

Antler River Watershed, Horseshoe Falls, Western Ontario Waterways Regional Councils of The United Church of Canada

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Member and Building Safety, PRIDE and 2S-LGBTQIA+ Affirming Events

For Communities of Faith, Community Ministries, Camps, Chaplaincies and more.

Adapted with permission from a resource created by Northern Spirit, Living Skies and Prairie to Pine Regional Councils, with writing by regional council staff Julie Graham and design by Chloe Burns. Many thanks to them for their generosity in sharing their work.

Ministries supportive of 2S-LGBTQIA+ people often engage in PIE DAY, Pride and other affirming services with gatherings that celebrate Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ people, communities and allies, and associated art forms like drag. These times can be both joyful and difficult for gender- and sexually-diverse people and their loved ones, and our church can contribute faithful, positive support.

At the same time, it is possible there will be an increase in online and in-person harassment of these events and their participants this year. This is due to a sharp increase in hate crimes against gender-diverse people in particular, with the entire Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ community targeted, all over the country.

The Regional Council would like communities of faith and other ministries to be careful and aware, without undue fear. This document includes some suggestions and strategies, and invites you to reflect on your commitments and on some possible consequences of those commitments. It is lengthy and meant to be a working resource. The first part offers background and context. The second part covers specific strategies and more resources. Share wherever you wish.

Public, Intentional, Explicit- and Faithful

First and most importantly, before anything else is said: **Thank you for any and all Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ Affirming support and ministry you offer, within your community of faith or incorporated ministry, and in the wider community. It makes a difference.**

Again and again, communities of faith receive notes or social media comments thanking them for flying a Pride flag, recognizing equal marriage on their websites, showing up to support Gay Straight Alliances/ Gender Sexuality Alliances, and much more. And often we won't ever know the impact of our decisions. We have to journey in faith, knowing that even the smallest symbol or word can make a difference at a time when the Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ community has been under serious attack.

Background

What's happening and who is involved?

Since the “Freedom Convoy” in early 2022 and even before, there has been an associated increase in hate directed at 2SLGBTQIA+ people. There is a close and well-documented relationship between extreme anti-vaccination movements, white supremacist movements, and anti 2SLGBTQIA+ movements, as documented in detail by the Canadian Anti-Hate Network and others. The movement's strategies often follow the lead of similar movements in the US, but we stress this is also homegrown Canadian movement that is opposed to equal rights for 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

It has a particular focus on anyone who does not conform to a narrow understanding of gender and what gender should look like. This is why this movement targets trans, non-binary, Two Spirit people, and drag artists. Harassment consists of online threats, slurs, and accusations; physical violence; vandalism; death threats; targeted presence outside libraries, schools, churches, and other public places. “Protecting children” is a common justification, which ties into very old slurs about gays, lesbians and bisexual people being predators. Unfounded accusations that all 2SLGBTQIA+ people are sexual abusers who target children are very common, with particular focus on trans women. Similar, rapidly-changing memes and talking points show up and circulate across the country, including in our own families and congregations; you have likely already encountered some of these without knowing their origin. All of these strategies aim to make extreme claims more palatable and believable. “Protecting children” is a common justification, which ties into very old slurs about gays, lesbians and bisexual people being predators. Unfounded accusations that all 2SLGBTQIA+ people are sexual abusers who target children are very common, with particular focus on trans women. Similar, rapidly-changing memes and talking points show up and circulate across the country, including in our own families and congregations; you have likely already encountered some of these without knowing their origin. All of these strategies aim to make extreme claims more palatable and believable.

Why is this happening?

Paul Dechene, a journalist with *Prairie Dog* magazine, described a nine and a half hour meeting of Regina City Council in April 2021, concerning a proposal to ban “conversion therapy” that was supported by a number of local United Churches. He wrote, “... what we learned (at that meeting) is that the same people who fought same-sex marriage, Pride parades, Pride flags, same-sex adoption; who fought to keep homosexuality a criminalized mental illness; and who for decades now have fought at *every turn* to block rights and protections for LGBTQ2S+ people, are still fighting.”

When we witness false information and accusations about drag artists and gender-diverse people, or about sex education materials in schools, we are seeing a continuation of this fight. It's important to understand that a minority has always been very opposed to human rights and any public visibility for 2SLGBTQIA+ people. Many, though by no means all, use Christianity to justify their positions. That's why a Christian response is also important. And it's important that cisgender and heterosexual people be aware of the often-vicious targeting that's happening, because this has an immensely negative impact on 2SLGBTQIA+ communities and their supportive family member and friends.

Do we need to take them seriously?

We hear this question a lot. 2SLGBTQIA+ people have no choice but to take it seriously. Cisgender and heterosexual people do have the privilege of ignoring anti-2SLGBTQIA+ movements, but be aware that some churches have been targeted simply because of striving to be affirming. Most churches will likely not experience anything out of the usual, but some may, and some have already. You're asked to practice solidarity and take these harmful comments and stereotypes seriously.

Most of the slurs and accusations are spread on social media, and often social media only shows us posts we agree with and hides the ones we don't agree with. Because of that, some in your community of faith may be unaware of how widespread it is. It's easy to dismiss online comments, and to think that ignoring them will make them go away. Unfortunately, that doesn't work. This letter includes a few suggested strategies and more extensive resources.

Implications for your community of faith

Hopefully: none. You'll participate in PIE Day events, Pride festivals, in library and GSA events, host your events and others', and offer inclusive worship with no problems. However, this is not guaranteed. A number of United Churches across the country have reported various and increasing forms of harassment over the past year and earlier. These have included graffiti, theft or destruction of Pride colours and flags, material targeting the United Church, repeat phone messages and emails, personal interactions, and physical presence and filming without consent on church property. The Regional Council is not suggesting you be worried or afraid. But is suggesting that your community of faith or ministry practice awareness, have at least the beginnings of a plan, and ground those preparations in our faith commitments.

What you can do

Some brief ideas are included below. Grounding ourselves in our faith is the most important first step. Scripture is full of examples of people who stood up to hate, fear, and deep inequality with courage and clarity. ***Jesus' commandment to love can be our grounding point.*** 1 John 4:18 reminds us that "perfect love casts out fear". And these movements are very much based in deep fear. As Christians, we are called to respond in faithful love and compassion.



Summary of what you can do

Think through together why you support 2SLGBTQIA+ people and communities; your church council or board, at minimum, should be part of this conversation. Have a short response or set of talking points ready to use if asked by the media or citizens. Identify your spokespeople and anyone who is willing to be interviewed.

Be aware of your rights (see the next section).

Be extra aware of activity around the building, including any graffiti, even minor vandalism, and posters.

Watch your social media carefully, especially if you publicly support 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

Be aware of the needs of building tenants and partners: communicate and collaborate.

Know who your allies and partners in the wider community are, including in the next community over if needed. These relationships are life-giving.

Don't hesitate to inform your [Regional Council Social Justice staff](#) if you have concerns, questions, or advice. We want to support you. Watch the Regional Council newsletter and social media for reports of difficult situations involving our ministries and others. And send a card or email to encourage them.

Your rights

First and always: The safety of congregants, volunteers, staff, and all building users supersedes any rights of people to enter a public space. You do not owe anyone entry.

You have the right to restrict entry to the building, allowing in only those who are invited or are part of whatever is happening there.

You can screen people entering the building for safety reasons.

You can tell people that they are not permitted to film inside the building or on the property. Please note that filming without consent is a tactic used by extremist groups; the resulting footage is edited to make it look like they are being persecuted when told to leave, and/or that those being filmed have something to hide or are aggressive.

Consider carefully if or how you want to report incidents to local police. If you do report, try to get a consistent contact person so that you can develop a relationship. Supportive retired or active first responders in the congregation may be able to help.



Dealing with harassment online

Prevention is easier than a cure! Make sure leadership in the congregation or ministry know who your social account administrators are and how to reach them. Add extra admins if you can.

Know where important privacy and control settings are for all your social media accounts before trouble happens. These include the ability to: delete specific comments; turn off comments on a specific post; limit comments to people who have followed your Facebook page for a certain period; and block specific people. You can always create a test post, ask several people to interact with it to test the settings, then delete the post.

You have the right to ban and block anyone who harasses or threatens. Use the “block” option early and often.

If your page, group, or account is set to Public: Consider not posting photos of vulnerable people and minors, because these can be downloaded and re-used.

Take a screenshot of any direct threats, or save such emails, and store them in a designated folder. If an individual is being especially offensive or persistent, take a screenshot of their profile. Be especially aware of any people who may live in your general area.

Engage thoughtfully – **if at all**. You can post your own public support for 2SLGBTQIA+ people and drag artists without responding to the hurtful talking points, slogans, and slurs. Congregants and allies can make positive comments while ignoring hateful rants. Remember that a lot of the extremist wording you see online is a copy and paste, not original thoughts and wording.

Dealing with harassment in person

Remember that you have the right to block entry to the building. Pay attention to people who are filming, and remember that extremist groups find supporters and shape their message primarily through videos.

Be aware of the needs of your tenants and partners, keep them informed, and collaborate.

If extremists enter the building or are on the property: Remain as calm as possible. Focus on your breathing if that is helpful. If possible, work out in advance who your designated speakers might be, and who might be comfortable physically blocking movement, preferably without touching anyone.

Focus on anyone who is most likely to be targeted. If it is safe for you, focus the attention on yourself, and consider blocking people without touching them. Slowly move them towards the nearest exit.

Tempting though it is, **do not shout back**, indoors or outdoors. Do not engage threats or accusations. Do not attempt dialogue at this time. Keep repeating, loudly and calmly, “We do not want you in this space. We ask you to leave.”

If someone is filming, hold up a piece of paper to block the lens, if safe. If filming is happening outside and you are engaging with a wider group, work with your supporters to create large, colourful banners prepared in advance. A sheet and bamboo poles work well to block cameras and share your message.

Resources

For more specific ideas in here in Canada, have a look at the excellent [schools anti-hate kit prepared by the Canadian Anti Hate Network](#). Like churches, schools are communities with diverse identities and needs that strive to be a safe space, and the tips and scenarios offered in the kit fit well with faith communities.

Egale: Canada’s leading organization for 2SLGBTQI people and issues. <https://egale.ca/>

[UCC statement, 5 June, 2023](#)

Affirming Connections (Alberta, United Church-based network): <https://affirmingconnections.com/unitedagainsthate>

Affirm United/S’Affirmer Ensemble: <https://affirmunited.ause.ca/>

Workshop: United Against Hate. [Click here for the video link](#). February 15 2023, the Affirm United/ S’affirmer ensemble, Affirming Connections, the General Council, United in Learning, and Regional Councils partnered with the Canadian Anti-Hate Network to offer a background on the recent surge in hate speech and crimes, and to hear from a drag artist. Please use this link, but do not post it on your social media or website.

PIE in the Public Square 2024: a panel discussion presented by Affirming Connections and Affirm United/S’affirmer Ensemble. [Click here for the Video Link](#).

[2024 PIE Day Message from Moderator Carmen Lansdowne](#)

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