

Knox Calgary, a fully inclusive community

The story of Knox, Calgary's journey to become an inclusive Church is not a story about a radical or subversive attempt to change or undermine orthodoxy. It is the story about a community of God's children working and talking to discern God's will in the Twenty-first century. The story of a community trying to work out the meaning of its faith and witness today. The story of a community discovering the presence and activity of God within the world, the church and their lives.

In 2012, I was called to Knox Church. However, their exploration of inclusivity goes back decades. This is one congregation who responded to the denominational calls for study and engagement. One of the first things I did, as the new minister was to confirm the congregation's core values. They have had the same three since the 1980's and were still, strongly, a part of the church's culture. They are Worship and Music. Compassion. Justice.

Over the years, the congregation has responded to the needs of multiple Refugee families, educated itself about relevant current issues concerning the church and gave thousands of dollars to help start new churches in the presbytery. It has been, and remains a place where diverse people find a sincere "welcome" – a word that is turning out to be controversial in the Presbyterian Church.

One of the markers of my ministry is a determination to encourage discussion about any matter. If the people of the church want to talk about it, then we, as a church, must talk about it. If God has laid it on the hearts of the Session then who are we as leaders to hinder God?

One of the methods we use facilitate conversation and enable people to express their opinions in a safe forum is called the conversation Café. Tables of six are arranged to encourage conversation. A menu of questions is placed on the table along with pens and blank pads of paper. An Elder is assigned to each table as the host. The host ensures that everyone at the table has spoken or shared their thoughts on the menu questions. I, or another leader, welcomes people, introduces the questions. Depending on how much time we have, I will ask people to record five responses to the question. There is 15 minutes to discuss each question. Each table group shares one answer with the larger group. When the three questions have been talked about, I thank everyone for their participation. Sometimes the conversation happens over lunch and other times over light refreshments. All the responses are collected, recorded and published in some form so that people can see all of them and have access to them. The conversation café model has been used to generate discussion over,

- what does it mean to be an inclusive community?
- what does it mean to look like an inclusive community?
- What is the future of our women's group?
- what are the questions or concerns about our finances?
- and What does a senior ministry look like?

Throughout most of our discussion over the past four years, one concern rose more than any other. The concern was the public declaration of being inclusive. Why did we have to do that? Aren't we already a welcoming community? We're a Church, "If the church welcomes everyone, then why should we have to make a special extra effort to do so for any particular group of people, however they identify themselves?" Do we even have to have the conversation? There are two answers that address that concern. One is found in the reasons for the creation of our Leading with Care Policy and the other is found in our Mind, Body and Soul study document.

Why did the Presbyterian Church in Canada need a Policy that declares itself to be a safe place for people and outlines the process through which it ensures that it is a safe place for people, especially with a focus on vulnerable adults and children? The answer is because parts of the church, and not simply the PCC, have not been safe places for people. There have been incidents and occasions when abuse has happened. The intentional, public declaration announces to people that we take that idea of being a safe place seriously. It is one way that individual churches may distinguish who they are: An intentionally safe place.

A further comment needs to be made about “safe.” To this point, we accept the meaning of 'safe' to be the common understanding of that word. To this point, the church, or parts of it, has not tried to qualify or narrow the common understanding of “safe” to support a particular theological agenda. To this point, the church has accepted and indeed, in most cases, wanted to affirm that common understanding “safe” so that people outside and inside the church understand the reason for the policy and what the church is trying to say.

Almost all churches have the words, "everyone welcome" on their church sign. However, many people both inside and outside of the church hear or read this as a conditional welcome. The Body, Mind and Soul Study document revealed this clearly. Some Church communities have hidden or not so hidden conditions on who, exactly, is welcome in that Church. To place socioeconomic, cultural or sexuality conditions on who is welcome in a church is to state publicly that not everyone is welcome. It is failure to take what the words “everyone” and “welcome” means. It is as if to say, in the kingdom of god, only one type of person is welcome.

The words "everyone" and "welcome" seem to be interpreted in such a way that the meaning has nothing to do with the common understanding of those words. It renders the meaning of those words on the church sign meaningless to many people. Churches who do mean the common understanding of the words, “everyone” and “welcome” must then find other ways, other words, other signs that let people know they do welcome everyone. A public declaration of inclusion is necessary because the phrase “everyone welcome” can be misleading or hypocritical; some churches are not safe places for many people.

Underlying this journey was an attempt to be transparent and open. Anything can be talked about because everything is talked about. Issues and concern are part of the public discourse so that people are comfortable and feel safe about holding and expressing the struggles of their faith journey along with the hopes and fears they have. An important moment, a turning point, for our Mission & Justice Committee happened listening to one of the children who grew up in the congregation and is now an adult. This was a true measure of what welcoming and acceptance meant at Knox. *When he told them that while he didn't feel persecuted for being gay, he did not think that it was possible for him to speak to anyone about his sexuality or announce publicly that he was gay, they knew something had to change.* How could Knox maintain the belief of being welcoming when one of our own didn't feel safe in the space and with the people he knew from infancy? If he didn't feel safe, how could others, who were not more intimately part of the community feel safe?

The process of exploring what it meant to be a fully inclusive congregation was led by our Mission and Justice committee and approved by the church session. We had the opportunity to meet with a person who sat on the Affirming United of the United Church. It was very helpful to learn about their affirming process and the advice offered. It was freeing to be reminded that because the PCC had no process, Knox would explore new ground. There are three foundational principles that underline the affirming

process that can be summarized as public, intentional and explicit (PIE). The principles seemed to make sense, but we didn't understand how each applied to our church.

Our experience over the past 3-4 years has confirmed the importance of these principles. The M&J committee made a proposal to the Church Session that it approve the work of the committee to take steps to explore what it means to become an affirming congregation. Further, that it make a statement to the congregation regarding the approval so that there was no confusion or misunderstanding about what was happening or why it was happening.

The statement declared that we believe that God is calling us to be an inclusive congregation. The church session approved taking the steps to explore what it means for Knox Church to become an affirming congregation. The decision to become fully inclusive would be made an AGM.

- 1) It was important that everyone understood what the point of conversations and events were and that everyone knew they would have a voice in the process. We repeated the need for and encouraged the expression of people's opinions not only about the events and conversations publicly but to express them privately as well to their Elder or Minister.
- 2) It was essential that everyone understood where we were going with these explorations. There was a purpose. There was an end. Our beginning point was, weren't we already on affirming congregation? Our ending point was to declare publicly and confidently that we were.

With that in mind, we begin a two-year journey of more intentional exploration and conversation. On Reformation Sunday that year it was a celebration of protest songs to help recapture the protesting side of our reformed faith. A post-it was placed in every bulletin. People were invited to write two things on the note. The first was to write their hope for Knox church. The second was to write their hope for the larger community. They were then invited to stick these on the doors of the church. We published those in our AGM reports as a permanent reminder of the congregation's hope. The responses echoed the core values clearly and some specifically mentioned becoming affirming.

Education was an important part of Knox's journey. Some of the events hosted by Knox were:

- Hearing the story of a person's journey to understand their sexuality, wrestle with issues of faith and their struggle of finding a safe place in the church.
- The story of a young man's transgender journey; hearing the painful struggle of that process itself along with the judgment and rejection from the faith community
- A Don't Be Afraid event involving Scott Jones, and many others, to raise awareness about homophobia both in and outside the church.
- Participation in Calgary's Pride Parade. This is one way that Knox has decided to be public about its inclusiveness
- Conversation Cafés
- The Communion Table draped in rainbow colours though Advent and Christmas including a World AIDS Day themed communion served on the first Sunday of December
- Many sermons and sermon illustrations that show what it means to live as an inclusive individual and community.
- A vote by secret ballot at the 2017 AGM to declare Knox a fully inclusive community
- A declaration by the session of the intentional steps to reach the possibility of that vote.
- A vote by the congregation at a congregation's meeting to approve the plan to explore the possibility of what it means to be affirming/ inclusive

- Hosting the performance of a play called oblivion by a local playwright. The play explores the decision a young man, Tim, who must decide to choose either having faith or being gay. The play is in two Acts. Act I presents Tim's struggle. As he understands it, he can have his sexuality or his faith but not both. Act 2 is an opportunity for the Actors, Playwright and the Audience to engage in a conversation about the play

I am not saying that to complete the process of becoming an affirming or inclusive community one must or has to begin where Knox did, this is where we did start because it was the logical starting point for the Knox community.

Next Steps.

A decision to become affirming/ inclusive does not end with the decision to be so. While the decision and the decision-making process is important, indeed vital that a church community understand where it want to go or who it wants to be - the challenge now is to find out / discern how to be that inclusive community. Like anything the church wants to be and do, how does one

- 1) get the word out?
- 2) continue to build / nurture a culture of inclusion?

In May, Knox held an Extending the Family of God Service on Christian Family Sunday. It was a celebration of the AGM decision. Guests were invited and letters were read that encouraged the community on its decision and journey. In October, a similar Service is planned for Reformation Sunday as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of Reforming the Church. A Lesbian Choir will join and share their ministry in our Sunday worship. On the Saturday evening before Reformation Sunday Knox is planning a Party. There will be live music and several LGBTQ2S groups have been invited to celebrate with us their work in supporting and advocating for the LGBTQ2S community.

Knox has begun to explore various ways we might announce to the wider community that the church is inclusive. What signage might we add or change? At the AGM, it was agreed to add the word "inclusive" to the vision statement. It now reads, "An inclusive Christian community for spiritual nourishment and caring fellowship." We are also exploring meaningful, colourful ways that additions to the building and other spaces including the sanctuary reflect the kind of inclusive God and faith that Christians are called to worship and live.

Knox has connected with the Affirming Network in Calgary. It includes many communities from the United Church but also those from the Lutherans, Mennonites and Unitarians. Finally, Knox has connected with Calgary Outlink as it discerns its most effective role within the LGBTQ2S community.

As an extension of the well-known Johannine passage that declares, "In my fathers' house are many dwelling places, the Greek lends itself to be interpreted," In my Father's house, there is room for everyone." The good news is, indeed, fully inclusive. Any interpretation that gives or justifies one groups dominion, privilege or preference over another violates the covenant God, as creator, made with all human beings. Let us worship God!

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