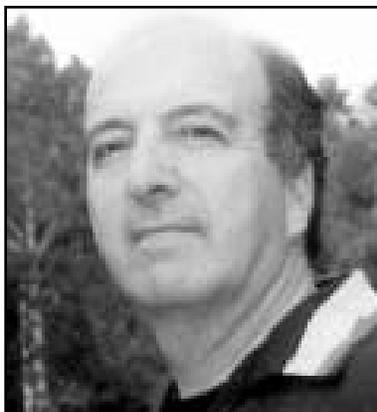


Aboriginal United Church leader Stan McKay to lead August conference in Winnipeg

Former moderator Stan McKay, now a leader of the church's Aboriginal conference, and five family members will be featured speakers at Affirm United's 2004 conference July 30-Aug. 2 in Winnipeg. (The gathering was originally slated for Montreal).

Under the theme "Justice is Indivisible," the McKay team and other facilitators will focus on justice, healing and reconciliation, and networking with minority groups in the church.

The moderator of the United Church from 1992 to 1994, McKay is acting speaker of All Native Circle Conference. Until recently, he led an educational institute that combines Christian theology and spirituality with Aboriginal traditions. McKay has



Former moderator Stan McKay

also helped the United Church in its journey of reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples.

Joining the former moderator at the Affirm United conference will be his wife, Dorothy McKay, an educator; daughter Nanette McKay, a minister who heads a community renewal body;

daughter Rebecca McKay, a professional forester who is dedicated to social justice and has just returned from an assignment in Guatemala; son Daniel McKay, an LGBT activist; and son-in-law Scott Douglas, a playwright who focuses on faith and social justice.

Workshop topics include diversity in aging and in LGBT spirituality, breaking barriers in churches, victimization and recovery, transformation, Affirming ministries, and United Church resources. Worship, song, and fun are always part of the mix at national conferences, say organizers.

The Rainbow Ministry of Winnipeg Presbytery is hosting the event at Young United Church, a downtown Affirming congregation. Child care and billets are being arranged.

The cost for four days, including meals, is \$150 before June 30 (\$180 afterward). The fee for one day is \$60.

Registration material is available through conference co-chairs, Laura Fohse and Wilson MacLennan, at Winnipeg Presbytery, 301-G Weston St., Winnipeg, MB R3E 3H4. Phone: (204) 954-2904.

E-mail: <rainbowministry@winnipegpresbytery.org>.

ON EQUAL MARRIAGE

Moderator wins mixed review

Moderator Peter Short was greeted with a mix of criticism and support for his leadership on the equal marriage issue when he met with Affirm United's executive body in February.

In articles on pages 2 and 3, the executive takes Short and other church leaders to task for not celebrating General Council's August decision to lobby for equal marriage. And they express concern that the Moderator said dissenters to equal marriage are not homophobic.

The executive also argues that the Moderator and other church leaders were shortsighted by deciding last fall not to speak at the Supreme Court when it deals with equal marriage. However, they praise Short for publicly expressing his personal support for equal marriage. And they welcome him as an honorary member of Affirm United.



ABOUT CONSENSUS

Consensus is the newsletter of Affirm United, an organization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their friends within The United Church of Canada. We work for justice and full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the church and the world.

Opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Affirm United.

Your news stories, articles, and letters are welcome. *Consensus* reserves the right to edit them for length, clarity or style. Please send your material by e-mail to amnugent@magma.ca or by mail or courier to
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'WHY DIDN'T WE CELEBRATE?'

Short quizzed for weak response to vote for same-sex marriage

At a February meeting with Moderator Peter Short, Affirm United's executive complained that Short and church leaders seemed "almost apologetic" about General Council's 165-5 August decision to ask the federal government to legalize same-sex marriage.

"This was a groundbreaking, marvellous, important decision," said membership co-ordinator Ron Coughlin. "Why didn't we celebrate?"

Some church members do not agree with the decision to support equal marriage, the Moderator said. He has adopted a low-key approach and is working pastorally, "the way I would in a congregation," to bring dissenters on board.

"People do not learn well when they are under attack," Short said. "We have to create a good learning environment first. I hope to get to a place where there will be transformation for all."

Referring to a Jan.31 article in the Globe and Mail in which he personally supported same-sex marriage, Short said, "In that article, you're seeing my process unfold."

Communication co-ordinator Alyson Huntly argued that simply bringing people "on board" was not adequate. "Justice cannot be achieved by trying to get the majority to agree to give human rights to the minority."

Treasurer Ken DeLisle said the church's stance is seen as an overly cautious approach to avoid upsetting people.

"We, as the church, seem to be living out of fear, not love," DeLisle said. "Is this just fear of conflict? People who are not with us have already had over 20 years to discuss the issue."

Any process of change has two key elements, Short replied: "One is making something possible. The other is making it work. It has taken three generations to make women in ministry work."

"General Council has made gay and lesbian marriage possible. It is up to congregations to make it work."

"Young people won't wait," said Marcie Gibson, an Affirm United council member at large. "The church will have to pick up the pace."

The Moderator also came under criticism for his comments at General Council that people who oppose same-sex marriage should not be called homophobic.

"Is there any reason to oppose equal marriage rights that isn't homophobic?" asked Huntly.

"Our culture speaks with an accent of homophobia," Short replied. "And it will take a lot of courage to move beyond that."

"Homophobia has occasional violent manifestations. There is homophobia at two levels. When I said, 'You are not homophobic for holding different opinions,' I should have been more specific."

The Moderator added, "I have been accused [by people opposed to equal marriage] of spouting the party line and of caving in to the interests of the administration."

Short wins kudos for newspaper article

Moderator named honorary member

Affirm United's national council has commended Moderator Peter Short for "coming out" in support of equal marriage.

Recognizing that such a stand has its risks and costs, members also awarded the Moderator an honorary membership in the organization.

At a meeting with Short during their annual mid-winter session in Toronto, Affirm United's executive praised the Moderator's Jan.31 article in the *Globe and Mail*, in which he personally supported the

General Council's decision in favour of gay and lesbian marriage.

In the article, Short wrote:

"The General Council of The United Church of Canada has made clear its response. All those, regardless of sexual orientation, who are willing to give themselves to transformation by love in the honourable estate are welcome in marriage.

"I am aware that among ecumenical and interfaith responses to equal marriage, the United Church is mostly alone.

"Nevertheless, and with great respect for our partners and friends, I believe that the General



Moderator Peter Short (right) receives an honorary membership from Affirm United's Ron Coughlin.

Council has made the right response, true to the gospel and true to our tradition."

'WHY AREN'T WE AT THE SUPREME COURT?'

Moderator queried on missed opportunity

Moderator Peter Short has told Affirm United that United Church leaders last fall decided it was not important to seek intervener status at Supreme Court hearings on same-sex marriage.

Short said leaders believed the Supreme Court would likely support equal marriage, and they preferred to put time and money into lobbying MPs to change the laws that prohibit it.

The national church has written to all pastoral charges suggesting ways for them to press the federal government to pass laws supporting equal marriage, the Moderator said at a meeting with Affirm United's national council in February.

However, members of Affirm United's executive pointed out that several United Church members have argued that visibility is important — that since the church is lobbying MPs it needs to be seen doing the same in Canada's highest court.

Currently, only two religious voices supporting equal marriage are official interveners — a coalition of rabbis and Metropolitan Community Church, a GLBT-positive Christian denomination.

According to United Church sources, national

Church reverses 2003 decision on Supreme Court

In early March, United Church leaders reversed their 2003 decision to not intervene when the Supreme Court considers questions about same-sex marriage referred to it by the federal government. Church staff are consulting with Affirm United and Canadians for Equal Marriage on a petition for intervener status.

church staff last fall prepared a budget, met with legal staff, and were ready to apply for intervener status.

But the senior leadership team, which includes the new general secretary, Jim Sinclair, and the new United Church moderator, Peter Short, decided to drop the plan.

Staff said they were told that congregations were "in different places" on the issue. Staff were also told that such a move might not sit well with the delegates to last summer's General Council — who voted 165 to 5 to lobby the federal government (there was no

Continued on page 4

God's on the loose: That's dangerous!

By Sally Harris

A professor from Princeton Seminary was speaking to a group of school children about the baptism of Jesus as a moment in time when God was revealed in Jesus. One slouching youngster, who had been staring at his feet, looked up at the conclusion and muttered, "Don't think that's what it's saying."

The professor, pleased that someone had been listening, asked, "What do you suggest it is saying, then?"

"Well, the passage tells us that heaven opened up?" "Yes."

"And when heaven opened, the Spirit came down?" "Yes."

The student lifted his whole body to an upright position and stared at the professor. "It's saying that God is on the loose in the world. And it's dangerous."

This past year has revealed a breaking open of the dangerous possibility of equality under the law for gay and lesbian couples who want to marry. All of us in Affirm United have been affected by both the joy of such danger and the renewed backlash.

CO-CHAIR REPORT

One needs only to read some of the letters in the more recent editions of the Observer to be immediately reminded that anger, misunderstanding, judgment and homophobia continue to lie just under the surface of our civilized church.

As Affirm United council members gathered in Toronto in February for our annual winter meeting, we again wrestled with what it means to stand as witnesses to a God "loose" in the world. And we were privileged to share our time with Peter Short, moderator of the United Church, and Choice Okoro, program officer for the church's Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit.

Recently a colleague shared with me that a resident in a large institution for people with developmental disabilities once told him: "Love is trouble because it makes people care!"

May the love we share with each other, with our partners and spouses, with our church and world, not only cause trouble but, indeed, make people care.

It is a dangerous time. God is on the loose in the world. May it be so!

IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY MISSED

'Church needs visibility at Supreme Court'

Continued from page 3

mention of the Supreme Court) for same-sex marriage rights.

Affirm United's membership co-ordinator Ron Coughlin suggested that the senior team's decision not make a presentation to the Supreme Court deviated from the usual process of following up on General Council resolutions.

Coughlin argued that the United Church had

missed an "important opportunity."

"Such actions are important in making visible the United Church position and in supporting interfaith and justice partners who are also working for equal marriage," Coughlin told the Moderator.

"This was a window of opportunity to let Canadian society know where the United Church stands and could be a way of making our church more attractive to the progressive individuals seeking a faith community home."

The federal government's four questions for the Supreme Court

The government of former prime minister Jean Chretien referred three questions about same-sex marriage for comment by the Supreme Court of Canada. Prime Minister Paul Martin recently added a fourth. The following is a paraphrase:

1. Does Parliament have the right to pass its proposed law removing "opposite sex" couple from the definition of marriage?
2. Is the proposed law consistent with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms?
3. Are religious authorities protected from being compelled to perform a same-sex marriage?
4. Is the opposite-sex requirement of marriage consistent with the Charter?

It's good to be together in a vital ministry

By Read Sherman

I write this in the afterglow of our national council's mid-winter meeting in Toronto. Eleven of us gathered in February at Trinity-Saint Paul United in Toronto, one of our Affirming congregations, to work through an ambitious agenda over two packed days.

The immediate solidarity and the warmth and laughter of our gathering reminded me of the feeling at our conference in Tatamagouche this past summer — of how good it is, how strong we are, when we are together.

The sense of urgency about our work made me proud to sit among such talented, committed, faithful people.

I am aware too of the committed work by our members around the country and the solidarity that is there. As people of faith you are speaking up and out so that a Christian message of acceptance and inclusive love is heard in the public square.

Thank you for your witness in your cities and towns. And please let us know more about what you do, so we can celebrate these

CO-CHAIR REPORT

achievements across the church.

Affirming ministries are playing an important role as ongoing advocates for the equality of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. But there is still much work to be done.

Thankfully, we celebrate three new Affirming ministries joining us in the struggle.

United Theological College / Le Séminaire Uni in Montreal became our first Affirming theological college in January.

Emmanuel-Howard Park United in Toronto and Rosedale-Queen Mary United in Montreal have become Affirming congregations.

The Affirming Ministries Program will continue to bring the voices of current and future Affirming ministries to bear on the need for education and inclusion in the church and beyond.



*Affirm United co-chairs:
Sally Harris and Read Sherman*

We are updating our resources and highlighting the reality of our transgender and bisexual sisters and brothers.

We are looking for new ways to bring the program and the ministries into a closer working relationship.

New partnerships with relevant units at General Council offices will also widen the scope of what we can achieve.

It's all about being together, standing together, in witness to Jesus' way of radical justice and love. It is always good to be together in such a vital ministry.

Your heroes deserve an award this year

Affirm United is calling for names of outstanding individuals and ministries to be considered for awards to be presented in August at its annual general meeting in Winnipeg.

The Affirm United volunteer-of-the-year award recognizes individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the

work of Affirm United or have furthered the GLBT cause, either in the United Church or in Canadian society.

The Affirm United award for Affirming ministries programming recognizes creative ways in which congregations and other ministries provide education and support.

Winners are profiled as models

for others in the United Church.

Nomination forms are available at www.affirmunited.ca.

For further information, contact co-chair Read Sherman at 660 MacLaren St., Ottawa, K1R 5L2, or by e-mail at <r.sherman@sympatico.ca>.

COUNCIL BRIEFS

The Affirm United national council met Feb. 6 and 7 at Trinity-St. Paul's United Church in Toronto. These are some highlights:

Affirming churches video being developed

A video about Affirming congregations will be produced by the United Church's Justice unit. Council arranged to have Communications Co-ordinator Alyson Huntly meet early in March with program officer Choice Okoro and Berkeley Studios to develop the content.

Council positions open

Nominations are being sought for four positions on the 2004-5 national council: male co-chair, membership co-ordinator, and two members at large. Voting will take place at the annual general meeting in August. Members are asked to send nominations to co-chair Read Sherman, whose contact addresses are listed on the inside back page of this edition.

Where do we find support?

Council decided to ask each United Church conference to identify congregations that will conduct equal marriages, to name LGBT-positive ministries and staff, and to report on LGBT issues in their area. It's part of a plan to identify people, networks, and congregations across the country that could be included in a list of supportive referrals.

Resource kit coming

A resource kit for Affirming ministries is being produced. It will include a worship service

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121 same-sex couples wed in Affirming congregations

By Alyson Huntly

A total of 121 same-sex weddings have taken place at Affirming churches in Ontario and British Columbia since the two provinces legalized equal marriage last summer.

An Affirm United poll at the end of February showed that most Affirming congregations quickly moved from celebrating same-sex covenants to holding weddings.

Marriage for same-sex couples became legal in Ontario on June 10; in British Columbia on July 8.

Many of these equal marriages have been for congregation members, but most Affirming churches will marry couples referred by ones that don't or can't offer the service.

Several couples have come to Canada from the United States, and one travelled from as far away as Hong Kong.

Only three of the 16 Affirming churches in Ontario and British Columbia have not yet received requests to officiate at an equal marriage.

One of the four Affirming congregations in British Columbia is taking time for study before revising its policy.

One of the 12 Affirming congregations in Ontario has decided to use the phrase "life covenanting ceremony" to describe all celebrations of relationship, both heterosexual and same-sex, until the definition of marriage is resolved in legislation.

Many congregations that are not officially Affirming also offer

same-sex weddings. St. John's United and Ryerson United churches in Vancouver have each held eight weddings.

"These weddings have been a gift to us," says Bari Castle, at Ryerson. "The celebration of a relationship that has stood the test of time (in some cases, for decades) has an emotional and spiritual depth that is profound."

In provinces that have not yet legalized same-sex marriage, there are nine Affirming congregations. Most continue to offer services of blessing, covenanting, or commitment.

Survey shows Ottawa is wedding capital

Here are statistics on equal marriages celebrated by 13 Affirming congregations in Ontario and British Columbia from June 2003 until the end of February 2004.

In the lead was First United in Ottawa, with 35 weddings. Toronto's Metropolitan United was a distant second, with 17.

- 121 marriages in total were celebrated by 13 churches
- 13 of the 121 were held in British Columbia at two Vancouver churches
- 108 of the 121 were held in Ontario at 11 churches
- 49 of the 108 Ontario marriages were held in Toronto at six churches

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that congregations could use or adapt for yearly celebrations of their Affirming status. Leaders may want to dedicate proceeds from the offering to support the national Affirming Ministries Program and their local Affirming activities.

Membership fees

Membership Fees continues to increase, but finances are a concern. A reminder letter will be sent to members who did not pay their fees in 2003.

Historical records

Affirm United will donate to the United Church a relevant set of files dating back to its first year, 1982. Membership co-ordinator Ron Coughlin, a founding member and Affirm United's archivist, has preserved all minutes, letters, and issues of Consensus, as well as files for each of the Affirming ministries and local groups.

Thanks to Lois Wilson

Lois Wilson, a former United Church moderator and member of Canada's Senate, has advocated strongly on Parliament Hill for same-sex marriage rights. Affirm United will send her a letter of appreciation.

Two conferences climbing aboard?

Toronto Conference and Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Conference are each discussing whether to become Affirming ministries.

Greetings from Japan

A report from Christian queer activists

The following article was submitted by Yuri Horie, a lesbian minister with the United Church of Christ in Japan, and a member of the Ecumenical Community for Queer Activism.

By Yuri Horie

I would like to express how much it means to me to have an opportunity to introduce myself as a voice from Japan.

I am an out lesbian minister of the United Church of Christ in Japan, and I would like to report on our LGBT Christian community here — it's called the Ecumenical Community for Queer Activism — and tell you about the situation we face in this country.

Our community is small. Only six or seven members attend meetings, but about 160 people read our newsletter, including LGBT supporters. Ours is the only community for LGBT Christians in Japan, except for a worship group in Tokyo.

Our community began in Kyoto in 1994 when some people got together to plan a Christmas service. Currently we focus on creating a safe space to build our confidence and strength for the fight against discrimination.

Each month we hold Bible study and have a reading circle. Our newsletter comes out very other month, and we offer peer counselling and provide speakers for lectures and meetings.

Japan is frequently portrayed as being culturally "tolerant" toward lesbians and gays. In fact, Japanese culture not only prevents

people from accepting anyone different from themselves, it stops individuals from developing their own identity.

Christians make up less than one per cent of the Japanese population. Generally speaking, while the church has not supported society's efforts to shut out homosexuals, it has not done much to make them feel welcome.

However the Ecumenical Community for Queer Activism just keeps on walking.

In 1988, when a student minister in my denomination came out as gay, a member of the church's executive committee said people who practice homosexual behaviour should not be admitted into ministry. Despite protests by fellow committee members and 30 letters demanding a retraction, nothing has happened. We are still fighting this battle, but the church's inaction clearly shows its position.

Interestingly, the gay student minister is now ordained. This may seem like good news, and it would be, if the church would admit to ordaining a gay person.

Unfortunately, the church has never officially acknowledged doing so. So the fact remains that if LGBT people seek to become ministers in the United Church of Christ in Japan, they have no guarantee against a fuss.

I hope that we can achieve in solidarity with you, our friends in Affirm United, and act together against homophobia in our churches. Thank you.

EQUAL MARRIAGE

Since it's not a problem for taxpayers let's consider the issue on its own merits

This article by Affirm United national council member Wilson MacLennan appeared in the November 2003 edition of *The Eyeopener*, a newsletter of Winnipeg Presbytery.

By Wilson MacLennan

In Canadian politics the relationship between economic policy and social policy is a key issue. The neo-conservative economic policies of federal and provincial governments have led to tax and budget cuts which have reduced social services, including medicare, to a dangerous level.

In this context it is notable that the issue of same-gender marriage is one element of social policy which is not being driven by economic factors. It should, therefore, be decided on its own merits.

For 20 years the United Church of Canada has affirmed our acceptance of all human beings as persons made in the image of God, regardless of their sexual orientation.

- In 1988 the church affirmed that all persons who profess faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of their sexual orientation, are eligible to be considered for ordained ministry.
- In 1992 the General Council directed that liturgical and pastoral resources for same-gender covenants be made available to congregations wishing to bless such unions.
- In 2000 the United Church affirmed that human sexual orientation, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is a gift from God and part of the marvelous diversity of creation. It further resolved to advocate for the civil recognition of same-gender partnerships.
- In August [2003] General Council resolved to

'It is not love that sustains your marriage, but marriage that sustains your love.'

call on the federal government to recognize same-gender marriage.

Marriage has been widely understood to mean the permanent union of two persons who undertake the obligations, and receive the benefits, of mutual care and support. It was the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who once wrote: "It is not love that sustains your marriage, but marriage that sustains your love."

The commitment of gay and lesbian couples should be honoured by the community and made legal by the federal government, as it has given notice it intends to do. All couples should be free, if they desire, to ask God to bless their marriage and while no church should be compelled to officiate at same-gender marriages, I am glad that the United Church has undertaken to do so, when new marriage legislation allows.

There are some who say that this will weaken the institution of marriage. It seems to me that every additional couple joined by vows of mutual responsibility, care and support can only strengthen the institution of marriage and also insure the well-being of society.

Before you sign any petitions or write any letters, I urge you to consider all the information at your disposal. Talk to your friends, talk to someone who is gay or lesbian, read the newspapers and do your own research. Draw your own prayerful conclusions, and then act as your conscience dictates.

Need regional networks to support GLBT issues

Affirm United's national council is encouraging Affirming ministries and other supportive congregations to confer regionally about building greater support in the wider church for

- same-sex marriage;

- more GLBT reps on church courts;
- transgender needs;
- GLBT folk in ministry;
- educational sessions; and
- the Affirming Ministries Program.

A model for regional networks exists in Toronto, where every year each Affirming congregation invites the others to an education night, a planning session, or an action day — such as building a float for a Pride Day parade.

Church helps Michelle find a new life

The following is an edited and updated version of an article written by Anne Tinker and published in the Kitchener-Waterloo Record in May 2003. Anne and Michelle are members of Wesley United Church, an Affirming congregation in Cambridge, Ontario.

By Anne Tinker

Michelle Hogan, a friend of mine, was not quite herself until recently. Indeed, she had tried to become herself for a number of years.

Michelle suffered from gender identity disorder, a condition in which a male or female feels a strong identification with the opposite sex.

Gender identity is linked to an individual's intrinsic sense of self, particularly their sense of being male or female. But a person's gender identity may not always conform to their birth-assigned sex.

And that was my friend Michelle's case when she came into this world and was named Michael. She was literally trapped in the wrong body. I can't begin to imagine what that must feel like.

Gender identity disorder is a medical condition. Recent research at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, reports a strong similarity between the brain structures of "born females" and "born males" who have later been diagnosed with the disorder. This suggests a genetic anomaly.

Before she was diagnosed, Michelle tried to lead a normal life as a male.

Michael attended church, was a high achiever,



Michelle Hogan

and eventually married a woman, hoping that would cure the nagging problem. It didn't. The marriage disintegrated and Michael finally saw what was going on inside.

When Michael realized that he must undertake gender transition, he knew that many things in his life would change. Society stigmatizes those who are different. It might jeopardize his job and other personal relationships.

And indeed it did just that.

Many people distanced themselves from him. It was a high price to pay to come to terms with who and what he truly was.

Can any of us conceive of how much strength and courage that must take? Yet, throughout it all, Michael maintained his integrity and dignity.

He began a series of hormone treatments, voice training, and electrolysis. He changed his name to Michelle and began living as a female for two years under the watchful eye of doctors and psychologists, so he could become eligible for sex reassignment surgery — the ultimate step to becoming female.

But, in the middle of the process (on Oct. 2, 1998), the province of Ontario pulled the plug. As a

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Gender group to lobby for OHIP coverage

Torchlight Gender Support, a new group at Wesley United Church in Cambridge, Ontario, intends to advocate with the provincial government for renewed coverage of gender reassignment surgery under the Ontario Health Insurance Plan.

The group was founded by Michelle Hogan, herself a transgender person and lifelong member of Wesley United, an

Affirming congregation west of Toronto.

The group provides a safe place for people with gender identity disorder to meet monthly and share their experiences with family, friends, and each other.

Members also aim to educate local doctors, therapists, and service providers about gender identity disorder to dispel mistaken ideas.

Torchlight Gender Support has been meeting monthly since September 2003 and attracts people from Waterloo and Wellington counties and the surrounding area. Eighteen supporters attended a recent meeting.

For more information, contact the church office at (519) 621-6060 or Michelle Hogan at <grsmedia@hotmail.com>.

WILL YOU MARRY ME?

Here's how two churches handled the proposal

Presbyteries are now briefing their members about equal marriage laws and about performing same-sex weddings. So Consensus asked Affirm United's Ron Coughlin and Ruth Bramham to describe how their suburban Toronto congregations dealt with the issue. Ron is the minister at Richview United in Etobicoke. Ruth is a member of Newtonbrook United in North York.

Although United Church policy allows a congregation's governing body to rule on allowing same-sex marriage, both Richview United and Newtonbrook United recently opted for a full congregational meeting, with a vote by secret ballot.

And both suburban Toronto congregations did so after information sharing, discussion, and attention to the voice of dissenting members. Neither church is an Affirming congregation.

The educational process at both churches took place over several weeks, allowing members time to reflect. And, in both cases, the decision to marry same-sex couples was made by a substantial majority.

Richview United's vote took place in December, based on a recommendation of its worship committee, minister Ron Coughlin reports.

One might think that this was an unlikely congregation for such a move, Ron said. The 100-family community is mostly elderly — 80 per cent of the members are retired — although there are a few,

new younger families. However, Ron added, information, consultation, and discussion helped members get on board.

The issue arose last summer when a gay couple called to ask if Richview would marry them. This prompted action by the worship committee, which recommended to the congregation's council "that the minister be permitted to perform services of marriage for same-sex couples, as other couples."

This led to council's educational activities. Everyone was given resources from the national church's Of Love and Justice, and a copy of "True and honest ... and finally legal" an article by Michael Rowe on same-sex marriage that appeared in the September 2003 edition of the *Observer*.

Resource people also shared the United Church's positions over the past 20 years, the legal status of same-sex marriage in Canada, and the experience of a congregation that has been performing same-sex holy unions for 10 years.

Congregation helps Michelle find a new life

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cost cutting measure, this type of surgery was removed as an OHIP benefit. The cost of surgery, as much as \$35,000, was far beyond Michelle's means.

Michelle is a member of my church congregation. In fact, Michael and I were in Sunday school together when we were younger. It was difficult for me to see Michael as Michelle and to realize that this was the same person I learned Bible verses with all those years ago.

However, when I did get my head around the situation, I became committed to helping Michelle raise the funds for her gender reassignment surgery.

Fortunately, there were other like-minded individuals in our congregation and a small support group was formed. Our function was to help with the financial costs and to offer spiritual and emotional support to Michelle as she made this journey.

We spent 18 months hosting garage sales, lunches, selling angels, and doing anything we could think of to raise the \$15,000 that we eventually brought in.

Finally in May 2003, Michelle travelled to Thailand for surgery. She was lucky. Waiting lists are sometimes years long at the few centres in the world that do this operation.

Michelle returned in less than a month complete in her new identity. And last September she founded Torchlight Gender Support, a group offering a safe meeting place at Wesley United Church for people with gender identity disorder and their supporters.

What a wonderful epilogue.

Supporting Michelle has been a unique and enlightening experience for me. I have learned a lot. And I have great respect for the courage of Michelle and others like her as they travel this lonely road.

ROSEDALE-QUEEN MARY UNITED

Montreal Church is 'joyfully inclusive'

By Alyson Huntly

Rosedale-Queen Mary United Church in Montreal is the newest congregation to join the Affirming Ministry Program.

This multi-racial, intergenerational, lower to middle income group of about 150 families is located in the Notre-Dame-de-Grace district.

The congregation has a history of involvement with GLBT issues, having shared in ministry with three gay men: former minister Shaun Friday, music director James Higgins, and the present minister, Neil Whitehouse.

The church's annual AIDS vigil has served the needs of many in the gay and lesbian communities since 1996 and, in 2002, the official board approved the principle of conducting civil unions in the sanctuary.

After a series of study sessions, members voted on Dec. 14 to become Affirming. A new sentence in the mission statement reads:

"We joyfully welcome and embrace people of any age, class, ethnicity, faith, gender, health, language, race and sexual orientation, to share our journey."

Members also voted to change the outside

signage, adding the words, "Rosedale-Queen Mary United Church — joyfully inclusive" accompanied by a rainbow-coloured rectangle.

The congregation is involved with the local community. NDG has the highest concentration of senior citizens in Quebec. It also has the highest level (19 per cent) of single-parent families in Montreal. And there is a growing shortage of community-based space.

This new Affirming church has responded with a number of community initiatives and outreach programs, including work with the local anti-poverty group. The church also provides space for several community groups and programs. A seniors' group founded by the congregation 25 years ago boasts over 400 members.

The congregation describes itself this way:

"Our focus is to build and support each other in community living, in our personal, social, physical, spiritual and emotional lives.

"We cherish and celebrate our diversity and realize that our vitality and worth as a community flow from our respect for the differences, dignity and integrity of each individual."



Neil Whitehouse, minister at Rosedale-Queen Mary United

VITALITY THROUGH DIVERSITY

The congregation says its vitality comes from respecting individual differences.



UNITED THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

First theological college to be Affirming

By Alyson Huntly

A bilingual theological college in Montreal is the first of the United Church's 10 colleges and centres to become Affirming.

On Jan. 31, some 70 board members, students, staff, and friends attended a service and reception as United Theological College / Le Séminaire Uni joined Affirm United's 28 other Affirming congregations and institutions.

A special offering was taken for the family of James Gabriel, the grand chief of Kanesatake, whose home had recently been deliberately burned down.

College principal Phillip Joudrey explained that the offering was part of a continuing journey to be more inclusive.

"The Affirming process invited us to stop and ask questions of ourselves — to become out and affirming," he said.

"We see this as a call to affirm those who have not yet been invited to the table and those who have been told they are not welcome."

Guest preacher Ron Coughlin, a founding member of Affirm United, said: "We all know that the



UTC practices an open door policy.

predominant view in society is that the church does not welcome gay men, lesbians, bisexuals or transgender persons.

"Therefore, we as the United Church, need to be all the more public about our welcome."

Ron praised the college for having stepped out in faith to affirm its welcome for all people.

The process to become Affirming began three years earlier when Ron Coughlin wrote a letter to the board of governors encouraging the college to become an Affirming ministry:

"Unless we make our welcome public and known, people can only guess at the situation they might encounter," he pointed out.

United Theological College began the Affirming study process two years ago and held educational events with its governors, staff and students.

On Nov. 27, 2003, the board formally adopted a new mission statement. Betsy Anderson, a staff member at the United Church's national office, attended and offered the church's support.

(See page 13 for more of Ron's Sermon.)

EMMANUEL-HOWARD PARK UNITED

This church was practicing equal marriage in 2001

The first congregation in Canada to perform a same-sex marriage that was recognized as legal (although mistakenly) is now an Affirming ministry.

Emmanuel-Howard Park United Church in Toronto has been actively "affirming" for many years, but it was only last October that members voted to change their mission statement and officially join Affirm United's Affirming Ministry Program.

The congregation's mistakenly legal same-sex marriage took place in 2001, two years before Ontario's historic decision to legalize such weddings. The lesbian newlyweds overcame the problem of

getting a marriage licence by having the church publish banns. After the ceremony, they applied to the province for a marriage certificate and were surprised but quite pleased when it arrived.

Emmanuel-Howard Park has a strong tradition of welcoming not only GLBT folk but many others who are on the margins of mainstream society.

Pews at the Sunday evening service are filled "almost entirely by those on social assistance," says the minister, Cheri DiNovo.

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‘You offer the gift of safety and acceptance’

This abridged sermon by Affirm United founding and executive member Ron Coughlin was delivered on Jan. 31 at a service celebrating the new Affirming status of United Theological College / Le Séminaire Uni in Montreal. The scripture text was 1 Corinthians 12: 27 - 13:8. The full sermon is available at www.affirmunited.ca.

By Ron Coughlin

The place is the metropolis of Corinth, a very prosperous commercial crossroads on the Greek peninsula. The situation is the congregation, which is made up of people from a spectrum of social and economic classes — from the very rich to the very poor, both Greeks and Jews, both slaves and the free.

In Corinth there is a small congregation, maybe 50 households, which had been founded by Paul five years earlier. And now the congregation is in deep, deep trouble. The problem is conflict. Conflict over a whole bunch of issues ranging from what food to eat, hairstyles, policies about marriage, the role of women, belief in the resurrection, and gifts of the spirit. Debate over which gifts were more valuable and whether everyone has to have the gift which seems most important in Corinth — the gift of speaking in tongues.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Now concerning spiritual gifts, I do not want you to be ignorant.” Paul always gets right to the point. Then he goes on to talk about the varieties of gifts, all important, and all given by the same God. Then he offers the image of the body as a way of thinking about the church of Jesus Christ. Then he gives us this beautiful poetic

hymn about love, and finally he offers some friendly advice about gifts of the spirit.

That congregation in Corinth was tearing itself apart with disputes. Who was right? Which members should be asked to leave? With all the economic and class differences, I am sure there were a lot of prejudices and stereotypes being expressed.

It seems to me that this is still an issue for the church today. How are we to be an inclusive church and welcome all people, regardless of race, age, ability, economic standing, or sexual orientation? How do we welcome their various gifts?

People of our world are struggling for love and acceptance. And one gift we can offer as a church is a message of welcome and acceptance and the assurance that God loves us.

In March 2001, I wrote to Murdock McFarlane, chairperson of the Board of Governors at United Theological College, encouraging the college to become an Affirming ministry. In that letter, I said:

“I ask you to imagine for a moment being afraid to attend theological school for fear of being rejected or ostracized on your first visit. Or imagine keeping a key part of who you are locked up inside you as a

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Toronto church practiced equal marriage in 2001

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“Every Sunday night we have a free community dinner and serve an average of 60 to 70 people. The poor and psychiatricized sit on all committees and comprise the entire Outreach committee.”

Children are an important part of the congregation, with over 50 in the Sunday school — up from six youngsters, five years ago. A large number of lesbian moms are active at the church, so Sunday school is an important place for children of the LGBT, DiNovo says.

Diversity is both seen and heard. With 10 or more mother tongues represented in its midst, the

congregation is home to people of many nationalities, especially from the Caribbean islands and Guyana.

Four transsexual people are active members, and the congregation has groups with names like Rainbowlers (mainly middle age to senior gay men), Godtalk, and West End Riot Grlz. The church also houses a Wellness Centre that offers grief work groups, plus meditation and healing sessions, such as reiki, shiatsu, and yoga.

Says DiNovo, “All of this [diversity] has meant a lot of love, spiritual growth, challenges and accommodation — which proves it’s possible to be an Affirming congregation in any context.”

Offering the gift of safety and acceptance

Continued from page 13

secret from all your friends and colleagues.

“I have heard of persons expressing these concerns as they think of attending theological school. Unless we make our welcome public and known, people can only guess at the situation they might encounter.”

We all know that the predominant view in society is that the church does not welcome gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, or transgender persons. Therefore, we, as the United Church, need to be all the more public about our welcome.

The main message from the media is, “The church will not accept you.” We, as a church, need to offer an alternative message. Let me share some stories of acceptance from Affirming ministries.

JEFFREY

A man named Jeffrey, aged 25, died of AIDS. His partner and his mother went to their priest for the funeral. The priest refused to conduct the funeral and to bury Jeffrey in consecrated ground. The partner called me and said he had heard of the United Church accepting gay men. He asked if I could help to find a minister to do this funeral. I found a United Church minister who provided pastoral care and conducted the funeral. And the United Church Women provided refreshments.

In a world where there is oppression and injustice, this kind of church stands as a beacon of light and hope, a place of safety and acceptance.

MARTHA AND ANN

Martha and Ann had been partners in life and love for 12 years. One day Martha was told that Ann had been struck by a car. When Martha arrived at the hospital and asked how Anne was doing, she was told that her status as “partner and lesbian lover” did not make her a family member. Therefore she was not entitled to information. Martha called her United Church minister, who came right away. It took the minister two hours of pleading with hospital staff, but finally Martha found out whether her life partner was dead or alive.

In a world where there is oppression and

injustice, this kind of church stands as a beacon of light and hope, a place of safety and acceptance.

SANDY

Sandy, 19, is struggling with his feelings of attraction to other young men. His family and his minister had told him many times that being gay was a sin and that gay people would go to hell. One day, as Sandy was walking down a street and contemplating suicide, he noticed a rainbow flag outside a United Church. He went in and asked the secretary if this was a gay church. The kindly reply was, “No, this is not a gay church, but it welcomes gays and lesbians.” Sandy broke into tears. A church that was welcoming was good news to his ears.

Through his sobs, he told his story to the secretary. Now the secretary was a wise person — as most church secretaries are — and since the minister was not close by, she called a church member who had a gay son and who was willing to come right over to talk to Sandy.

This young man will tell you today that the United Church saved his life. Everyday reality is still not easy for Sandy, but he knows that he is not alone and that God loves him.

In world where there is oppression and injustice, this kind of church stands as a beacon of light and hope, a place of safety and acceptance.

Yes, Paul’s message to Corinth is also a message for us today. We all have different gifts to share, but we have a common gift — membership in the body of Christ and the gift of love.

Tonight, United Theological College joins 28 other congregations and institutions which have declared themselves an Affirming ministry. You, as a theological school, have stepped out in faith to affirm your welcome of all people.

In world where there is oppression and injustice, this kind of institution stands as a beacon of light and hope, a place of safety and acceptance.

And in churches within our country which have given and still give a message of non-welcome, it is gift of God to find a safe place.

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AFFIRMING MINISTRIES

The Affirming ministries of Affirm United work for inclusion and justice for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people within the United Church and in society. To date, 29 congregations and other ministries have declared themselves to be Affirming — after completing a formal study.

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First United Church, Salmon Arm
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First United Church, Vancouver
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Metropolitan United Church, Toronto
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