



In 2016, Bracebridge United Church began the process of becoming an Affirming Ministry.

What does this mean?

The Affirming Ministry Program encourages United Church bodies (such as congregations, presbyteries, Conferences, education centres, and outreach ministries) to study what it means to be publicly welcoming and inclusive. The program provides information and education on sexual orientation and gender identity issues. It also encourages the study of other United Church resources that promote inclusion and justice for other groups that have been historically excluded or marginalized (such as those excluded by ageism, racism, sexism, accessibility, and socio-economic differences).

Affirming Ministries publically declare their commitment to inclusion and justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. They work in many different ways toward the healing and wholeness of creation — challenging bias and discrimination based on appearance, culture, class, or age; working to end racism; promoting economic justice; increasing accessibility; or caring for the planet. These ministries declare, in words and actions, that God loves and celebrates all people. And they call upon the rest of the church and society to do the same. Affirming committees lead their United Church congregation in this process of becoming an affirming ministry.

Although the Affirming Ministry Program focuses on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, it encourages ministries to broaden their understanding, awareness, and action to include justice, healing reconciliation for Aboriginal people and First Nations, and work to end racism. LGBTQ people from ethnic minority groups or those who are Aboriginal, Métis, or First Nations may experience two-fold oppression. They may be marginalized in their own context because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and they may experience racism, isolation, or invisibility within LGBTQ networks, where people of White/European origin often predominate. It is vital that groups in Canada that support justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including churches, also address structural and internalized racism, White privilege, and fear of those who are “foreigners” or “other.” Affirming Ministries seek to connect with those working to end racism and White privilege to build networks of dialogue and mutual action around such issues as sexism, class, or (dis)ability.

What have we done so far in this process?

- We established a committee to take us through this process, comprised of the following members: Shawn Forth, Ginette Grewal, Kevin Logie, Jim McCuaig, Keith Montgomery, and Kent Phillips. All committee members familiarized themselves with the key working document, *Open Hearts: Resources for Affirming Ministries in the United Church of Canada*. We encourage you to read this informative document, which can be found at: <http://ause.ca/wp-content/pdf/OpenHearts.pdf>
- In the Spring of 2017, we presented a series of “Affirming Moments” at various Sunday worship services.
- In June, we screened the film “*For the Bible Tells Me So*”. Approximately 30 people attended.
- Affirming Ministry committee members spoke individually with congregation members who wanted to discuss the need for, or the purpose of going through this process.
- A “Suggestions & Comments Box” was made available in the narthex/lobby for the congregation’s input and feedback.
- An information leaflet was developed and made available to congregation members and members of the greater community who attend BUC events.

- Affirming Ministry committee members met with all small groups, teams and committees to discuss the relevance of being an Affirming congregation for each particular group. One committee member did several presentations for the Men's Breakfast Group.
- Three of the Affirming Ministry committee members attended the *Trans Day of Remembrance* event on November 20, 2017 and spoke of our Affirming Ministry process.
- A panel discussion was held November 26, 2017, with over 30 participants including individuals from the wider community.
- The "*What's Happening at BUC*" weekly e-newsletter and Sunday bulletins have included updates on the process on a regular basis.

We're Already Welcoming, So Why Become Affirming?

Some ministries already have many signs of inclusion. They may feel they include everyone and wonder why they would need to specifically mention sexual orientation or gender identity. When the question of becoming an Affirming Ministry arises, people may feel that they are already welcoming so there is no reason to become Affirming. Being an Affirming Ministry is not merely about welcoming people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Words like welcoming or inclusion suggest those on the inside have the power to choose to accept those on the outside. This makes it sound like an act of charity to welcome those who are different or marginalized. However, it is not our place to welcome anyone because church is not a private club and we are not the gatekeepers. As soon as one new person comes through the doors, the community becomes a new community.



Jesus' parable of the great dinner (Matthew 22:1–14) reminds us that the true host of our faith community is the Risen Christ. In Jesus' parable, the guests who have been invited fail to show up, so the host goes to the streets and back alleys of town to fill the banquet hall. In the church, by God's grace, everyone is already included in the celebration. When we participate in Christ's church, we accept an invitation to which others, including LGBTQ folk, have already been welcomed. By showing up, we agree to sit at table together. By accepting the welcome offered to each one of us as individuals, we encounter God's inclusive love for humankind in all its wonderful diversity.

Affirming Ministries acknowledge that God's love is wider and more inclusive than they can imagine, let alone live out, and they commit themselves to sharing that news with others who may have heard a quite different message about what it means to be church. Because voices of condemnation, exclusion, and hatred are loud and persistent within the church and in society, Affirming Ministries make a public statement about who they are and what they believe. They understand that while it may be risky and challenging to "come out" as an Affirming Ministry, it is often far less dangerous than it is for LGBT people themselves. Affirming Ministries believe it is important to be a public witness and to be a role model for other ministries.

"To change another to better fit our own ideals is not love; it is domination. Instead, to truly love is to engage joyfully in our differences and to bring out the best in our unique potential — in personal relationships, and in community." ~ BRODERICK GREER (Canon precentor at Saint John's Cathedral in Denver where he directs liturgy and oversees ministry with people in their 20s and 30s).

Where do we go from here?

Bracebridge United Church will gather as a community of faith after both services on **Sunday, May 6, 2018**, to vote on become an Affirming Ministry, and to accept the revised Mission Statement (below), and our Affirming Statement (below). If you are unable to be here on Sunday, May 6 and wish to participate, you may pick up a ballot at the church office and leave your vote with Barb Mason, our Church Administrator.

Bracebridge United Church Mission Statement (revised)

Bracebridge United Church is a lively Christian community with roots in our pioneer heritage of faith, worship and service. We are a welcoming, serving church which recognizes and accepts the challenge of ministry in a growing, changing Muskoka community.

Our Mission, in response to the message of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ, is to:

- Foster commitment to Jesus Christ and his church
- To be an open and affirming congregation that welcomes all people safely into the church family with diversities in family make-up, age, ethnicities, abilities, sexual orientation, cultural, economic, and spiritual backgrounds
- To worship joyfully and faithfully and share a desire to explore and grow in faith and spirituality
- To provide opportunities for children, youth, and adults to grow in knowledge of the Christian way of life
- To be a committed community that speaks and lives its Christian values in a diverse and inclusive way
- To reach out to persons in need through word, action, and faith
- To share with God the responsibility for the well-being of our world, spiritually, socially, and environmentally.

Affirming Statement

- ◆ We recognize that congregations have historically condemned and excluded some persons and groups of persons through active effort or complicit silence.
- ◆ We believe all people of every age, race, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation or religious background are part of God's community.
- ◆ We acknowledge that couples may be married regardless of race, creed, colour, gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. We also celebrate the union of previously divorced people and couples with differing religious backgrounds.
- ◆ We will work constantly to be a safe, accessible, inclusive, and affirming church.

Ballot to be cast on Sunday, May 6, 2018*

That Bracebridge United Church becomes a member of Affirm United/S'Affirmer Ensemble, a network of ministries seeking to work for justice and inclusion of all, and in doing so;

⇒ **Adopts the revised Mission Statement.**

⇒ **Adopts the Affirming Statement.**

* If you are unable to be here on Sunday, May 6 and wish to participate, you may pick up a ballot at the church office and leave your vote with Barb Mason, our Church Administrator.

For further reflection...

"Spiritual humility is not about getting small, not about debasing oneself, but about approaching everything and everyone else with a readiness to see goodness and to be surprised. This is the humility of a child, which Jesus lauded. It is the humility of the scientist and the mystic. It has a lightness of step, not a heaviness of heart. That lightness is the surest litmus test I know for recognizing wisdom when you see it in the world or feel its stirrings in yourself. The questions that can lead us are already alive in our midst, waiting to be summoned and made real. It is a joy to name them. It is a gift to plant them in our senses, our bodies, the places we inhabit, the part of the world we can see and touch and help to heal. It is a relief to claim our love of each other and take that on as an adventure, a calling. It is a pleasure to wonder at the mystery we are and find delight in the vastness of reality that is embedded in our beings. It is a privilege to hold something robust and resilient called hope, which has the power to shift the world on its axis. Public theology is at its best when it creates the space necessary for people of various gender identities, religious affiliations and non-affiliations, ethnicities, and economic levels to be known as their full selves, not pushed into a mold not meant for them. It is being less concerned about finding surface-level common ground than about holding space for people's unique experiences of divinity and humanity." ~ KRISTA TIPPETT, Masters of Divinity Yale University 1994, Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living