

Hillhurst United Church

Celebrating 2 Years as an Affirming Ministry

By Amy Darling

Religion is a touchy subject at the best of times. And the word *touchy* doesn't even begin to cut it from the perspective of an entire segment of the world's population which has been marginalized, demonized, tortured - executed - for the sake of what's purported to be right.

Every night, millions of eyes stare at ceilings around the world as people wonder what they did to deserve being created as evil creatures unworthy of a higher power's love, tossing and turning and trying to reconcile two warring sides of their identities.

Many of us who grew up in the shadow of the church have horror stories; wounds that still run deep and scars you can see and feel. The mere mention of organized religion is cause to be on alert, to be suspicious, to ready our defences. Even if we haven't been burned before, we are almost expecting it: who's going to bring up Exodus and their "ministries", or throw down some lame Leviticus quote, or say something about marriage being a sacred, holier-than-thou covenant exclusively between two bored, desperate heterosexual people who don't want to pay for their own waffle maker?

Those members of the queer community who do welcome traditional spirituality into their lives are treated with suspicion and often derision by their friends: after all, why would you want to be part of a group that detests everything that you are? So it is a real challenge for those who wish to find a place where they can be open about their sexuality *and* their faith.

Enter organizations such as Hillhurst United Church in Kensington. Like 7 other United churches in the city, HUC has made the conscious decision to become what is called an affirming church: they are a fully inclusive congregation now committed to welcoming people who have been marginalized by organized religion, in particular the GLBTQQ community.

Joanne Anquist, Worship Animator at the church, explains: "The process of becoming an affirming ministry started about 5 years ago with a group of people who felt that HUC needed to make a public statement of inclusivity that would welcome the GLBTQQ community into a safe, sacred place. At the same time, we were trying to craft a banner to hang on the church that would express our beliefs about our community of faith to celebrate our 100 year anniversary. 'Whoever you are, wherever you are at, join us on the journey' became a statement of intent for how we wanted to shape our community in the next 100 years."

While this stated commitment to inclusiveness is encouraging just on its own, the affirming process that such churches must undertake is a lengthy journey of discovery and debate before any proclamation can be made. HUC had long before voted to welcome same sex marriages under its roof, but they now needed to create opportunities for dialog, education, and exploration within their congregation. All church members were given information on the affirming process and the philosophy behind it. Sunday services included stories of shunned members of the queer community, and a presentation on the common passages used to exclude individuals from Christian circles based on sexual orientation. Films like *For The Bible Tells Me So* were screened, showing the theological and emotional consequences of homophobia. The church even thought to engage the Calgary Sexual Health Centre to lead a number of educational events on sexual orientation and gender identity. Incredible!

Evening sessions with guest speakers were arranged; at one such session, says Anquist, "We were asked to share our own stories of transformation. We heard stories of gay men who had been members of the ex-gay movement, or who had been denied communion in their church; of seniors who had gay uncles or friends who had remained in the closet out of fear; of young men who had been disowned because they were gay; of lesbian couples afraid to come out to the people at work; of friends who were told

they would go to hell because they were gay; of mothers who were afraid for their gay children. Each of us had been shaped by a story of a loved one unable to be free because they were gay. All of these painful stories melded to form a collective intention to offer Hillhurst United as a safe place to bring these hurts and rejections, and to invite all to grow within a community of faith where they are accepted and valued."

After months of progressive, intelligent exploration and earnest reflection, a vote was held to confirm HUC's intent. The vote was unanimous, and on Palm Sunday, 2009, Hillhurst United celebrated becoming an affirming church.

It is not surprising to learn that people such as these have not been content to rest on their laurels after such a momentous event. Currently in the middle of restoring their 100-year-old heritage building and amazingly, adding 13 units of affordable housing, Hillhurst United will be holding a weekend-long celebration this month of their two year anniversary as an affirming church.

On Saturday, April 16th, the church will play host to a one-night-only reading of the acclaimed play *heterophobia*. The play, which enjoyed sold out audiences during its run last fall, features a world in which gay is the norm and straight people are threatening the sanctity of marriage. This will be your last chance to catch it for quite some time as Calgary playwright Pam Rocker, who wrote *heterophobia*, will be busy settling into her new role as the Marketing & Communications Coordinator at Hillhurst United.

Impressively, the church's morning service on Sunday April 17th will honour their anniversary celebration with a very special guest speaker, Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi. Says Anquist: "The election of Mayor Nenshi has helped reframe the view of our city, both to ourselves and across the country. It also speaks to aspirations of building an inclusive community where diverse voices are welcomed and respected. Hillhurst shares that vision. The affirming celebration commemorates our decision to open our doors to all people, to provide a safe place to be in community." 🌟



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