others.

There are other reasons as well: First, as a Church, we need to be explicit about our inclusion because so many Christians have been so explicit about their exclusion. Second, many churches that say they love or welcome everyone are not at all inclusive or accepting of people who have different sexualities and genders, mental health issues, other cultures, or many other things. People may have very different understandings of what "all" or "everyone" really means and so we must spell it out. And third, many who are made to feel unwelcome are made so because of invisible and stigmatized reasons. As we know from the Civil Rights and Suffrage movements, equality and human rights have been won only when issues of injustice become named and visible. Affirming Ministries are public and explicit about what their welcome and justice-seeking really means and looks like.

Q. Who decides whether a church or organization will be declared an Affirming Ministry?

A. There is a very intentional and prescribed process to becoming an Affirming Church. The ministry's board sends a request, along with its Affirming Ministry Vision Statement, Inclusive Marriage Policy, and Action Plan to the Affirming Ministry Coordinators of the United Church of Canada. If all criteria is fulfilled, the ministry is declared an Affirming Ministry at their service of

celebration when they receive their certificate after which they are added to the national list on the Affirm United web site.

Q. Affirming Ministries make a financial commitment to Affirm United. How much money is asked for and what is the money used for?

A. Affirming Ministries typically make an annual contribution of \$100 per year to be institutional members of Affirm United. The money supports the work of the Affirming Ministry program, pays for the newsletter and other communication, helps initiate other Affirming Ministries across the church, and supports Affirm's annual conference and annual general meeting.

Q. Do all United Church congregations celebrate same-sex weddings?

A. No, the decision is made on a congregation-by-congregation basis. Some congregations offer weddings to all, some offer weddings only to heterosexual couples, and some permit their clergy to officiate at off-site same-sex weddings. All Affirming Churches offer weddings to both hetero and same sex couples.

Q. Will our ministry lose members or donors if we become Affirming?

A. Some congregations do lose a few members when they decide to become Affirming. There is often nothing one can do about this. However, most ministries grow in numbers and vitality when they become Affirming. People are attracted to congregations that study and grow, are actively living out their vision and mission, and are welcoming to others. While it is sad to lose community members and resources, it is a loss we must take if we truly believe in what we are doing.

Q. How many Affirming Ministries are there?

A. The number is growing, both within the United Church of Canada as well as in other denominations.

In 2010, there were 70 ministries across Canada. **(UPDATE STAT)**

Q. Is the celebration where we declare ourselves an Affirming Ministry the end of the process for becoming Affirming?

A. The celebration is an important milestone, but it is only part of a long-term commitment to live out what it means to be an Affirming Ministry. Affirming Ministries are asked to create an ongoing Action Plan. They recognize that there will always be more to learn. Affirming Ministries continue to grow and change as they gain further understanding and as they seek new ways to act for the healing and wholeness of all creation.