

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*” 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 does the Bible say about homosexuality?

A. The Bible says nothing about homosexuality as a sexual orientation because the idea of people having different sexual orientations was not part of the biblical worldview. However, there are several references in the Hebrew scriptures and the Epistles to men having sexual relations with other men and to women having sexual relations with women (e.g., Romans 1:26–27). In all these passages, same-gender sexual relations are said to be wrong. However, this needs to be put in context. Some of these passages cited as arguments against homosexuality also condemn other behaviours we consider acceptable, such as creating images of people, birds, or animals (Romans 1:22) or eating foods such as shrimp that are deemed to be unclean—a practice that is also called an abomination in the Bible (Leviticus 20:25).

Suffice it to say that the theology of radical hospitality and inclusion is complex. It needs to be explored with theological knowledge of the many understandings of scripture and the context of the scripture.

Q. Did Jesus have anything to say about same-gender relationships?

A. The gospels have no references to same-gender relationships or homosexuality. However, Jesus is quoted as saying, “Do not judge” and “Love your neighbour.”

Q. What does the Bible say about gender identity?

A. Although God creates human beings of the male and female sex in Genesis, the creation story says nothing about gender. It is also important to remember that gender is not the same as sex. The Bible does present clear gender roles in which women are subordinate to men, but these must be situated in a historical context in which men had multiple wives, could forcibly marry the widows of their enemies, and hold concubines. There are also many instances of people deviating from traditional gender roles—consider, for example, the contrast between Esau (who is “hairy” and a hunter) and Jacob (who is “smooth” and “stays in the tent” where women stay). It is

Jacob who becomes the chosen one for all of Israel, despite being gender non-conforming. While some cite Deuteronomy 22:5 to censor gender variance (“A woman shall not wear a man’s apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God”), it’s important to keep in mind that it is vastly outnumbered by passages celebrating gender diversity (e.g. Matthew 19:12; Isaiah 56; Acts 8).

Q. Affirming Ministries make a financial commitment to Affirm United. How much money is asked for and what is the money used for?

A. Affirming Ministries typically make an annual contribution of \$100 to \$500 per year to be institutional members of Affirm United, with fees varying depending on the net revenue of the community of faith. The money supports the work of the Affirming Ministry program, pays for six newsletters per year and other communication, helps initiate other Affirming Ministries across the church, and supports Affirm United’s National Council expenses as well as annual conference and annual general meeting.

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. Will our ministry lose members or donors if we become Affirming?

A. Some communities of faith do lose a few members when they decide to become Affirming, usually people with a strongly held opinion that homosexuality is evil. However, most ministries grow in numbers and in vitality when they become Affirming. People are attracted to communities of faith that study and grow, are actively living out their vision and mission, and are welcoming to others.

Q. How many Affirming Ministries are there?

A. By the middle of 2020 there were over 220 Affirming Ministries, including communities of faith, regional councils, national organizations, educational institutions, United Church Women structures, a university chaplaincy and an assisted living residence. Some outdoor ministries are exploring how they might become Affirming Ministries. Together, these represent just under 10% of the total number of United Church of Canada ministries. We’re encouraged that the number is growing rapidly, especially in smaller communities and non-community of faith ministries.

Q. Can’t we just say “everyone is welcome”? 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. 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.