

Welcoming Congregations: A Journey, Not a Destination

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What does it mean to be a Welcoming Congregation?

When the First Unitarian Congregation of Hamilton voted unanimously to become one in 1998, completing the Canadian Unitarian Council's program for congregations wishing to be more inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer or questioning people, it was blazing something of a trail. The church had only one openly LGBTQ congregant. It had been only six years since the Unitarian Church of Edmonton had become the first in Canada to complete this program. Equal marriage rights for same-sex couples were still six years in the future.

In the almost two decades since, times have changed. Today, Hamilton is one of 99 percent of Unitarian congregations in Canada that have voted to become Welcoming Congregations, and is home to many LGBTQ members. Rev. Linda Thomson, who co-chaired the committee that oversaw the Welcoming Congregation project, credits the slow, deliberate approach the committee took leading up the vote with an affirmation that has produced lasting results.

"That work really seems to have stood the congregation in good stead for a long time," she says.

But the Hamilton congregation also recognizes there's still work to be done, which is why it decided in recent years that LGBTQ issues would be one of its main areas of social justice focus. Indeed, the Unitarian Universalist Association recommends congregations reaffirm their welcoming status every five years, and offers additional programs congregations can undertake to "deepen their welcome".

While First Unitarian hasn't formally signed on for any of these yet, the congregation is still pursuing a number of LGBTQ-affirming policies, such as making most of their washrooms gender-neutral. The congregation has also become home to a monthly PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) group and a LGBT social group. Monica Bennett, a longtime member who identifies as bisexual, believes that these and other initiatives are already enhancing the congregation's welcoming status.

"There's more talk about it, there's more conversation about it, people are more open to it, I can just feel people's openness and their curiosity and compassion. There's a bigger sense I have of it," she says.

Lyla Miklos, a lay chaplain at First Unitarian agrees that while it might not always be immediately visible to outsiders, the church has made progress on LGBTQ issues. But she also believes that there's still a ways to go.

"When you walk in, we're not all wearing rainbow stickers on our heads," she says. "It's understood, without it being said, that we're a pretty safe space. But how can we make it even safer?" Miklos expresses concern, for instance, over a survey First Unitarian conducted about a decade ago in which some respondents indicated they were uncomfortable with the prospect of a trans minister in their

congregation. An education worker with the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, she's advocated mandatory training on LGBTQ issues for her employer, so that there's a shared standard of behaviour for all employees that they feel comfortable holding each other accountable for.

"My vision would be something similar," she says. "So that we're all on the same page together, and we all have the same understanding together."

On a broader level, Miklos also sees a need to hold the congregation as a whole accountable. Laudable as the unanimous vote to become a welcoming congregation may have been, she says, it's important to recognize it was just the beginning of a process, not the end. And being a welcoming congregation, she adds, goes beyond simply welcoming the LGBTQ community to tackling the many other forms of discrimination that still persist. In short, the question of what it means to be a Welcoming Congregation is still one everyone should be asking.