

United Church regional conference makes history

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It's more than corn and apples that attracts United Church minister Ken DeLisle to Morden again and again.

The openly gay United Church minister from Selkirk heads to the southern Manitoba community known for its summer festival next week to witness his regional church become the first within the United Church of Canada to welcome the participation of all people, regardless of sexual orientation.

On May 24, 350 delegates representing 249 churches will pause from their business for a 30-minute celebration to recognize the move of the Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario become an affirming conference. It is the first of 13 regional units in the denomination to achieve this designation.

"This is the third time something significant to me personally has happened in Morden," explains DeLisle, a former Roman Catholic commissioned to ministry by the conference in 1994, the last time it met in Morden for its annual general meeting.

In 1984, the general council, the national governing body of the United Church, met in Morden to discuss a paper on human sexuality.

Affirming is the term used within the United Church of Canada to indicate full inclusion and participation of all people of all sexual orientations within the life of a congregation or conference.

"It means that our office is affirming and our actions and behaviour will be held to that standard," explains Bruce Faurshou, conference executive secretary.

"It's the conference that is becoming affirming. It doesn't mean all our presbyteries are affirming, and it doesn't mean all our congregations are affirming, although we encourage congregations to walk down that path."

Several congregations in the regional conference have already blazed the trail on this one. In 1995, Augustine United Church in Winnipeg was the first within the denomination to be labelled affirming, a step which has led to the hiring of a lesbian minister and to attract people of all sexual orientations to the Osborne Village Church.

"It has become a sanctuary in many ways," explains Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd, minister at Augustine. "People find their way to Augustine who have been repeatedly rejected by other denominations or their families. They're quite wounded and suspicious of Christianity."

For the members of Immanuel United Church in East Kildonan, becoming an affirming congregation meant taking seriously the biblical message of inclusion and long history of social justice within the United Church.

"Personally, it's made me want to be more inclusive of the next generation of people, youth, different cultures," says Muriel Kenyon, a member of Immanuel. "I feel some hunger now that we've started the process of being more inclusive of other people."

The process of becoming affirming takes several years and is facilitated by the Affirm United, a membership-based organization of all sexual orientations and gender identities affiliated with the United Church.

Affirming groups indicate their status with a rainbow symbol displayed in the building and by wording in their mission statement.

Having this designation at the conference level means better working conditions for ministers who are gay or lesbian, and a greater sense of inclusion for everyone, says DeLisle, treasurer of Affirm United.

"(It means) discipline if we can't find jobs, human rights, prayer services at conferences where we're included," he explains. "If a (ministerial) candidate faces homophobia, what are they going to do about it?"

The process of being affirming is ongoing, even once the official process is completed, says Faurschou.

"We've kind of gone one mile of the marathon, but the work continues," he explains. "For a long time, we've preached inclusiveness. The two go hand in hand and we know if we preach it we've got to live it."

This move by the regional church is applauded by Rev. David Giuliano, moderator of the United Church of Canada, who sees this step as part of the Christian call to include everyone.

"While individual congregations, of course, retain their authority locally, it seems like an important symbolic step and a commitment to addressing the historic exclusion and even persecution of gay, lesbian and transgendered people," he said in an e-mail statement. Giuliano's home church in Marathon, Ont., is a member of the Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario.

Also on the agenda for the meeting, which runs from May 22 to May 25, is a resolution to pay carbon offsets for staff and committee automobile travel, and reduce mileage by 20 per cent this year. Last year, 250,000 kilometres were logged on staff or committee business.

Delegates are also asked to consider implementing guidelines for blogs written by United Church ministers.

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