

PRIDE PLACE

Bringing Together the United Church and the
2SLGBTQIA+ Community in Nova Scotia

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Note to readers:

We acknowledge that the language used to refer to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community is evolving, and that individual members of the community have individual preferences in how they identify themselves and their community.

For the purposes of this report, we will use the terms 2SLGBTQIA+ and trans and queer community interchangeably. As we continue on our journey of building and strengthening relationships we recognize that the language we use may change.

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- Saint Andrew's UCW
- Saint Andrew's United Church Queer Working Group
- Saint Andrew's United Church Council
- Robert Wright, MSW, RSW
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- A dedicated group of volunteers from St. Andrew's United Church congregation and staff
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Introduction

Saint Andrew's United Church in Halifax, Nova Scotia is nearing one hundred years as a community of faith. We believe in a loving God, and we are called to share that love and demonstrate it in our actions each day. Our faithful commitment to God has not changed over the years, but, our understanding of God's Word and how we are called to demonstrate our faith in our daily lives has changed.

Saint Andrew's has established our mission as:

Respond to the spiritual hunger in our community. Create community across religious & social borders. Stand for social, economic, environmental justice.

With a vision of:

Saint Andrew's constantly strives to expand the impact of our mission to be recognized as a spiritual and social justice leader in Halifax.

We hold the values of:

To love God and to love one another.
Inclusion of all.
Courage.
Excellence.

We recognize that the Christian Church has not always demonstrated God's love toward members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. To live the mission, vision and values that we espouse, we have made a commitment to learn and grow in our faith, and in our relationships with members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, both those within and outside of our faith community. We must do the work to ensure that community members not only feel welcome, but genuinely feel that they belong. Early in 2023, St. Andrew's United Church established a Queer Working Group. Made up of church members, queer and trans community members, and allies, the Queer Working Group tends to the issues, concerns, events, pains, and celebrations of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and seeks to lift up the concerns in a way that invites an appropriate response from the church. The Queer Working Group

recognized the need for St. Andrew's and other United Churches to gain a deeper understanding of the queer and trans community in order to build meaningful relationships, and to begin to consider how United Churches in Nova Scotia, and beyond, can approach reconciliation and reparations with the community.

Jane Rideout's study, *Investigating Queer-Inclusive Spaces in The Halifax Regional Municipality* (2022) states, "Queer individuals deserve to feel safe and included" (p.2), but, that "while there are queer-inclusive spaces in the HRM, they are concentrated on the Halifax Peninsula" (p.2). Respondents to this study indicated that they "are dissatisfied with the number and quality of queer-inclusive spaces in the municipality" (p.2).

This is an area where United churches can offer support. Most United Churches across Nova Scotia have space that could be offered as queer and trans-inclusive spaces. We inherited the church buildings where we gather for worship, fellowship and community events from past generations. Many, indeed, most of these churches were established and built at a time when members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community were oppressed and marginalized and unwelcome. We now have the gift of an opportunity to apologize and atone for our past. To welcome those who we once oppressed, to demonstrate that we understand the harm that we have caused, and to say to the community, there is a place for you here, you belong.

In May 2023 St. Andrew's received a Seeds of Hope Grant from the United Church of Canada Foundation, to explore our relationship with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, to begin a conversation with individuals and organizations that serve and support the community, and to explore how we can strengthen current relationships, build new relationships, and how United Churches in Nova Scotia can support the community and demonstrate true allyship. We believed that these conversations would provide valuable insight not only to Saint Andrew's, but to all United Church in Nova Scotia that are interested in exploring their relationship with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and finding ways to build and strengthen those relationships.

Pride Place: The event

On October 24, 42 members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community gathered in the hall at Saint Andrew's United Church, supported by 22 staff and volunteers, to share their stories in order for us to learn from each other. Participants were joined at their tables by two volunteers, a table facilitator and a note taker.

After opening remarks, Dan MacKay presented on the history of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in Nova Scotia.

Robert Wright MSW, RSW, facilitated the discussion, posing 3 questions over the course of the day.

- What is currently happening in the community?
- What does the community need?
- What can Saint Andrew's and United Churches across Nova Scotia do to support the community?

Data collection:

The information included in this report was gathered in a number of ways.

- Volunteers at each table took notes throughout the day, recording the responses and points made by participants.
- Participants wrote responses to specific questions on Sticky notes which were collected and grouped by theme.
- Participants were sent a link to a feedback form following the event and encouraged to share feedback on the day.
- Volunteers were asked to provide any additional information that wasn't captured by note takers, including comments heard during the lunch break and following the event.
- Several people who were not able to attend the event sent comments and concerns via email.

All data was collated and grouped into themes to provide a broad overview that reflects what was shared with us.

Many people commented that there is currently an increase in anti-queer and trans bias, homophobia, and transphobia. This is demonstrated in the destruction and/or theft of queer and trans signs and symbols as well as an increase in violence against 2SLGBTQIA+ people. Attempts by some provincial governments to legislate a change that would require school staff to inform parents when a student “comes out” to them demonstrate a lack of understanding of the rights of queer and trans youth and the issues of safety that they face.

Despite the increase in anti-queer and trans bias, there is a recognition that some organizations are actively working to provide supports to the community. It was noted that Dalhousie University has established a Queer Student Advisor position within the last year, and that in some jurisdictions there are efforts to create affordable housing options for queer and trans seniors.

Many of the challenges discussed are the same challenges that are faced by other marginalized and minority communities. Affordable housing, food insecurity and support for aging community members were highlighted as concerns that must be addressed.

What does the community need?

As would be expected of a diverse community, the needs indicated are diverse, however, themes did emerge that must be recognized.

Safety

People need to feel safe to function. One comment was “the rapidly changing political landscape puts us at further risk, especially the most vulnerable within the 2SLGBTQIA+ spectrum”. The lack of a feeling of safety extends to the church environment. Recognizing that scripture has been, and indeed still is by some readers, interpreted as being supportive of homophobia. To feel safe, people need to know they are in a place where homophobia is not tolerated and will be challenged by anyone displaying homophobia.

Community Space

There was wide support for a community space that offers a variety of services and supports. Of particular note, is the need for sober spaces. As one commenter wrote,

“When I was young, the only spaces that our communities had were bars and these spaces played such an important role in my youth and developing identity. Things have changed. Bars are not the ideal place for our community to gather.

This sentiment was echoed by many others.

In addition to sober spaces, participants indicated a need for intergenerational and intersectional spaces. From youth who are just beginning to express their sexual and gender identity, to seniors who are moving toward retirement and want to remain active, we need spaces that are welcoming and supportive to all.

Many people indicated a need for a clinic within a community hub, providing care for medical, physical, and mental health.

A community hub that supports and encourages participation in the arts, music, recreation, healthy living and social activities such as dances and a queer and trans cafe, as well as providing services for community members who face food insecurity, housing insecurity and/or health challenges was a recurring theme.

Allies

Given the lack of safety that many people expressed, it is not surprising that the need for allies would arise. It was clearly stated that a claim of allyship requires action. We heard that to be an ally you must speak up, have difficult conversations, and advocate. One participant posed the question, “Will outsiders know you are an ally?”

What can Saint Andrew's and United Churches across Nova Scotia do to support the community?

The history of homophobia and transphobia of the Christian Church is still fresh in the minds of many. We did hear concern that it was difficult to participate in a project sponsored by a church and speculation that the church is “jumping on the bandwagon” or using the queer and trans community as an opportunity to access new financial and property resources. These concerns were balanced with comments demonstrating an appreciation for the willingness of the church to open this conversation and a comment that “the whole process we went through drew me closer to the church as a queer person.”

The issue was raised by both volunteers and participants that there is a challenge in asking people who are not connected to the church, what we can do differently. On the surface, it can appear to be an odd question to ask of people who don't know what you are already doing. We believe there is value to asking this though, and the responses we received do bear that out.

The United Church of Canada made a commitment to affirming and supporting members of the queer and trans community in 1988. Saint Andrew's recently voted to become an affirming ministry. Our affirming nature is demonstrated through the policies and practices of the church, including the wedding policy, the welcoming nature of the congregation, and the display of Pride symbols throughout the church. But is this enough?

Affirm United, a partner of The United Church of Canada, that offers education, action and support to United Churches that want to be welcoming churches where people of all gender identities and sexual orientations are welcome and feel that they belong, calls on congregations to be **Public, Intentional, and Explicit (PIE)** in their support of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. If we are following this call, we would expect that our wider community, even if they are not members or adherents of our church, would know that we are supportive of our queer and trans neighbours.

Be brave! Take risks

There were many suggestions for what we, as a faith community can do. A common thread that was woven through all of the responses to this question was to be brave and take risks.

Amongst all of the responses to “what can we do” the need for true allyship was a central theme. We were reminded that “action speaks louder than words” and that participants are “hoping the wish list becomes reality.” Along this line, participants voiced concern that “nothing will come of it”. In the spirit of partnership and recognition that building relationships requires working together, one person stated, “Like any first step, it can really only be judged by the follow-through and I think that is up to all of us.”

So how does the church publicly, intentionally and explicitly put our words and beliefs into action? Specific recommendations arising from Pride Place include:

- **Including members of the queer and trans community in leadership roles within the church.**

Our facilitator spoke of his personal experience of moving away from his church community when he came out. How this resonated with some participants was eloquently captured in this feedback:

Robert's words at the end had a powerful effect on me.

About being robbed of your opportunities for service by his queerness I've kind of been crying for days over it.

- **Education and training for members of the church.**

A church is a community and although we hold shared values and may all agree that we must welcome and affirm everyone who comes through our doors, we all come with different experiences and understanding. Despite hosting a volunteer training session in advance of Pride Place, we still had reports of guests being mis-gendered and feeling a lack of sensitivity by some volunteers. If we are to assure that everyone who visits or uses our space feels truly welcome, we need all church members, staff, and volunteers to know how to sincerely and appropriately extend that welcome.

- **Show up at queer and trans events.**

The queer and trans community in Halifax and other parts of Nova Scotia is a vibrant, diverse, active community. There are a great variety of queer and trans led and queer and trans serving organizations that host events and provide opportunities for people to come together. Attending these events offers church members the chance to meet and get to know people.

Developing relationships with people will always provide a greater education about their lives and experiences than sitting in a room learning about them in the abstract. Put very succinctly, it was suggested that we “get out of the pews and into the community”.

- **Demonstrate allyship and advocacy.**

Allyship requires bravery and risk taking. It was raised in discussion, and is clear in recent news reports, that there has been an increase in displays of anti-queer and trans sentiment. This ranges from intimidation and insults to damage and destruction of property to physical violence. The message is clear. We need to speak and act against this. Suggestions for allyship included being present and visible at counter-protests and lobbying the government to create policies and provide funding that supports queer and trans led and queer and trans serving organizations.

- **Deconstruct theology.**

Joe Terrell (2023), defines Christian deconstruction as, “the process by which a Christian critically re-evaluates the tenets and doctrines of traditional Christianity and emerges with a different perspective on their faith.”

Theology is at the heart of the church. Everything we do and believe comes from our understanding of theology. We know that scripture is open to interpretation, and that for a very long time, in many churches, the interpretation of scripture was used to condemn homosexuality. With our new understanding of scripture, we must work to counter this historical perspective. Recognizing that accepting and internalizing new perspectives takes time, and will vary widely amongst individual members of the church, it is imperative that we provide opportunities to hear, discuss and explore this new perspective.

Being brave means acknowledging the historical discrimination, having the difficult conversations, challenging assumptions and incorporating these lessons into our regular worship services.

- **Provide safe space**

The lack of queer and trans-inclusive spaces discussed in Jane Rideout's report was echoed by many participants of Pride Place. Several people indicated the need for sober spaces. Traditionally, in Halifax, bars have offered a gathering a meeting space for members of the queer and trans community. Although these bars have provided social opportunities, many activities and services are not ideally served in this type of venue.

There is a call for intergenerational and interfaith sober spaces where community members can create, socialise and access support. The range of activities that were suggested to be offered in such a space include:

- Mental and physical health care
- Sober dance parties
- Creative spaces to support art and music
- Youth programming
- Queer and trans cafe
- Food and housing support
- Meditation
- Human library

Next steps

Forty-two people generously gave of their time and openly shared their thoughts at Pride Place because we said we wanted to learn from them. Others who were unable to attend shared their thoughts and ideas through email. Twenty-two members of the congregation and staff team gave their time to listen and learn.

Consultation is meant to be a beginning. It is an opportunity to learn, to plan, and to begin building relationships. To have meaning, the consultation must be followed up with concrete action based on what we learned.

To reiterate, there is concern among those who shared their thoughts and ideas, that “nothing will come of it”. This concern is tempered with hope that “the wish list becomes reality”. The responsibility to continue to build and strengthen relationships and to follow-up on the suggestions and requests of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community lies squarely at the feet of the church, but we are not expected to do it alone. As a participant indicated, “Like any first step, it can really only be judged by the follow-through and I think that is up to all of us.”

As we move forward, we will be most successful if we walk together toward a future of acceptance and inclusion.

- Examine the recommendations in this report and determine how we can meet them.
- Develop short, medium- and long-term goals based on these recommendations.
- Create a plan of action including budget allocations to successfully meet these goals.
- Support and expand the Queer Working Group to continue to advise the church and create opportunities for learning and connecting.
- Create a plan to continue dialogue with the queer and trans community. This should include ongoing conversations with individuals and organizations as well as future round table events.
- In the short term, make space available for queer and trans groups and activities.
- In the longer term, as congregations look to the future to redevelop and/or rebuild their physical spaces, invite the voices of the queer and trans community into our conversations and examine ways to include the creation of dedicated queer and trans spaces in any new buildings or facilities.

References

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