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Calgary United Churches keen to ‘affirm’ support for LGBTQ



Pace Anhorn and Pam Rocker are seen outside Calgary's Living Spirit United Church.
Metro/Robson Fletcher

Pace Anhorn is transgender and believes in God, two defining characteristics that don't always jive together.

That is, until he was welcomed with open arms by members of the congregation at Calgary's Living Spirit United Church. Now, he and other members of the congregation are preparing Oct. 26 to become to ninth church of their kind in Calgary to join the "affirming" network, meaning they are open to same-sex marriage, promote a space space for people from all walks of life and have no problem sharing that acceptance with members of other churches near and far.

"God's love is all encompassing — for everybody — it's not just for those that fit the Conservative mould," Anhorn stated proudly in an interview Monday.

The process to join the affirming network can span years and isn't as simple as "sticking a rainbow flag in the window, because it's cool," according to Pam Rocker, who's from Calgary but serves as co-chair of the national Affirm United group, which helps congregations like Living Spirit embark along the journey to greater acceptance for all.

She said there's a long ways to go, as just 115 of roughly 3,000 United Church ministries in Canada — less than four per cent — have gone through the process that Living Spirit is soon to complete.

"It doesn't mean those that aren't officially affirming aren't inviting, but it's so important for us to preach what we practice," Rocker said, later adding, "So many people have been through spiritual abuse from different religions . . . if somebody's willing to take that risk again and they have a spiritual yearning to work out their faith in a community, this is important. I would never go to a church that isn't affirming now."

The road to acceptance can be a bumpy one. Metro first met the ministers at Living Spirit, Traci Hubbard and Jennifer Ferguson, in late 2012. A lesbian couple, the pair recalled fierce opposition to their initial application to lead the congregation.

"They drafted a petition," Ferguson recalled at the time. "I am thinking, 'Wait a second you haven't even heard me preach.'"

Nowadays, it seems even more senior members of the church, like 78-year-old great-grandmother Norma Baldwin, have bought in.

"It was important because all churches should be open," Baldwin said of the affirming process. "It was something we could do to make a welcoming place in our community for those who might feel marginalized. Not just LGBTQ folks, but also their families."