



# ST. ANDREW'S UNITED CHURCH

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**For Immediate Release**

## **LOCAL CHURCH BECOMES "AFFIRMING."**

St. Andrew's United Church in North Bay now officially offers an open and public welcome to gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered people. The 129-year-old downtown congregation recently voted by a large majority to become an Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Canada. It joins over 80 other congregations in the denomination with that designation.

St. Andrew's will post a rainbow symbol decal outside its building to indicate to LGBT persons that this church offers them a community in which their sexual identity will be respected and affirmed. No strings attached. It has adopted a statement saying all people are invited "to take part in every aspect of our church life including membership, leadership, celebrating life's passages and marriage."

The decision was not taken lightly. For two years the congregation studied, with films and discussion and speakers, what it might mean to fully include people of all sexual orientations and identities. The result is a "place where you really belong... where if you are not there, you are missed," in the words of Peter Haddow, a member of the committee guiding the process.

Although homosexuality is still viewed with suspicion by some Christian denominations, the national United Church has chosen to ordain and commission, as clergy, openly gay [LGBT] people who meet the criteria for that vocation. Congregations are free to celebrate same-gender marriages. By choosing to become publicly known as an Affirming Congregation, St. Andrew's has also opted to place a new "inclusion committee" within its church council. It will actively "seek reconciliation and justice" regardless of sexual orientation, economic circumstance, or other terms that sometimes divide people.

St. Andrew's has a long tradition of seeking social justice, hosting a food bank and regular Sunday lunches for any downtown neighbours in need. It provides space for many community organizations. It is active in the environmental movement, and has a well-known and creative ministry of music.

The church's welcome to the LGBT community is not new. "We were almost there already," says St. Andrews' Council Chair Howe Saunders. But he's glad to "see it completed." And now -- for the sake of any person who feels that a church "might not really accept them"-- it is time to "get the message out on this one."

A service celebrating St. Andrew's new designation as an Affirming Congregation will be held at the church, 399 Cassells St., at 10:30 am on Sunday May 5. All are invited.

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