



Contact

President’s Message: It Started in the Choir

For nine years I sat beside him in the Senior Choir as he gently and patiently taught me how to sing tenor, sharing off-colour jokes he used in his travelling salesman job, relating from time to time stories of his service in the Second World War. This time I was sitting beside him during the Annual Congregational Meeting in 1988. He was a vocal opponent of allowing homosexuals to become ministers in the United Church of Canada. Much of what he said during that meeting burned my soul like acid.

As the debate wound down, it was obvious the congregation was going to send a petition to the General Council in Victoria, B.C., decrying ordination for people who were gay. He leaned over to whisper conspiratorially in my ear. “What we need in the pulpit are good, solid, God-fearing, Christian men—people we can trust as our spiritual leaders.” Then he named one person specifically. With a satisfied smile, he settled back to relax into the pew, waiting for the vote.

I was dumbfounded while at the same time trying to squelch a giggle. You see, the person he named I knew to be a closeted gay man.

In the 29 years since that meeting, that congregation where I grew up—Parkminster United Church in Waterloo—has become an Affirming Ministry. I know they have discovered becoming Affirming was only the first step. Subsequently, they have had to work diligently,

intentionally, and publicly to faithfully live into what Affirming means. It is an evolutionary process that has no ending.

Back to my choir mate. I loved him. I was deeply hurt by him, but I still loved him. After a few years, he felt he could no longer remain a member in the United Church of Canada and transferred his membership to another denomination. I was still hurt by his worldview, perplexed about why he seemed to despise those with a different sexual orientation, but I still loved him. Wanting to “clear the air,” I invited him to meet me at Tim’s.

After the usual pleasantries, I asked why he felt so strongly. For the longest time he looked into his coffee cup as if the answer could be found there. I began to think I had pushed too hard and our pleasant sharing would quickly end. He sighed, took a sip of his coffee and looked me straight in the eye.

“I’m going to tell you something I’ve never told anyone before,” he whispered, “Not even my wife. It was London, England, during the Blitz. We had been out to the pub before the bombs started raining down. Escaping to the bomb shelter, we were cooped up for the rest of the night, unable to emerge until the ‘All clear’ sounded. Finally, just as dawn was breaking, we were allowed out. I had about a ten-block walk to get back to my barracks.

(Continued over)

Inside this issue:

How do vital ministries celebrate milestones? Parkminster’s celebration of the ten-year anniversary of becoming an Affirming church is one of the stories highlighted in this issue, along with stories from other churches who have embarked on the journey to becoming Affirming.

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March 2017

Contact is a Hamilton Conference newsletter produced four times annually and distributed by HamPack.

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DEADLINES

Oct. issue—Sept. 15
Jan. issue—Dec. 15
Mar. issue—Feb. 15
June issue—May 15

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www.hamconf.org

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"I took a deep, refreshing breath of the morning air. It was tinged with a hint of dew and the pungent smell of cordite, blood, and dust. Halfway back, a fellow stopped me on the street and asked to bum a cigarette and a light. I obliged and lit one myself. That's when I found out," he snarled.

"Found out what?" I asked.

"He put the moves on me. I didn't know he was one of *them!* I didn't even hesitate. I punched him in the nose and kicked him once he was down. Then I left in disgust, my cigarette forgotten."

We sat for a timeless moment in silence. He didn't seem to be able to look me in the eye. I wanted to reach out and give him a reassuring touch, but I didn't dare. I took a sip of my coffee, pondering.

Every one of us has a history. Our stories are written through experience, through gaining wisdom, from exploring differing points of view, from celebrating others for the good within. In fact, this is a "Holy Shift!" that is essential to affirming others as we ourselves are affirmed. The Affirming movement was initiated by those championing LBGTQ+ rights, but it extends far beyond that singular perspective. The work of the Affirming movement is to give reverence to another person, to pay close attention to who they are without preconceptions, and then to embrace them as we ourselves are embraced. In that loving action we are both changed—for the better—as we work for justice and inclusion for everyone.

It's hard work. It's rewarding work. It's transformative work. It's faithful work. It's work to celebrate and it continues for as long as we interact with others.

I found out that he was dying, that man who so hurt me and whom I loved. I went to his home to say goodbye. He

was sleeping when I entered his bedroom. I touched his hand and his eyes opened. He smiled and he didn't move his hand away. In fact, he reassuringly grasped my hand. I told him that I was sorry he was having such a hard time because I had enjoyed our conversations as I got to know him better over the years. He had taught me so much. His eyes closed and I thought he was falling asleep. When I started to let go of his hand, he pulled me closer.

"I'm going to miss our chats, too," he breathed. "I learned a lot from you. I learned that maybe I needed to listen more closely to others. Thank you." He prayed for me and I prayed for him. He died the next week.

He affirmed me and I affirmed him. We were both transformed in the sharing.

*By Gord Dunbar,
Hamilton Conference President
2015-2017*



"The work of the Affirming movement is to give reverence to another person, to pay close attention to who they are without preconceptions, and then to embrace them as we ourselves are embraced."

Parkminster United: An Affirming Church

Introduction

Parkminster United Church in Waterloo Presbytery is an affirming congregation. It was ten years ago that the decision was made to call ourselves affirming. Over the years, we have learned and grown into this identity. We have much to share, including the story of the great celebration of our tenth anniversary, which we had this past November.

Becoming Affirming

Ten years ago, Parkminster United Church in Waterloo voted to become an Affirming church. It was decided that a yes vote needed 67% support from the congregation. The affirming motion passed by 67% plus one, one vote more than what was needed to become Affirming.

Some voted against becoming an Affirming church because they knew that some would leave in protest. Some did. Others did not see that there was a need for having that designation in writing or in the church's policy manual. After all, we were welcoming. However, history has proven that it is important to state publically who we are and to show that all are welcome. Many of our new members, when asked why they chose us, comment on the little 4x6-rainbow sticker that we have on our sign at the street. They were looking for a place where all are welcome and they needed it to be clear and publicly stated.

Ten years ago, thirty-three percent of the Parkminster congregation voted against becoming affirming. This year, when the hand-held rainbow flags were being distributed for our re-commitment to the affirming way, only two people refused a flag. We have come a long way and we have grown and become

more blessed than we could ever have imagined.

Now, we have an Inclusive Committee that is strong. We are working on what it means to be people who fly the rainbow flag. We are pondering an LGBTQ meet-up as well as services for partnered LGBTQ folk whose relationships are ending. The plan is to consult with the LGBTQ community to determine its own need/interest. We have received so much community response that we are really focused on next steps.

The process of becoming affirming made us look at ourselves and our beliefs. It is one thing to say that we are welcoming, but it is another thing to fly the rainbow flag, a symbol that shows our inclusivity and therefore our willingness to engage with others across difference. Here is one story of the power of accepting the "Affirming" name.

When one family's daughter came out, she was given a rainbow wind chime. The mom was hesitant to hang it outside where the public could see it. The mom realized that she was fearful of other people's opinions and her recognizing the fear signalled the need for some deep self-reflection. When a church comes out, it means that all must look at their hidden fears and be willing to risk personally.

Being named affirming means that there are many issues to consider. For example, Parkminster installed four new accessible washrooms. The Inclusive Committee advocated for



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three of the four to be gender neutral. This designation means that anyone can use any of those three washrooms and not be challenged, making those washrooms safe for transgender people, especially those who are in transition. Parkminster's thought is that if we can be more accepting and make even one person's life easier, then we have done a job worth doing.

Parkminster's Tenth Anniversary Celebration

We celebrated the Affirming vote on its tenth anniversary. There were two "Celebration Projects." The first was the purchase of a flagpole and a rainbow flag that we would set up right on Erb Street. It is beautiful and it has been noticed by many and appreciated. Each week at our community food truck event, a new person speaks to us about the flag and how it impacts his or her family. People have come to our door asking if we have support groups for things that they would like help with. These encounters are pushing us to look at ourselves and figure out next steps in becoming a welcoming and helpful congregation.

Secondly, we celebrated our anniversary on November 13 with a special worship. It was the most wonderful day.

Our guests were the Rainbow Chorus, who sang at Parkminster a decade ago. Our choir sang "One World," a fabulous anthem about unity and hope. There were six speakers, each a member at Parkminster. The first two were the daughter and granddaughter of one of the original advocates for the Affirming decision. The daughter told her mother's story, including the anger and homophobic behaviour that came her mother's way. Her own daughter, an out lesbian, spoke about what it meant to come out in a caring family and an Affirming church.

The next speaker was a gay man who

reflected on his experience and his partner's, and what it meant, for both of them, to find a welcoming church home.

The third speaker was the mom of three children who had been attending a church in her community until that congregation started to debate its position regarding LGBTQ people. The experience was so painful that she and her husband decided to find an inclusive church in which to nurture their children. The family came to Parkminster because, as the mom said, she and her husband do not know how each of their children will grow up. It was important that, no matter what choices the kids might make about their sexual lives, they would know that their spiritual home was a safe place.

The last speakers were a husband and wife, parents of two children. Their son, six years old, is gender fluid and dresses most often as a girl. Most Parkminster people thought they had two daughters. Again, the family was looking for safety and acceptance, for welcome and respect for all four of them.

The stories were deep and rich and very moving. All of us learned, firsthand, what a gift it is when church "draws the circle wide" and follows the gospel mandate to love our neighbours as ourselves.

As the Inclusive Committee planned the anniversary day, it decided to decorate the sanctuary with rainbow banners that were attached to the cross at the front and stretched overhead to the choir loft. The communion table had a rainbow cover, and we had three bunches of rainbow helium balloons.

As the offering was being received, the children handed out rainbow flags and the congregation made a recommitment to inclusivity and welcome. To mark our recommitment, the Rainbow Chorus sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." When the kids returned to worship, they carried



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in a rainbow banner. The boy who identifies as gender fluid was one of the banner kids—an experience that was inclusivity in action.

It was also quite a moment when that same little guy came into the sanctuary and saw the decorations. He asked his parents what they were for. They explained as best they could and his response was, "They are for people like me." If that little boy learned anything that day, he realized that he matters and he is worthy of celebration.

Conclusion

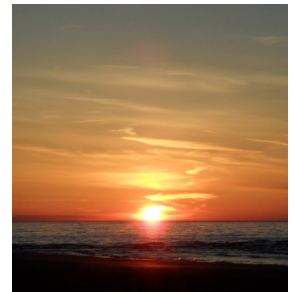
The Parkminster congregation began a journey of hope when it voted to become Affirming. The job of determining what that identity is calling us to be and to do is an ongoing task. It makes us grateful, and it makes us bold.

*By Meg Grieve, Interim Minister
Parkminster United Church*

Conference Meeting 2017

Delegates will gather for the 92nd meeting of Hamilton Conference at the UNIFOR Centre on beautiful Saugeen Shores in Port Elgin, **May 26-28, 2017.**

If you are a Presbytery Representative for your congregation, or if you are ministry personnel, you are expected to attend the Hamilton Conference Annual Meeting. Registration is available on the Conference website: <http://hamconf.org/administration/annual-meeting/>. Registration for Children and Young Teens and Youth Forum is there too!



Other Upcoming Opportunities in Hamilton Conference

Best Practices for M & P Committees

April 1

Awakening to Contemporary Spiritual Voices

April 24

Is Your Stewardship Toolbox Empty?

April 29

SAPR Boundary Training

May 2 & 6



See the Hamilton Conference website for more info or to register!

<http://hamconf.org/events/>

Applewood United Church: On Becoming an Affirming Congregation

Applewood United is located in south-east Mississauga, near the border of Toronto and the QEW. We are composed of three congregations that merged together in 2003; Bethesda and St. Luke's both closing their doors and joining Applewood. In 2008 we held our Same Gender Marriage vote, and in 2012 we began looking at the possibility of becoming an Affirming Congregation.

A small group of interested folk began meeting in the fall of 2012 to determine what the requirements were for becoming Affirming, and whether this was something we thought would be important for our congregation. We already knew we were welcoming, but did we want to take the extra step to make our welcoming intentional and public? Very early on in our discussions, it became evident that we all thought it was, 'The right thing to do.'

With the guidance of Affirm United personnel, and the 'Open Hearts' resource document, we began by looking at our Mission Statement, and reworked it. Some members started planning educational sessions, and others arranged funding for speakers and resource people.

In February of 2013 we sent out a copy of the new Mission Statement and a Question and Answer letter to the congregation. The questions included: What is Affirm United? What else do we have to do? Why now? We're already welcoming, why gain the Affirming designation? Why do we need to name sexual orientation and gender identity explicitly in our statements? What does the Bible say about homosexuality and same-sex relationships? How will

becoming an Affirming Ministry change what we teach in Sunday School? Will we become a gay church? Have congregations lost members when they became Affirming?

Attached to the congregational letter was a response form, asking for either reasons why people were happy we were considering becoming Affirming, or questions and concerns. We received 77 signed responses, of which only three were in disagreement. We did recognize that there were a handful of members who were not prepared to put their opinions in writing. Concerns were also expressed about how to support those who were not in agreement.

In March of 2013 we had an Affirming Sunday, where Irene Miller, the then-chair of PFLAG Toronto spoke during the service and answered questions afterwards. PFLAG stands for Parents, Family, Friends and Allies of the Gay Community. Irene is a member of Fairlawn United church and an advocate.

We continued to meet and plan educational events. We had 'Minutes for Affirmation' on a regular basis, providing updates and information during the service.

In the fall of 2013 we held our first movie and discussion event and showed 'Inlaws and Outlaws' by Drew Emery. At this point we were trying to discern who in the congregation was hesitating and why. It turned out that it was a small group. We put great effort into our 'How to Be an Ally' workshop that included lunch and a panel of speakers who shared their experiences of the gay community and

"We already knew we were welcoming, but did we want to take the extra step to make our welcoming intentional and public?"

the church. Over 50 people attended. This was followed by a focused Affirming Sunday service and another Question and Answer session. We had personal discussions with people who were unsure.

After much deliberation and with the guidance of Anne Hebb from Affirm United and Kim Uyede-Kai from Hamilton Conference, we decided that we were ready to hold a congregational vote. This occurred on April 6, 2014. It was a two-part vote. Ninety-one percent were in favour of becoming an Affirming Congregation and 96 percent were in favour of accepting the new Mission Statement.

This was the beginning, not the end. We held our celebration service at the end of April. From that point on we have continued to hold education events and discussions with the congregation. We have regular submissions in our weekly newsletter. We held a workshop in January of 2016 to explore the Trans and Gender Identity Kit, 'Celebrating Gender Diversity.' We have looked at ways to reach out into the community and make contact with a number of organizations serving the marginalized in our society. We had a table at our community Wellness Fair last May. We have focused on inclusive language in our worship services and cooperative action among church committees. Movie events continue to draw people into discussion.

We are now working with Diane Matheson-Jimenez from Hamilton Conference, and representatives from other churches, to organize an Affirming Event for congregations that are already Affirming, and those who wish to become so in the future.

On April 2, we will celebrate our third anniversary of becoming an Affirming Congregation. Michael Coren will be our

guest speaker. All are welcome to attend!

Our Mission Statement, approved in 2013 helps guide our actions:

Applewood United Church takes its inspiration from the life of Jesus. As an open, welcoming, compassionate community, we are inclusive and respect diverse understandings of God. We recognize our need for spiritual nourishment.

We are intentional in our inclusiveness. We welcome unconditionally people of all ages, races, genders, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, ethnic origins and economic circumstances. We will build on our strengths and add new ones, seeking to be a more effective church. We will inspire people to 'Go out and make a difference in the world!' As a result of these efforts, we will grow as a people and as a faith community.

*By Marilyn Hayden, Chair
Affirming Committee of
Applewood United Church*

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Affirming Congregations: A Personal Experience at Harcourt Memorial United Church

“The thing about sharing that you are part of a sexual minority is this: once the words are said they cannot be taken back.”

When a member of the church council came to me saying that he was going to make a motion at the next meeting that a committee be struck to explore the process required for becoming an affirming congregation, my heart sank. How was I, as one of the ministers, going to carry on ministry with such a process happening when I had a lesbian daughter and we as a family were not ‘out’ in a public way. Sure, we were out to a number of congregational families as well as my colleague in ministry and I had shared the information with the Personnel Committee but other than that, it was a secret. Our daughter was living and working in Toronto but we felt it had to be a family decision as to how we were going to handle the process. In the end, we decided that if the church council decided to enter the process, I would take a sermon time and tell my story as a dad. Our daughter’s story was her story. In addition, my ministerial colleague and I decided that she would be the ‘point person’ for the process.

When the council decided to initiate the process, I did tell my story as a father and about what I had learned in the years since our life as a family changed in the twinkling of an eye. The thing about sharing that you are part of a sexual minority is this: once the words are said they cannot be taken back. Prior to sharing, I also wrote every household where someone had shared their own story about a child, an uncle, a parent, and so on. There were about thirty households to contact. We also told our friends in the PFLAG (Parents, Family,

Friends and Allies of the Gay Community) group of which we were a part. On the day that my sharing happened, both services were amazingly full. Some kind of word had spread. I decided that I would not stand at the door greeting people afterwards but rather at the front of the sanctuary; the line to me was very long, something I had not anticipated. After the service I was exhausted but I felt strong about what I had shared.

The affirming process took five years at Harcourt. It was painful at times. The Affirming Committee provided a number of educational experiences as well as an event off site where those opposed or uneasy could share their issues in confidence. The Committee worked far harder than they expected. By the time the formal congregational vote happened it felt like a new day was unfolding and the covenanting service that followed was particularly celebratory.

During those five years, I felt I had to stay out of the process except on one occasion where my colleague and I had a difference of opinion. A lesbian couple asked for a blessing of their relationship and a request was forwarded to the Worship Committee. I felt that by saying yes we would be prejudging how the congregation would decide the question. My colleague felt it a matter of justice, I think, and wanted the blessing to occur. The Worship Committee decided not to give its support.

Now, twenty-five years after our daughter first started the process of coming out, I know that I have been changed and for

the better. I would not have missed this part of my life for anything, even if it has been tumultuous at times. When she married in June 2016 my heart was filled with such love and joy. But I also live with the strange paradox of a little boy living inside of me who grew up in a very different time and place, who just thinks same-sex relationships and marriage are weird. But that's OK. My faith with a compassionate Divine Presence is filled with ambiguity and paradox, making life far more exuberant and joyful.

By John Butters

“I would not have missed this part of my life for anything, even if it has been tumultuous at times.”

Working towards Becoming an Affirming Conference

Affirm United is a justice-oriented organization of people in The United Church of Canada working for the full inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in The United Church of Canada and in society. A description of Affirming Ministry requirements is available on their website: <http://affirmunited.ause.ca/affirming-ministry-requirements/>.

At the 90th meeting of Hamilton Conference, the Affirming Conference Task Group tested the will of the court to becoming Affirming by bringing forth the following motion, which was carried:

That Hamilton Conference of The United Church of Canada move toward authentically becoming an Affirming ministry by:

- a) *Acknowledging and celebrating the inclusive work of our Church in its efforts to work for healing, justice, and wholeness for the world and for creation itself, but also acknowledging the challenges and presence of homophobia and heterosexism in the church; and*
- b) *Reflecting upon the issues of heterosexism and, individually and corporately, continuing to work towards challenging and changing policies and practices to engender safety, respect, and inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, and avoiding heterosexist assumptions and expectations; and*
- c) *Asking Conference Executive to establish a monitoring, auditing, and reporting process (mindful of confidentiality) on the work of Conference regarding issues of heterosexism and homophobia; and*
- d) *Actively inviting and encouraging presbyteries, pastoral charges, and ministry personnel to engage processes that promote the authentic inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in our faith communities; and*
- e) *Offering educational resources to presbyteries and pastoral charges that will support transformational learning about heterosexism and homophobia; and*
- f) *Inviting Affirm United to recognize this Conference as an affirming ministry.*

As part of the process of fulfilling the requirements of the Affirming Ministry Program, the Affirm Network of Hamilton Conference will bring forth a proposed Mission Statement and Mission Policy to the 92nd meeting of Hamilton Conference on **Friday evening, May 26, 2017**. There will be an opportunity for small group discussion following the presentation!

We want to hear from you!

Contact, a newsletter for Hamilton Conference, is distributed four times annually through HamPack (HAMilton PACKage). The purpose of *Contact* is to share news throughout the Conference about our life, work, programs, policies and communities.

In particular, we want to highlight stories about vitality in ministry.

Questions for our readers:

Where do you see vital ministry happening?

Where have ministers navigated tough conflict?

How do you help a congregation set vision for the future?

What questions might liberate ministers to share good stories?

Please send submissions to Barbara Hampson at bhampson@hamconf.org. Submissions may be edited for length and clarity. Digital photos are welcome; make sure you have **permission to publish** pictures of people, especially photos of children.

Hamilton Conference is one of 13 Conferences of the United Church of Canada. It includes 53,000 church members in 230 pastoral charges.

Hamilton Conference provides leadership and support to six Presbyteries (Bruce, Erie, Halton, Hamilton, Niagara and Waterloo) to enable a variety of ministries in the Presbyteries and congregations and to do the work of General Council in the area bounded by Mississauga and Kitchener-Waterloo, and Tobermory and Niagara.

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