

“Celebrating Diversity”

**A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
by Linda and Bruce Hutchinson from Affirm United on September 11, 2016**

Scripture: Selected verses from Acts 15

LINDA

It is a pleasure for us to be here with you this morning as we look at what it means to “welcome diversity” – personally and as a congregation.

Our journey of learning about diversity began in my family home in 1961 when we invited a young Chinese Optometry student, studying at University of Toronto, to be part of our family in the Hamilton area. The story unfolds to eventually include his wife and children, an East Indian couple and their children, a Mexican exchange student... and on... and on... welcoming people of many ethnic diversities into our family. Our immediate family now includes our daughter-in-law, Giselle, of Goan heritage (territory on west coast of India) and 3 adopted Inuit grandchildren from Nunavut – in Canada’s far north. This is increasingly the new face of Canada.

Our journey to understanding “celebrating diversity” relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people, also known as LGBTQ, began in 1997 when our congregation, Sydenham Street United Church in downtown Kingston, decided to enter the process required to become an Affirming Ministry within The United Church of Canada – the process in which you are engaged here at St. Andrew’s. An Affirming Ministry publicly celebrates people of all sexual orientations and gender identities... welcoming all into the life and work of the congregation with no discrimination of any sort.

We began our journey to Affirming in response to the request from a lesbian couple to have their baby baptized. Their request for baptism had been turned down at their own congregation where they were actively involved – teaching Sunday School, singing in the choir and feeling very much a part of that congregation. Until! After the assurance that we would baptize their child, they asked why aren’t you Affirming? It was all new to us but we sought out information and participated in a educational process similar to the process you are engaging in here at St. Andrew’s.

Sydenham Street United Church became an Affirming Congregation in November of 1999 and this year, we celebrate 17 years of being an Affirming Ministry. There are so many stories – mostly joyful but a few sad - from those 17 years. We have time for a few now... and some later in our after lunch presentation. Our journey, at SSUC, continues as we still strive to be truly inclusive of all people inside and outside our walls.

The scripture we have chosen for this morning is read from Acts 15, from *The Message – the Bible in Contemporary Language*. This reading is a call to “let the outsiders inside” – in other words – “to be inclusive”.

BRUCE

In the chapters just prior to the 15th chapter in Acts, Peter, a devout Jew, has a vision of a large sheet coming down from heaven containing all sorts of animals, many of them considered unclean and therefore not to be eaten according to Jewish law... but Peter hears God say very clearly ... “Go to it Peter – kill and eat”. When Peter objects that he cannot eat

meat that is not kosher, God says – If God says it is ok, it is ok!!!! ... This happened three times and then the sheet returned to heaven. With the help of others, Peter discerned that God was saying, that the God of the Jews was for everybody including the gentiles ... non-Jews who were, by law, considered unclean. With this background, we come to Acts 15 where, in a church in Antioch, Peter and Barnabas are reporting on their visits with the non-Jews.

It wasn't long before some Jews showed up from Judea insisting that everyone be circumcised: "If you're not circumcised in the Mosaic fashion, you can't be saved." Paul and Barnabas were up on their feet at once in fierce protest. The church decided to resolve the matter by sending Paul, Barnabas, and a few others to put it before the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem.

When they got to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were graciously received by the whole church, including the apostles and leaders. They reported on their recent journey and how God had used them to open things up to the outsiders. Some Pharisees stood up to say their piece. They had become believers, but continued to hold to the hard party line of the Pharisees. "You have to circumcise the pagan converts," they said. "You must make them keep the Law of Moses."

The apostles and leaders called a special meeting to consider the matter. The arguments went on and on, back and forth, getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the floor: "Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that God wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it – and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as God gave the Spirit to us. God treated the outsiders exactly as God treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, renewing their lives as they trusted and believed God.

"So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don't we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?"

There was dead silence. No one said a word. With the room quiet, Barnabas and Paul reported matter-of-factly on the miracles and wonders God had done among the other nations through their ministry. The silence deepened; you could hear a pin drop.

LINDA

As we heard the scripture read, it spoke to the people of the first century. Let's set the context for the present day and hear Peter speaking directly to us in 2016 here at St. Andrew's United Church in Sudbury... as it might apply to people who often feel excluded today.

BRUCE

Then Peter took the floor: "Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that God wanted the hard of hearing to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it – and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave the hard of hearing the Holy Spirit exactly as God gave the Spirit to us.

LINDA

How would we act differently if we were going to be inclusive of the hard of hearing? The two hearing aids, which I wear, are definitely tools of technology that allow me to engage with the hearing world and to not be left out. I give thanks for them everyday... but how frustrating it is for me, when in a group situation, where a sound amplification system is being used, people say – “Oh, I have a big voice, I don’t need to use the mike!” Perhaps they are afraid or unfamiliar with using a mike... but without realizing it, they have left me out. My hearing aids amplify all sounds. I still need to have the speaker’s voice amplified so that I can hear it over all the other noises. To be fully inclusive of people with hearing loss, churches should have a sound system or hearing assistance not only for worship but for meetings of fifteen or more people in other locations in the building. There are compact, portable systems available which work really well in settings for up to 70 people. The sound system should include a mobile mike for questions and comments from the audience. Thanks to Catherine and your technical people here at St. Andrew’s, I understand that there will be amplification available for this afternoon’s presentation and conversation on the 2nd floor.

BRUCE

Let’s listen, again to what Peter has to say in 2016 about another minority who has definitely been excluded over the years, especially from the church.

Then Peter took the floor: "Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that God wanted lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it – and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people the Holy Spirit exactly as God gave the Spirit to us.

LINDA

How would we act differently if we were going to be inclusive to all sexual orientations and gender identities... heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people and all those in between?

Among signs of welcome to sexual minorities, language is subtle but very important. When a woman you have met for the first time, mentions that her partner is working in Saskatoon, instead of saying “what does he do there . . . only to discover that her partner is female, you might use the same language she used and say “what does your Partner do there?” Baptism certificates and Sunday school registration forms should say guardians rather than mother and father so children with two moms or two dads don’t feel that their family doesn’t “fit the form”. Stories in children’s time and sermon illustrations would include many kinds of families with different configurations of adults... single parent, heterosexual, same sex, foster parents, grandparents, guardians, adoptive parents and so on. All of these are signs to people in all families that the church is inclusive of them.

BRUCE

People outside the church learn from the popular press that LGBTQ people are not welcome in churches. We have all heard news stories of people losing their jobs in religious schools, a person denied communion, people taunted by fundamentalist churches, people being killed as in Orlando, Florida – and on and on. While the elected body of the United Church has taken decisions in support of the LGBTQ community, people in the secular

world really don't know that. Also, it is the local congregations who have decision-making power over worship, including who will be baptized and married. Remember our story about the lesbian couple whose baby was refused baptism by a United Church congregation. Policies of inclusion vary in congregations across the United Church. It is hardly a surprise that people in the LGBTQ community want to know if a United Church is a safe place for them before they risk entering a new congregation. Many churches have "All Welcome" on their signs but LGBTQ persons have experienced discrimination in some of those churches with signs that say "All Welcome". So, people look for symbols of safety because words can be misleading. A symbol of safety that is widely used is a rainbow symbol – often a tiny symbol – sometimes huge and bold – but a clear message to the public that safety and respect are offered inside the space bearing the rainbow. As part of being an Affirming Ministry, a church will use that unique symbol on its sign, website, communications and publications – just like the signs for physical accessibility and hearing assistance.

LINDA

A story about the rainbow symbol: Several years ago now, a delightful couple started coming to worship and joining in the life of the congregation. They were a heterosexual couple and I asked the woman what brought them to SSUC. Much to my surprise, she said "the rainbow on your sign." She had experienced a very nasty divorce, for which she was being shunned and shamed by her fundamentalist congregation. Walking past our sign one day, in a state of despair at her loss, not only of the marriage relationship but her church relationship also, she saw the rainbow and "knew that meant a safe place for her." The rainbow touches many hearts beyond the LGBTQ community with the message of respect, safety and welcome... "letting, not INVITING, the outsiders in."

BRUCE

Inclusivity goes beyond tolerance, even beyond acceptance, to celebration and appreciating the richness of diversity and then, incorporating that into the life and work of a congregation. To be authentically inclusive of a particular minority, you need to get to know the people of that minority and find out what they need, to feel included. It is a reciprocal relationship involving attitudes and behaviors toward one another – involving our whole selves.

LINDA

While we have spoken of only two communities of people who are often marginalized, there are others to become aware of and sensitive to – all in an effort to celebrate the richness of diversity. Being an Affirming Ministry includes pursuing equity and inclusivity for people of all genders, races, nationalities, religions, sexual orientations, ages, gender identities, social and economic status. Perhaps the task sounds daunting, but taken one step at a time, it becomes a richly spiritual and "just" journey to being an inclusive ministry which celebrates diversity and welcomes all God's children... The kind of ministry urged by Peter, in the scripture, when he said "God treated the outsiders exactly as God treated us!"

May God bless all of you here at St. Andrew's United Church as you ponder the thoughts we have brought to you this morning and faithfully engage in this learning process.

Let us continue our worship as we sing a hymn that speaks of our need to be rooted in a common vision, "Deep In Our Hearts," #154 in *More Voices*.