

# Hillhurst United Church an 'affirming ministry'

Congregation shows belief in inclusiveness

BY MARIO TONEGUZZI, CALGARY HERALD APRIL 9, 2011



Joanne Anquist, left, and minister Geoffrey Simmins are excited about Mayor Naheed Nenshi's impending visit to Hillhurst United Church.

Photograph by: Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald

In an age when some people equate churches and religion with some current examples of hate-filled fanaticism, Calgary is home to a community of faith that looks at spirituality in a fresh and unique way.

And on April 17, Hillhurst United Church will celebrate its Affirming Ministry with a special guest: Mayor Naheed Nenshi.

Hillhurst is part of Affirm United, a collection of United Church congregations committed to welcoming people it says has been marginalized by the church, particularly the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities.

Many people fitting into these communities have experienced exclusion from faith communities. "The affirming process seeks to address the harm done by that active exclusion," says Hillhurst United Church. "When a congregation is designated as affirming, it is making a public statement to all who arrive there that it has taken on a period of reflection regarding barriers to participation and belonging.

"The election of Mayor Nenshi in Calgary has helped reframe the view of our city both to ourselves and across the country," says Joanne Anquist, worship animator at Hillhurst. "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. We welcome Mayor Nenshi as he shares his journey and his hopes for continuing openness and diversity in this great city."

Anquist says this is the second year for the affirming celebration. "It's a celebration of the statements that we've made to the community about being open to everybody whoever they are," she says.

"It's on Palm Sunday. For us, Palm Sunday is also political. Jesus was making a statement and the people were hoping to overthrow oppression on Palm Sunday. That's why they marched in the streets and so we always have our affirming celebration on Palm Sunday. "We feel that the connection between Palm Sunday and the statement about being open and inclusive is a good one."

A palm parade at the end of the service goes into the neighbourhood. "Affirming is not just for that community. It's to expand to other people who are disenfranchised for any number of reasons," says Anquist. "We're going to celebrate the statement that we've made to the community at large that we accept you whoever you are, wherever you're at."

Part of the affirming celebration is a special staged reading of the play "heterophobia" on April 16 -described as a darkly comedic play by local playwright Pam Rucker that brings a unique perspective to the issue of discrimination against homosexual relationships.

More information on the April 17 services can be found at [www.hillhurstunited.com](http://www.hillhurstunited.com) and more information on heterophobia can be found at [www.heterophobia.ca](http://www.heterophobia.ca)