

## **The Sign Board says “WELCOME”**

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It's hard to find a church sign board that doesn't include the word “WELCOME”. It would be equally difficult to find a group of regular church-attenders who don't think that in their church, everyone is welcome. It would be next to impossible to find a policy statement in any church that explicitly excludes anyone. **So why the fuss about “affirming”? Isn't all this “welcome” enough?**

On April 18, 2009, 65 thoughtful, questioning individuals gathered at St. Andrew's United Church in Peterborough to consider this question. The group engaged in honest, passionate sharing of stories that revealed both welcome and rejection. The meeting was part of a series of workshops offered by the 10 x '10 Action Project of MOA. The goal of the project is to have 10 Affirming Ministries within Bay of Quinte Conference by 2010. The project is a response to the direction of General Council in 1988 that congregations should engage in study and discernment related to sexual diversity and faithful living.

Being an Affirming Congregation differs from simply saying “All are Welcome”. Becoming an Affirming Congregation indicates that the congregation has participated in an intentional process of questioning, study and development. The process was developed by Affirm United to assist congregations and other groups consider matters of diversity in general and sexual diversity in particular, from a spiritual and faithful perspective.

**During the day I heard several stories from “welcoming congregations”.** You can decide whether these stories convey a clear and recognizable message of welcome:

\*One woman said that her minister is allowed to marry same-sex couples – just not in the church;

\*Another said that since some parishioners became aware that she is lesbian, she has been quietly advised that it would be best if she didn't teach Sunday School anymore;

\*A mother told of the difficult choice to stand with her lesbian daughter as she asked to be married in the church, realizing that if the request was denied she would no longer be comfortable in the church she called home;

\*A young man said that his minister offered to refer him to a program that would make him straight;

\*A session member was relieved when a lesbian couple who wanted to have their infant baptized decided to have the ceremony at their home rather than in the church as fewer people would need to know;

\*A gay man told of the hurt he felt when the anniversaries of straight couples were recognized in church, while he and his partner of 26 years pretended to be just good friends;

\*A straight man said that he doesn't know if anyone else in his church shares his concern for gay and lesbian people because no one speaks about it and it feels like a huge risk to bring up the subject.

As our Church history is full of stories like these, none of us knows whether gay, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered people are really welcome. We must make a clear and unmistakable proclamation that sexual diversity is Affirmed - with no qualifications, if we hope that our churches will be experienced as welcoming to all.