



Letter: member and building safety during Pride 2023, June 2023

Dear family in communities of faith, community ministries, camps, chaplaincies, and more:

The Regional Council is sending this letter for two reasons:

Summer marks the beginning of Pride festivals, parades, and associated local events, celebrating Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ people and communities, allies, and associated art forms like drag. This is both a joyful and difficult time for gender- and sexually-diverse people and their loved ones, and our church can contribute so much faithful, positive support.

At the same time, it is possible there will be an increase in online and in-person harassment of these events and their participants this year. This is due to a sharp increase in hate crimes against gender-diverse people in particular, with the entire Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ community targeted, all over the country.

The Regional Council would like communities of faith and other ministries to be careful and aware, without fear. This letter includes some suggestions and strategies, and invites you to reflect on your commitments and on some possible consequences of those commitments. Share wherever you wish. If you want to understand the background and history of today's hate movements more fully, [please see this article we prepared.](#)



Public, Intentional, Explicit- and faithful

First and most importantly, before anything else is said: **Thank you for any and all Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ Affirming support and ministry you offer, within your community of faith or incorporated ministry, and in the wider community. It makes a difference.**

Again and again, communities of faith receive notes or social media comments thanking them for flying a Pride flag, recognizing equal marriage on their websites, showing up to support Gay Straight Alliances/ Gender Sexuality Alliances, and much more. And even more often, we won't ever know the impact of our decisions. We have to journey in faith, knowing that even the smallest symbol or word can make a difference at a time when the Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ community has been under serious attack.

Below, we look at implications for your ministry; suggest some strategies and review your rights; and point to more resources. [Again, click here for more context.](#)

Implications for your community of faith

Hopefully: none. You'll participate in Pride festivals, in library and GSA events, host your events and others', and offer inclusive worship with no problems. However, this is not guaranteed. A number of United Churches across the country have reported various and increasing forms of harassment over the past year and earlier. These have included graffiti, theft or destruction of Pride colours and flags, material targeting the United Church, repeat phone messages and emails, personal interactions, and physical presence and filming without consent on church property. The Regional Council is not suggesting you be worried or afraid. But is suggesting that your community of faith or ministry practice awareness, have at least the beginnings of a plan, and ground those preparations in our faith commitments.



What you can do

Some brief ideas are included below, with more listed in the recommended resources.

Grounding ourselves in our faith is the most important first step. Scripture is full of examples of people who stood up to hate, fear, and deep inequality with courage and clarity. Jesus' commandment to love (John 15:12-13) can be our grounding point. 1 John 4:18 reminds us that "perfect love casts out fear". And these movements are very much based in deep fear. Our response can be rooted in faithful love and our many powerful practices for expressing that love.

Then, think through together why you support 2SLGBTQIA+ people and communities; your church council or board, at minimum, should be part of this conversation. Have a short response or set of talking points ready for use if asked by the media or citizens. Identify your spokespeople and anyone who is willing to be interviewed.

Be aware of your rights (see the next section).

Be extra aware of activity around the building, including any graffiti, even minor vandalism, and posters.

Watch your social media carefully, especially if you're publicly supportive of 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

Be aware of the needs of building tenants, users and partners, communicate, and collaborate.

Know who your allies and partners in the wider community are, including in the next community over if needed. These relationships are life-giving.

Don't hesitate to inform your Regional Council office if you have concerns, questions, or advice. We want to support you. Watch the Regional Council newsletter and social media for reports of difficult situations involving our ministries and others. And send a card or email to encourage them.

Your rights

First and always: The safety of congregants, volunteers, staff, and all building users supersedes any rights of people to enter a public space. You do not owe anyone entry. This includes the entire church property.

You have the right to restrict entry to the building to those who are invited to or part of whatever is happening there, including of course those in need of support or accompaniment.

You can screen people entering the building for safety reasons.

You can tell people that filming inside the building or on the property is not permitted. Please note that filming without consent is a tactic used by extremist groups; the resulting footage is edited to make it look like they are being persecuted when told to leave, and/ or that those being filmed have something to hide or are aggressive.

Consider carefully if or how you want to report incidents to local police. If you do report, try to get a consistent contact person so that you can develop a relationship. Supportive retired or active first responders in the congregation may be able to help.



Dealing with harassment online:

Prevention is easier than a cure! Make sure the leadership in the congregation or ministry knows who your social account administrators are and how to reach them. Add extra admins if you can.

Know where privacy and control settings are for all your social media accounts before trouble happens. These include: the ability to delete specific comments; turn off comments on specific post; the ability to limit comments to people who have followed your Facebook page for a certain period; and blocking specific people. You can always create a test post, ask several people to interact with it to test settings, then delete the post.

You have the right to ban and block anyone who harasses or threatens. Use the “block” option early and often.

If your page, group, or account is set to Public: Consider not posting photos of vulnerable people (minors), because these can be downloaded and re-used.

Take a screenshot of any direct threats, or save such emails, and store them in a designated folder. If an individual is being especially obnoxious or persistent, take a screenshot of their profile. Be especially aware of any people who may live in your general area.

Engage thoughtfully- if at all. You can post your own public support for 2SLGBTQIA people and drag artists without responding to the innumerable talking points, slogans, and slurs. Congregants and allies can make positive comments while ignoring hateful rants. Remember that a lot of the extremist wording you see online is a copy and paste, not original thoughts.

Dealing with harassment in person:

Be aware of the needs of all building tenants and partners, keep them informed, and collaborate.

Remember that you have the right to block entry to the building. Pay particular attention to people who are filming for the reasons mentioned above.

If extremists enter the building or are on the property: Remain as calm as possible. Focusing on your breathing can help. If possible, work out in advance who your designated speakers might be, and who might be comfortable physically blocking movement, preferably without touching anyone.

Focus on anyone who is most likely to be targeted. If it is safe for you, focus the attention on yourself, and consider blocking people without touching them. Slowly move them towards the nearest exit.

Tempting though it is, **do not shout back**, indoors or outdoors. Do not engage threats or accusations. Do not attempt dialogue at this time. Keep repeating, loudly and calmly, “We do not want you in this space. We ask you to leave.”

If someone is filming, hold up a piece of paper to block the lens, if safe. If filming is happening outside and you are engaging with a wider group, work with your supporters to create large, colourful banners prepared in advance. A sheet and bamboo poles work well to block cameras and share your message.

Singing and prayer are important gifts we can use, before, during, and after.

Regional Council contacts

Neighbouring Affirming ministries and those in the process are important resources for us. [Look up a complete list here](#), and look at additional resources on the AUSE site while you're there.

Don't hesitate to contact your Regional Council office at northernspirit@united-church.ca, livingskies@united-church.ca, or prairietopine@united-church.ca and we will work out who is available to talk through the summer months and beyond. All contact information is on our websites: www.northernspiritr.ca / www.livingskiesrc.ca / www.prairietopinerc.ca and each site has an Affirming page, too.

This letter was prepared by Julie Graham, Regional Minister, Justice and Communications, in collaboration with the invaluable lived experiences of a number of communities of faith and their leadership, including (among many others) Pembina Parish, Morden MB; Steinbach United Church MB; Grosvenor Park United Church, Saskatoon, SK; First United Church Swift Current SK; Living Spirit United Church, Drayton Valley AB; Athabasca United Church AB; and with the wisdom and advice of the Affirming task groups of Northern Spirit and Living Skies Regional Councils, and the Equity and Diversity Committee of Prairie to Pine.



Resources

[United Church of Canada statement on Pride Month](#), 5 June 2023

Affirming Connections (Alberta, United Church-based network) and their new campaign, [United Against Hate](#).

Workshop: United Against Hate. [Click here for the video link](#). February 15 2023, the Affirm United/ S'affirmer Ensemble, Affirming Connections, the General Council, United in Learning, and Regional Councils partnered with the Canadian Anti-Hate Network to offer a background on the recent surge in hate speech and crimes, and to hear from a drag artist. Please use this link, but do not post it on your social media or website.

For more specific ideas in here in Canada, have a look at the excellent [schools anti-hate kit prepared by the Canadian Anti Hate Network](#). Like churches, schools are communities with diverse identities and needs that strive to be a safe space, and the tips and scenarios offered in the kit fit well with faith communities. CAHN has also released a [Pride defense guide](#).

