



## ST. MARK'S UNITED CHURCH

*A progressive, inclusive, and life affirming Christian community of faith  
within The United Church of Canada*

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### Report of the Affirming Congregation Discernment Task Group

May 7, 2008

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*We sing of God's good news lived out, a church with purpose:  
faith nurtured and hearts comforted,  
gifts shared for the good of all,  
resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize,  
fierce love in the face of violence,  
human dignity defended,  
members of a community held and inspired by God,  
corrected and comforted,  
instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ,  
creation's mending.*

*We sing of God's mission.*

*From A Song of Faith, The United Church of Canada 2006*

#### **1. Mandate**

While for pockets of time the church recognized, honoured, and married gay and lesbian Christians, most of its history is marked by exclusion, condemnation and violence in regards to people who were gay and lesbian. This history reflects current practice and attitude towards gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) persons in much of the church today. Some, however, believe that this is inconsistent with our Christian faith and choose to make an explicit statement of inclusion and include in its ministry deliberate components reaching out to GLBT persons.

In the JNAC (2006) and Strategic Planning process, the following task was identified:

#### ***JNAC Decisions December 2006***

*Engage the programme for becoming a designated Affirming Church through the Affirming Congregations and Ministries Programme and continue to embrace inclusivity in policy, protocol, practice and daily life.*

#### ***May 3, 2007 Board Meeting***

*MOTION (Moved by Bart Boniface, seconded by Kevin Balgopal) that, in accord with the JNAC decisions, the Board establish an Affirming Congregation Co-ordinating Team to lead the Congregation in the process towards considering becoming an officially designated "Affirming Congregation", that this Team consist of three members of the Congregation appointed by the Board on the recommendation of the Nominating Committee; and that the Chair person will be a corresponding member of the Church Board.*

Subsequently the Church Board appointed a task group comprised of Harry Brown, Kathryn Moase and Anne Parks to lead the congregation in a process of discernment that would culminate in a decision by the Congregation whether or not to request official designation as an *Affirming Congregation*.

## 2. History of Inclusion

The process of inclusivity at St. Mark's began more than 20 years ago and continues a tradition that began earlier within The United Church of Canada.

- ✚ 1936 UCC Ordination of Women
- ✚ 1988 UCC After a 12 year process to democratically consider and debate the issue, decided not to bar members who are gay or lesbian from consideration for ordered ministry.
- ✚ 1970's St. Mark's Edith Littleford became the first woman chair of the Board
- ✚ 1989 St. Mark's Began extending care to people and families living and dying with HIV/AIDS.
- ✚ 2000 St. Mark's Adopted a policy to participate in same-gender covenanting services.
- ✚ 2003 St. Mark's Covenanting policy extended to same-gender marriage.
- ✚ 2004 St. Mark's Adopted new marriage policy: Celebrating Marriages and Relationships
- ✚ 2006 St. Mark's Joint Needs Assessment Report indicates Congregation's desire to be inclusive and to explore the "Affirming Congregation" designation.
- ✚ 2007 St. Mark's Adopted New Mission Statement confirming intentionality to be inclusive.

St. Mark's celebrates its history of evolving practices and processes that have welcomed full participation of everyone and continues to be committed to facilitating full involvement of individuals or groups who might otherwise be unable to participate.

## 3. Process of Discernment

During the period from September, 2007, to May, 2008, and after consultation with and support from Affirm consultant Malcolm Spencer, the Task Group offered educational and interactive opportunities for the congregation that included:

- ✚ Three congregational gatherings following an educational process of discovery, inclusion/exclusion testimonials, and discernment of response. Each session was attended by approximately 20 people;
- ✚ Regular reports/updates in the monthly church newsletter *The Memo*;
- ✚ Regular reports to and discussions at Church Board meetings;
- ✚ An online forum attached to the St. Mark's website;
- ✚ Distribution to the congregation of pertinent materials;
- ✚ A Sunday service, attended by approximately 100 people, focusing on the affirming principles, stories of GLBT experience, and calls to grow with each other;
- ✚ Opportunities for informal discussion.

## 4. Learnings from congregational gatherings and consultations

The congregational gatherings, Church Board discussions and informal conversations raised awareness that the Affirming principles have application in all of our ministries and challenge us to be mindful of accessibility on many other platforms: cultural, language, gesture, ability, age, etc. Specifically we learned that:

- ✚ The congregation is open to the principles of welcome and equality;
- ✚ There is much yet to learn and the process of affirming is an on-going commitment!
- ✚ There is a continuous need to develop strategies and interventions for extending hospitality, offering services, and communicating inclusivity;
- ✚ There is much that we don't know and strategies will need to be developed as we go along.

## 5. Recommendations

- 1) That the Church Board of St. Mark's United Church recommend to the Congregation that St. Mark's request official designation as an Affirming Ministry in The United Church of Canada.
- 2) That all members and adherents be allowed to vote on this recommendation at the Annual Congregational Meeting to be held on June 8, 2008:
  - a. That voting be by show of hands as is tradition at St. Mark's, unless otherwise specifically requested of the Chair in advance of or at the Congregational meeting;
  - b. That the Congregation be apprised of the United Church practice of not voting by proxy.
- 3) That St. Mark's join Affirm United at a cost of \$100/year.
- 4) That the current Mission Statement be amended to include the following commentary highlighted in italic type:

St. Mark's is called to be a progressive, inclusive and life-affirming Christian community of faith within The United Church of Canada *that is committed to engaging faith, scripture and tradition in progressive ways, that seeks to be inclusive of all, regardless of ability, age, class, ethnicity, gender race or sexual orientation, and that will strive to affirm the inherent blessing of life found in all of Creation.*
- 5) That St. Mark's Church Board and ministry teams develop explicit programmes of welcome, education and pastoral care for people who are GLBT.
- 6) That St. Mark's publicly promote our membership as an Affirming Ministry on our signboard and website, in our publications and with our community and church partners.
- 7) That if designated by Affirm United, a service of celebration be held in the fall of 2008.
- 8) That upon the acceptance of these recommendations by the Church Board at its May 8, 2008 meeting the Affirming Congregation Discernment Task Group be disbanded.

Submitted by Harry Brown, Kathryn Moase, and Anne Parks.