

Summary of Grace United Church's Affirming Ministry Lunch & Learn on January 29, 2023

The Worship Service

The Affirming Ministry Lunch & Learn followed an Affirming forward service lead by Richard Bott and supported by members of the Affirming Ministry namely, Steven Bottaro, Sharyn Georgas, Jane Jenner, and Janet Saunders. Watch the entire service here. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Uh6jVMijIO>

The Lunch & Learn Workshop Process

The Lunch & Learn event was quickly set up during the Coffee Social. Approximately 40 participants enjoyed the lunch provided. Thanks to Myrna-Gail who helped with the beverages and set up. On each of the tables the Affirming Committee provided several handouts:

1. A list of the definitions of the individual "communities" making up the 2S/LGBTQIA+ acronym of the larger queer community;
2. Wheel of Privilege and Power; and
3. the handout from "Open Hearts: Resources for Affirming Ministries in the United Church of Canada", entitled *Why Become an Affirming Ministry?*

Table Discussions over Lunch

Also on the table were several stickies to encourage responses from the participants to three questions:

1. What stood out for you regarding the service today?
2. What did you learn that was new?
3. What needs to be clarified?

Some in the congregation loved Richard's stole, while others enjoyed the fact that the Affirming Committee members remained in the congregation while reading their portions of the service. Many were also surprised that there is such a small percentage of Affirming congregations within the broader United Church of Canada. Some commented on the history and the timelines of Affirm United and the United Church.

<https://affirmunited.ause.ca/history/>

<https://affirmunited.ause.ca/affirming-ministries/>

Many participants were prompted by the questions to participate in the open forum. For those who were not comfortable participating within a large group, the stickies provided the opportunity to write down comments or questions throughout the workshop. Participants were then encouraged to park those stickies on the easel. Questions will be answered at the end of the session or reference made as to where to find additional information.

Safe Space, Pronouns, “This is Us” & Language

Richard talked about safe spaces and the use of pronouns by all in order to create a safe place for everyone. When thinking about the 2S and LGBTQIA+ community we need to say to ourselves “This is Us” as people within our congregation and immediate family members are part of the 2S and LGBTQIA+ community. Language is important when we are discussing issues related to marginalized communities; however, until we learn them, we can use the language we know, and as we learn the appropriate terminology, we will use that. This allows us to all learn together and in a safe environment.

The Agenda for the Lunch and Learn focused on three main topics:

- Affirming Vs. Welcoming
- Privilege
- Allyship

Affirming Vs Welcoming

One of the comments we received from a Grace member is attaining a level of comfort when trying to explain to a friend or family member what “affirming” is. Here is a video clip of one person’s take on what “affirming” means to them. This clip is a video documenting the affirmation process by Riverside United Church in London, ON.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcx6cImMlhY>

- Discussion between welcoming and affirming is important. We will need to revisit this to make sure the distinction is understood.
- Numerous questions were raised about the Affirming process - what it involves, how long it takes, what is required to become Affirming, and to maintain the Affirming designation.
- Concern expressed by some: “Are THEY (i.e., 2SLGBTQIA+) going to take over?”.
- One of our core values is inclusivity, and that becoming Affirming ties in with this.

Privilege

Discussion of what privilege is using the wheel of privilege and power.

Here is the link for the wheel which includes gender, and sexuality, as well as race. Take a look at the wheel and make a note of where you sit on the wheel in each category. The closer to the centre of the wheel you are, the more privilege you have.

<https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/documents/pdf/english/corporate/anti-racism/wheel-privilege-power.pdf>

Here is a link to a video to watch:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hD5f8GuNuGQ>

What is privilege?

- Unearned advantage we get from being part of a dominant group whose needs traditionally have been prioritized by systems (e.g., government, police, school etc.).
- We don't earn or choose, privilege is structural, we can't control but we can understand and be more aware.
- Makes it easier for some people to succeed not due to efforts or ability.
- By understanding, helps us understand experience/barriers of people with less privilege face.

Discussions:

- Surprise at how many categories were on the Privilege Wheel.
- You have to look at each spoke on the wheel to determine your overall privilege; you will have varying degrees of privilege in each category.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc.

For example - A black woman may experience misogyny and racism, but she will experience misogyny differently from a white woman and racism differently from a black man.

We are all unique. It is important to recognize that people in the queer community are individuals with their own views and concerns, and not one person represents everyone in the community.

We can use our privilege to our advantage to support and advocate with (not for) others (i.e., be allies).

Our privilege from where it comes from gives us the ability to be an ally to marginalized groups.

Here's an example:

Video "Sometimes you're a caterpillar"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRiWgx4sHGg>

- What situation immediately came to mind when you saw the snail struggling?
- Was it the wheelchair/accessibility situation? This is an example of how the world had to be educated as to why physical accessibility (e.g., ramps, no curbs, wider washroom stalls, etc.) was necessary to equal the playing fields for those with physical challenges –

now (for the most part), it has become a no-brainer. We set up handicaps by being blind to their impact on others... What are the handicaps we set up?

- The same change in mindset (like the caterpillar) is needed for the 2S & LGBTQ+ community.

Allyship

What is an ally?

Some videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4UEVBdWdms>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BxDyFgAQoo>

How can we be allies to marginalized communities, such as 2S plus LGBTQIA+? What actions can we take?

- Learn and educate ourselves (i.e., appropriate terminology and language) and understand issues that specific groups face (read).
- Awareness is not enough: we need to put our voices out there.
- Advocate and support; we need to be that “someone” who has your back.
- Challenge in the moment inappropriate jokes or references, for example.
- Support someone who is challenging in the moment.
- Share feedback to someone who is exhibiting inappropriate actions or language.
- Lead with our hearts.
- Be P-I-E. (Public, Intentional, Explicit)
- Mark days of significance (e.g., PRIDE Sunday), etc.

Importance of Allies:

- Advocate(s);
- Someone who goes to bat for others;
- Characterized by listening to find out what would help – what the issues and barriers are;
- Important to understand that broader meaning of the word – not just in the context of political or military spheres.

Check in

The stickies that were placed on the easel in the parking lot were reviewed – some were about the definitions and we directed them to the sheet on the table. The other questions or comments were addressed at this time if not within the workshop.

We then checked in with everyone to see how they were feeling. We read two statements and asked participants to gauge their reaction to them by using the orange and blue cards on the table. Orange if you are warm to the statement and blue if you are cool to the statement.

- I have more information now than I did before I came today.
- If asked (which, are you not), I feel ready to make a vote today on Grace being an affirming congregation.

The Affirming Committee asked participants to provide feedback regarding the L&L workshop. All comments and concerns were organized and reviewed by the Affirming Committee at their next meeting. The comments were extremely valuable to help the Affirming Committee plan the next Lunch & Learn event.