

FAQs about Affirming Ministries

Q. What is an Affirming Ministry?

A. Affirming Ministries are communities of faith, regional councils, assisted living homes, educational institutions, retreat centres, outdoor ministries and other ministries within the United Church that publicly declare their commitment to inclusion and justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Although Affirming Ministries make an explicit statement about issues of sexuality and gender, their commitment to justice is far broader. They 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. Affirming Ministries are not —gay-only churches^{ll} or single-issue communities. They work on a variety of justice issues. They know that the work of healing and justice-making, of being the church, is an ongoing part of who they are, whether they strive to combat racism or work to make their buildings wheelchair-accessible; as they attend anti-poverty marches or seek to live out the United Church's apology on residential schools; when they honour the teachings of Two-Spirit people, respect children's rights, and provide space for addiction support groups.

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

A. The ministry's governing body sends a request, along with its Affirming Ministry Vision Statement, Equal Marriage Policy, and Action Plan to the Affirming Ministry Coordinators (via email). If these documents are approved by Affirm United, the ministry membership then votes to become an Affirming Ministry. Following a positive vote (recommended 75% minimum), the ministry sends a completed membership form and institutional registration fee to the treasurer of Affirm United. The Affirming Ministry Coordinators confirm membership registration and assist the ministry in planning its service of celebration, at which it receives its Affirming Ministry Certificate. The ministry is then added to the national list on the Affirm United website.

Q. What is the difference between "welcoming" and "affirming"?

A. 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.

Q. Why do we need to name sexual orientation and gender identity in our statements?

A. First, we need to be explicit 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 of all sexual orientations and gender identities. People may have very different understandings of what "all" or "everyone" really includes. And third, people of this marginalized group are often invisible even to those of us that want to offer support. Human rights have been won only when issues of injustice become more visible. Affirming Ministries are public, intentional and explicit (P.I.E.) about what their welcome and justice-seeking really means.

Q. Why do people state their pronouns (ie she/her or he/him or they etc.) following their name?

A. Displaying a person's pronouns in the workplace, social settings, zoom calls or on social media profiles, has become increasingly common. The reason straight people share/display their pronouns is to let others know (especially LGBTQ2S+ folks) that this is a safe space for any LGBTQ2S+ folks helping to make spaces more inclusive of transgender, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary people.

Q. What does PIE mean?

A. To become Affirming, your ministry embarks on an educational, discernment, and decision process that helps your ministry be PIE:

Public: Be out and proud! Use symbols, signs and words which are echoed inside and outside the church building, in all facets of church life.

Intentional: An Affirming ministry is deliberate in their process of study, education and dialogue with members of their faith community. They ensure that the history of oppression and discrimination by the church is both understood and acknowledged, and that continued growth, education, and celebration are part of its ministry.

Explicit: An Affirming ministry is very clear about who it welcomes. It names queer, trans, and Two-Spirit people and the gifts they bring.

You're asked to look at a variety of areas that may be barriers to those coming to your ministry and community—age, gender, race, ability, class, economic status and, in particular, gender identity and sexual orientation.

Q. Do all United Church communities of faith celebrate same-gender weddings?

A. No, the decision is made on an individual basis. Some communities of faith offer weddings to all, some offer weddings only to heterosexual couples, and some permit their clergy to officiate at off-site same-gender weddings.

Q. Do all Affirming Ministries celebrate same-gender weddings?

A. Yes, it is one of the requirements to be declared an Affirming Ministry that a community of faith must offer heterosexual and same-gender couples the same rights and privileges, including weddings.

Q. If our community of faith becomes Affirming, does that mean we'll be a gay church?

A. No. Affirming communities of faith, like all other United Church communities of faith, have a wide diversity of members and adherents, including heterosexual couples, families, seniors, children, youth, singles, as well as members of gender and sexual minorities. Typically, in most Affirming Ministries the latter are usually more visible, out, and active than average because they're in a safe and supportive place. Often same-gender couples want their children to be part of an Affirming Ministry because of the supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere they find there. But many heterosexual people choose Affirming Ministries for the same reason—it's a place where children, youth, and adults can grow in faith in an atmosphere of respect and justice for all people from all walks of life.

Q. What is Affirm United's relationship to The United Church of Canada?

A. Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble is a partner organization of The United Church of Canada. It is an independently incorporated charitable organization whose membership (mainly United Church members and ministries) is open to those of all sexual orientations and gender identities who support the organization's work. It celebrates the changes in the United Church while continuing to challenge the church to be true to its calling.

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.

Primary Source: Open Hearts – Resources for Affirming Ministries in The United Church of Canada
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