

AFFIRMING MINISTRIES PLAN OF ACTION

In June 2019 at our general meetings, Antler River Watershed, Western Ontario Waterways, and Horseshoe Falls Regional Councils each approved the following Vision Statement:

SAFETY. SANCTUARY. UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Striving to be faithful followers of Jesus in our time and place, Horseshoe Falls / Antler River Watershed / Western Ontario Waterways regional council will continue to remove barriers to participation in the life and work of the regional council and society, committing ourselves to be open to the Spirit. Resisting all forms of oppression, we welcome and celebrate people of any sexual orientation and gender identity, and all others who are marginalized.

That was step one. The next step is to approve a plan for how this intention will be implemented. This plan has been approved by the Affirming Ministries Coordinators.

Affirming Ministries are specifically focused on being open and welcoming to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities and also pay attention to those who are marginalized in other ways. Some resources for this conversation have come from Affirm United at <http://affirmunited.ause.ca/affirming-ministries-program/>

The Affirm Network is a self-established joint committee of members of Western Ontario Waterways, Horseshoe Falls and Antler River Watershed Regional Councils and is accountable to the regional councils. The Affirm Network promotes the mission of Affirm United / S'affirmer Ensemble through education, by encouraging communities of faith to become Affirming Ministries, and by offering support for those that are.

The Affirm Network encourages these practices to enact the Vision Statement:

- Intentionally engage guest speakers/preachers at events who reflect diversity
- Have introductions/name tags that indicate gender pronoun preferences and explain why we do so
- Review all policies and decisions through an affirming lens
- Encourage diversity in nominations procedures
- Identify, challenge and eliminate barriers in hiring and pastoral relations
- Make use of United Church of Christ resources, particularly "Stretching Beyond: Diversity in the Search and Call Process": <https://vimeo.com/showcase/5604408> and other appropriate resources from our partner denominations
- Brand the Regional Council as an Affirming Ministry on signage, website, letterhead, and in other ways and places
- Hold Regional Council events and meetings in locations that are accessible
- Work toward accessible properties, facilities, resources and systems

The Regional Council, Staff, Executive, Commissions, Committees, Networks, and members commit to working toward fulfilling the vision statement by:

A. Continuing to remove barriers to participation in the life and work of Western Ontario Waterways / Horseshoe Falls / Antler River Watershed regional council

- Commit ourselves to relationship building in our business and activities
- Educate continually on the value, importance and ways of inclusion of the LGBTQIA2S+ community
- Through the Executive, review all policies and actions with a view to removing barriers and to ensure barrier-free policies and actions moving forward
- Ensure that regional council staffing includes a portfolio with responsibility for LGBTQIA2S+ ministries
- Provide Affirming Ministries orientation including an opportunity for conversation and an information package to all new regional council members
- Include Affirming issues in the training of those serving in Pastoral Relations processes and on M&P Committees
- Encourage communities of faith to make use of available resources, including the Affirm Network, to discuss issues of inclusion and diversity

B. Continuing to remove barriers to participation in society:

- Advocate for municipal, provincial and federal government policies and laws that reflect a diverse and inclusive society
- Speak out on current events that demean, stigmatize or incite violence against others
- Encourage conversations with ecumenical and interfaith groups and community partners, especially with our full-communication partners regarding best practices
- Create physical and emotional spaces that are welcoming, encouraging and supportive for individuals to explore their own queerness and to explore queer spirituality
- Actively advocate for justice for all who are oppressed and who face discrimination within our geographical region

C. Committing to be open to the Spirit:

- Listen together for God's on-going revelation
- Discern new voices and seek them out
- Listen to and engage the diverse voices of the LGBTQIA2S+ community within the regional council
- Recognize the unique gifts and spirituality of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, by embracing, welcoming and inviting the community to share their traditions, experiences and expressions, seeking to weave them into the full tapestry of the faith, liturgy and polity of United Church within our regional councils

D. Resisting oppression:

- Conduct business and activities in a respectful manner that allows for open communication and discussion and differences of opinion
- Be conscious of 'safer space' practices at all regional council events, providing visible signs of inclusion (i.e. gender-neutral bathrooms, signage, nametags indicating preferred pronouns along with an explanation of their use)

- Acknowledge the intersection of privilege and oppression
- Be mindful of the disgraceful relationship of the church with the LGBTQIA2S+ community and seek reparation and reconciliation
- Recognize the need for us to be held accountable, beginning with the development of a position description for the role of equity monitor and then the appointment of an equity monitor for meetings of the executive
- As more are equipped to be equity monitors, they will be added to commissions.
- Seek to provide accompaniment for those who are travelling a difficult path

E. Welcoming and celebrating people of any sexual orientation and gender identity:

- Provide opportunities for the celebration of our diversity
- Encourage communities of faith to engage in conversations about making safer spaces within the church and community for people of any sexual orientation or gender identity
- Provide education and information on evolving gender identity language and the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities
- Visibly support LGBTQIA2S+ activities
- Provide support for the Affirm Network, particularly through the Mission and Discipleship Commission, as it offers education, encourages communities of faith to become Affirming Ministries, and offers support for those that are.

The Vision Statement will be included in each annual meeting and compliance with the Action Plan will be assessed annually as part of the annual reporting to Affirm United / S'affirmer Ensemble.