

What is an Affirming Church?

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

With thanks to Trinity United Church, Vernon

Q. What is an Affirming Church?

A. “Affirming” is an official designation from Affirm United. It signifies that a church has spent an intentional period of time considering what it means to be inclusive and, following that exploration, has made the decision to actively strive to welcome people of all races, ethnic backgrounds, economic circumstances, sexual orientations, gender identities, ages, mental and physical abilities, and so on. An “Affirming Church” recognizes that being welcoming and hospitable is more than politely shaking hands; it does the hard, vulnerable and intentional work of creating a space where all are actively embraced as God’s beloved ones and made to feel welcome, wanted and valued, particularly those for whom church has too often been a place of judgment and exclusion.

Q. Can’t we just say “everyone is welcome” as we have been? Why do we need to name ourselves as Affirming or focus on certain things, people or groups?

A. We know that ‘all are welcome’ because God loves everyone and in God’s world everyone has a place. But we also know that our world doesn’t work that way. Jesus specifically went to and named those who had been pushed out, marginalized, and made to feel unwelcome: gentiles, women, children, Samaritans, the poor, the doubters, and the sick and lame. As his followers, we are called to do the same. And words are not enough; our actions have to back up what we say. By following the Affirming process we have shown that we have done some of the work that we need to do in order to Publicly, Intentionally and Explicitly say “this is who we are.” It also says that we have committed to, and are proud to put into our policy, our stance. There are other reasons to be Affirming as well: First, we need to be explicit about our inclusion because, in the broader church, so many Christians have been so explicit about their exclusions.

Second, while many churches say they love everyone, the definition of everyone has not always truly meant ALL people. Either explicitly or through implication, some sexualities and gender identity and expression, ability, mental health issues, cultures, economic backgrounds or other things have been left out of the definition of everyone, so we must spell it out. And third, many people are made to feel unwelcome because of invisible and stigmatized reasons. As we know from the Civil Rights and Suffrage movements, equality and human rights have been secured only when issues of injustice become named and visible. As a result Affirming Churches are public and explicit about what welcome and justice seeking really means and looks like.

Q. Does that mean that Affirming Congregations are primarily concerned with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and with social justice issues?

A. No. Affirming Congregations are not “gay churches” or “social justice groups.” They have a firm commitment to supporting and developing faith and spirituality, to being a caring church community and to engaging in the outreach and justice work involved in bringing about God’s shalom. While this is the current focus of work for our Affirm Committee, it is not the only thing we have explored, highlighted or talked about. For years we have had an affirming marriage policy and a values statement that facility partners (renters) are required to agree to. And the other work that makes Jubilee who we are (like worship, belonging, learning, and service) will continue to be a vital part of our life together.

Q. What will happen this spring (2025)?

A. This spring we will vote on a motion to become an Affirming Congregation. If 75% or more of us vote in favour of the motion, the motion passes. We will also vote on a motion to adopt an affirming statement so that the language better aligns with an Affirming Church identity. A simple majority is required for this vote. We will also

vote on a proposed Affirming Church Action Plan; how we will continue to live out a commitment to justice and affirmation. Again, a simple majority is required for the plan to pass.

Q. If Jubilee votes to become Affirming, what happens next?

A. We will submit our results to Affirm United for their confirmation. We will also submit other documents to show that we have fulfilled our obligation to engage with the congregation about this important decision (we have been in on-going dialogue with Affirm United throughout our process and have every reason to be confident that our work will meet with their approval). We can expect to get official confirmation within a short time so that we can begin planning a service of celebration at which we can receive our Affirming certificate and publicly announce ourselves as Affirming to our community and the wider United Church. After this we will be added to the national list on the Affirm United website.

Q. Is the celebration where we declare ourselves an Affirming Church the end of the process?

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 Church. 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.

Q. So then, what is an Affirming Action Plan?

A. An action plan is just that, a plan to act out our commitment to be publicly, intentionally, and explicitly inclusive of all people. Typically a plan will have both a short and longer term focus. It is also meant to be a living document, not a rigid, static, proscriptive contract. In Jubilee's case it is an expansion of who we are and aspire to be.

Q. Might some people leave Jubilee if we become Affirming?

A. Yes, it's possible. Some congregations have lost a few members during their process. However, most churches grow in numbers and vitality when they become Affirming. People are drawn to churches that actively live out their vision and mission and that welcome others. While it would be very sad to lose members, it is a risk we must take if we truly believe in the gospel message: ALL people are God's beloved ones and there is an important place for each one in the life and work of God's church.

Q. Is it possible that some people will leave if Jubilee does not become an Affirming Church?

A. Yes, it's possible. For some people, the welcome that has been offered without having been made policy could mean that they cannot stay. As we are seeing in the USA right now, when companies and organizations remove their stated commitment to DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) and other statements of welcome, some people cannot abide participating in that organization any further.

Q. Is there a possibility that Jubilee will be vandalized if we become an Affirming Church?

A. Of course it's possible, but based on the experience of other congregations in the immediate area that are Affirming, and of businesses that have publicly identified as spaces that welcome the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, it is highly unlikely. That being said, of course we will be prudent about the steps we will take to minimize possible risk, however unlikely.

For more information contact affirm@jubilee-uc.ca