



# Annual Report

Nov 2023 - Nov 2024

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## Events

### Holy Runaways: An evening with Matthias Roberts

December 2023

This event featured acclaimed author and psychotherapist Matthias Roberts delving into his new book, *Holy Runaways: Rediscovering Faith After Being Burned by Religion*.

*Holy Runaways* speaks to people who are feeling ignored, oppressed, or rejected by their religious community and church, offering a path forward built on speaking truth, deep listening, and acting with compassion.



### Making Space: In conversation with Rose-Ingrid Benjamin

February 2024

Affirming Connections was privileged to be joined by Rose-Ingrid Benjamin for a rich conversation about solidarity and decolonizing faith-based activism. As the Community Connection Lead for the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, as well as someone with deep roots in advocating for 2SLGBTQIA+ people of faith, Rose-Ingrid brought a wealth of insight on how communities of faith can be better co-conspirators in social justice work and decolonizing religion.



## National Affirming/PIE Day Panel: Living out PIE in the Public Square

February 2024

To celebrate PIE Day, we invited three dynamic faith leaders to reflect on what being Affirming truly looks like through our 2024 PIE Day theme, **"PIE (Public, Intentional, Explicit) in the Public Square."**

The panelists included:

- Rabbi Dr. Nachshon Siritsky, spiritual leader of The Chavurah Collective
- Rev. Franklyn James, theologian and educator
- Rev. Tricia Gerhard, minister for Westworth United Church, an Affirming ministry in Winnipeg



## National Affirming/PIE Day!

March 2024

This was our sixth year of celebrating PIE/National Affirming Day on March 14. Affirming Connections and Affirm United/S'Affirmer Ensemble co-founded PIE Day to celebrate P.I.E. (Public, Intentional, and Explicit)—the pillars of a truly Affirming welcome. Our theme was "PIE in the Public Square," and we were so honoured to see all the creative, adventurous, and courageous PIE Day celebrations that took place in "public squares" across Canada this year!





**35+ cities and towns** celebrated with **60+ events**, including:

- Worship services
- Panel discussions and Workshops
- Film screenings
- Letter writing campaigns
- Fundraising events
- Creation of a PIE Day cookbook
- Stand-up comedy

...and so much more. One group from Trinity United Church in Grimsby, ON even wrote an original PIE Day song. This creative expression of PIE inspired our 2025 PIE Day theme, "Sing Out Proud," which features our first-ever PIE song contest!

We rolled out new resources to support Affirming services and events, including service templates commissioned from faith leaders across Canada, including our first interfaith template. These beautiful and varied templates included songs, prayers, communion liturgy, scripture suggestions, and children's activities.

KAMLOOPS UNITED, KAMLOOPS, BC



## Queer Interfaith Coalition Launch

March 2024



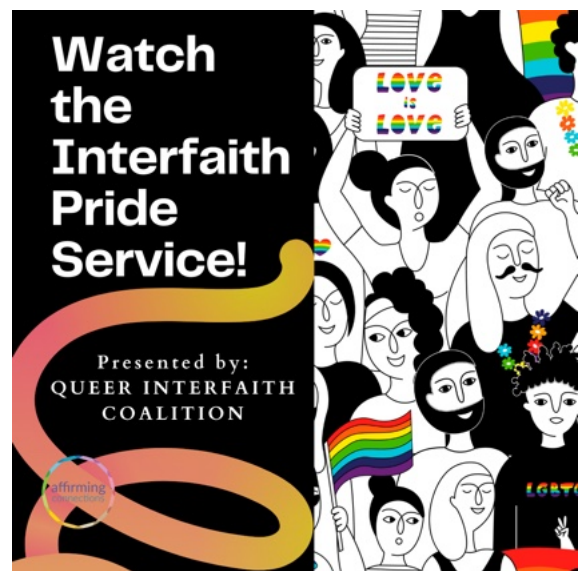
We officially launched the Queer Interfaith Coalition (QIC) on National Affirming / PIE Day. The QIC was created by Pam Rocker, Director of Affirming Connections, and Rabbi Dr. Nachshon Siritsky, Spiritual leader of The Chavurah Collective: Decolonizing Judaism in Mi'kma'ki. The QIC is made up of dozens of 2SLGBTQIA+ faith leaders and organizers across the country.

We introduced our origins, heard reflections from several members of our group, read our open letter, and held a sacred time of silence for those who are suffering from religiously motivated hate and discrimination. [Watch the recording here!](#)

## Interfaith Pride Service - presented by the Queer Interfaith Coalition

June 2024

In June the Queer Interfaith Coalition held its first Interfaith Pride Service, led by and for queer people of many faith traditions. Allies and 2SLGBTQPIA+ folks joined together online for a sacred time of celebration and reflection. [Watch the recording here!](#)



## Citywide Pride Interfaith Gathering

August 2024

We were delighted to partner with Calgary's Affirming Network of Faith Communities and Calgary Unitarians to welcome so many people to the 6th Annual Citywide Pride Interfaith Gathering!

This annual service connects us with the beautifully diverse interfaith community in Calgary, and gives us the opportunity to proudly state that no matter your religion or background, you deserve to belong.



We were proud to once again hold this gathering both in person and online. The 2024 ceremony saw record-breaking attendance, with 180+ people in person at the event hosted at the Calgary Unitarians and 23 faith communities represented. In front of our beautiful poster design by Two Spirit fashion designer Alex Manitopyes, our guests shared stories, songs, and commitments in honour of our theme, "Queerfully and Wonderfully Made."

(Photo credit to Graham Loudon-Khan.)



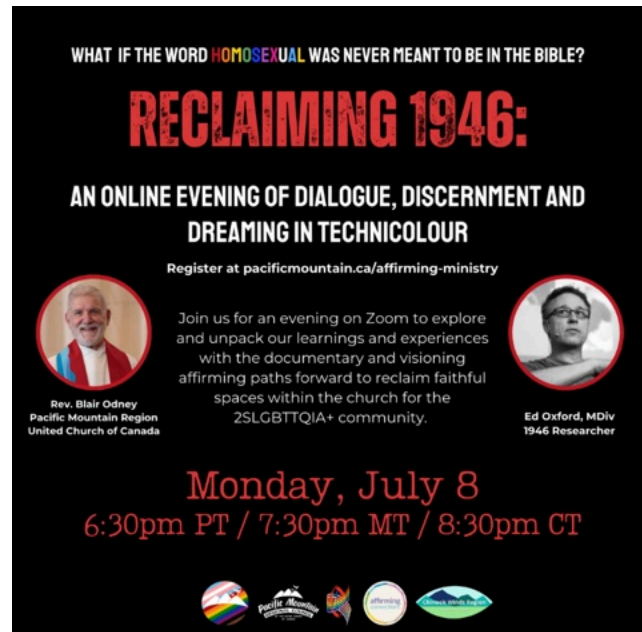


## Reclaiming 1946: An evening of dialogue, discernment, and dreaming

July 2024

What if the word homosexual was never meant to be in the Bible? That is what the documentary, 1946, unveils! Affirming Connections and Pacific Mountain Regional Council were proud to co-host this online discussion to explore and unpack our learnings and experiences of the documentary. The event featured special guests Rev. Blair Odney and Ed Oxford, one of the key players from the film!

The event included a Q&A with Ed, as well as time for attendees to vision Affirming paths forward to reclaim faithful spaces within the church for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.



## Calgary Pride

September 2024

Affirming Connections had another great Calgary Pride! Program Coordinator Miranda Martini was at our booth in Prince's Island Park all day September 1st, engaging with hundreds of attendees and giving out 2SLGBTQ+ faith resources, info on Affirming ministries, free stickers, buttons, and postcards.



Members from our support team joined us onsite, welcoming visitors to the booth and engaging in conversation about Affirming Connections' work, as well as marching in the Pride Parade that morning alongside other members of the Affirming Network of Faith Communities. We can't wait for next year!



## What The Hell? Screening and Conversation

October 2024

"What the hell...is hell all about?!" What have we been taught about it, and how has it been used to enforce certain ways of thinking and acting? Why is the idea of hell so often used to target 2SLGBTQ+ folks and others?

Affirming Connections' 20-minute film, "What The Hell?" poses these questions to clergy members, faith leaders, queer folks, and allies, and captures their poignant, funny, and life-giving answers. Affirming Connections and Pacific Mountain Regional Council Affirming Ministry partnered for an online screening of the film, as well as a workshop on how to discuss this short film in faith communities.

Due to the overwhelming positive response to this event, we will be co-hosting a study series with this film and discussion guide next year, as a template for how others can incorporate this important conversation into their Affirming ministry continued education.





## Queer Garden: A Magical Evening of Music

**November 2024**

This live music event featured four queer artists showcasing their musical talents in the beautiful setting of the Calgary Central Library. What a perfect way to open up our Affirming Media Conference!

### Artists:

- SallieMae
- Lanice Chop
- Damase Elis
- Zenon



## Affirming Media Conference

**November 2024**

We had a blast hosting the inaugural Affirming Media Conference in Calgary's beautiful Central Library and online!

On Saturday we welcomed both livestream and in person attendees, with a special blessing from Rev. Tony Snow, followed by an unforgettable keynote about how to craft our messaging, from Kathryn LeBlanc. Senior editor and journalist Mel Woods took us on a tour through queer and trans issues in the media today, and let us in on how we can pitch our own stories and decipher fact from fiction.

The afternoon kept us inspired with a social media for social change workshop led by Pam Rocker (who pinch-hit at the last minute due to one of our speakers being unable to travel), and a very interactive Q&A session with Kathryn LeBlanc.



We're so thankful for this chance to gather together, especially in the center of these turbulent times, and to invest time in how we really reach out in meaningful ways that can change hearts, minds, churches, politicians, leaders, governments, and the world. Every voice, every message, matters.

### **SPEAKERS:**

- Kathryn LeBlanc, a social impact communications expert and Principal Consultant at LeBlanc (& co.) Communications
- Mel Woods, a writer, editor, content creator, and Senior Editor of Audience Engagement at Xtra Magazine
- Pam Rocker, an award-winning advocate, writer, speaker, Certified DEI Specialist, and founder and director of Affirming Connections!



## National Affirming/PIE Day 2025: Sing Out Proud

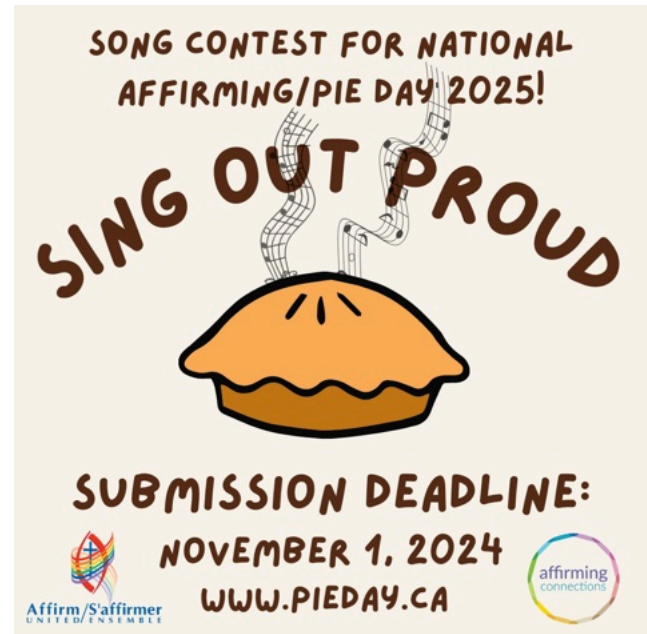
**November 2024**

As part of our 2025 PIE Day celebrations, we're thrilled to be holding our first-ever song contest!

With a panel of stellar judges, categories for original songs and choral/group performances, and cash prizes, this is sure to be one of the loudest and proudest PIE Days to date!

### **JUDGES:**

- Flamy Grant, award-winning, Billboard-charting, shame-slaying, hip-swaying, singing-songwriting drag queen
- Amanda Udis-Kessler, internationally published hymnwriter, songwriter, composer and writer
- Rev. Thérèse Samuel, Ordained Minister of Right Relations and Social Justice, United Church of Canada
- Rev. Dr. Alydia Smith, Network Coordinator, Church in Mission Unit, General Council Office of the United Church of Canada



Winners will be announced in January 2025, the songs will be professionally arranged, and the songs, charts, and lyrics will be available for any ministry to use in their PIE Day celebrations and year round!





## By The Numbers

We spend a lot of time fostering trust and relevancy on our social media platforms, creating eye-catching graphics, sending out weekly newsletters, and maintaining two beautiful and easy to navigate websites.

We continue to deal with a large amount of hate speech on our social media channels. We constantly adapt our approach to navigating our social media presence, which requires a bigger commitment of time in creating ads, blocking and reporting certain users, and monitoring our posts to delete harmful comments.

Despite these challenges, we've been able to foster audience engagement and growth and will continue to be nimble in our adaptations to these trends. In the next year we will be investing in training and equipment to stay relevant in keeping up with the demands of new platforms and methods of content creation. This will also enable us to pass this information on to the ministries we work with.

### Social Media Growth YTD

Facebook Followers: **1,846**

Facebook Page reach increased by **80%**

Instagram Followers: **1,403**

Instagram Page content interactions increased by **100%**

YouTube Subscribers increased by **20%** to a total of **191**

Affirming Connections Newsletter subscribers increased by **20%** to a total of **1,250**

United Against Hate Newsletter subscribers: **200**

### Website Growth Year-to-Date

Website search result clicks increased by **311%**

Impressions (our website coming up in search results) increased by **285%**

Number of Albertan cities that accessed our website: **56**

Number of BC cities that accessed our website: **66**



### Top pages visited:

- Affirming Ministries Map
- Affirming Resources
- Queer Interfaith Coalition

## Programs + Projects

### Call to Action - Conversion Therapy Promoter Conference in Calgary

December 2023 - January 2024



#### Call to Action - Conversion Therapy Promoter Conference in Calgary

Christopher West, a well documented supporter and promoter of Conversion Therapy Practices (CTP), was invited to speak at the “Theology of the Body” conference hosted in Calgary on February 9. Many of West’s events and books openly promote a hetero-centric and anti-trans ideology. Promotion and provision of CTP is illegal federally, and also prohibited by

the City of Calgary’s Bylaw against the promotion & offering of Conversion Therapy Practices, since 2020. In response to this event being announced, we asked our Calgary-based community to call 311 to report the event.

We then heard back from many people who received contradictory and incorrect information from 311 operators, with some operators admitting they didn’t really know what to do, including City of Calgary’s Chief Bylaw Officer. This points to a concerning reality that bylaw officers lack the training necessary to know what CTP looks like and how information about it is disseminated. The City needs to ensure that their Prohibited Businesses Bylaw (20M2020) actually works!

While what we learned was disappointing and concerning, this was also an opportunity to witness some amazing advocacy for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth.

We continue to work with the National Coalition to End Conversion Practices and the Egale Canada legal team on how to develop pathways on local and federal levels, to make sure that reporting and prosecuting these crimes are effective, accessible, and don’t cause further trauma to the person experiencing CTP.

## New Memberships

January 2024



We recently became a member of the Enchanté Network, a national network of Pride centres and 2SLGBTQI+ Service Providers across Canada.

We are the sole faith-based organization in their membership.

We're also a member of Trans Action Alberta, a growing coalition of 90+ organizations and businesses with the common goal of ensuring that Alberta is a safe and inclusive place for transgender and gender-diverse people.

## “Trans Youth Deserve” Postcard - Part of our United Against Hate Campaign

February 2024



In early 2024, the Government of Alberta announced plans to change policies regarding:

- Restricting access to gender-affirming care for transgender youth
- Effectively eliminating sex education
- Expectation of teachers to notify parents when their child starts using new pronouns at school



- Restriction of trans women's participation in recreational sports
- This proposed legislation strips rights and autonomy away from youth and their supportive parents and plays politics with the lives of trans youth and their families.

In response, we created and gave out hundreds of postcards pre-addressed to the Office of the Premier, imploring the Government of Alberta to withdraw these planned policy changes. We continued to hand out these postcards out at the Citywide Pride Service, Chinook Winds and Pacific Mountain Annual Gatherings, at our Pride Booth, and the Affirming Media Conference.

Unfortunately, these policies are still being pushed forward into legislation as of October 31, 2024. We are committed to faithful action to protest the most vulnerable among us and to support faith communities in their own advocacy.

## Media Training and Allyship with James Demers

### March 2024

In the spring we offered media training to assist Affirming faith communities and allies with effectively communicating and advocating for gender and sexual diversity on various platforms. It tackled common misconceptions surrounding gender and sexual diversity, and offered actionable steps to confidently advocate for 2SLGBTQIA+ rights and inclusion.

This training was facilitated by James Demers, a GSD (Gender & Sexually Diverse) content expert and EDI educator across many sectors including healthcare, social services, tech, and organizational change.



## Love Resists: Nonviolence & Sacred Activism

**April 2024**

In April, we hosted a four-week nonviolence training alongside McKillop United Church (Lethbridge).

This practical virtual series welcomed allies, accomplices, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people looking to deepen their understanding of nonviolence through the lens of sacred activism for 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. Co-facilitated by activists and trainers Rev. Dr. Jerry Maynard and Rivera Sun, the course covered living resistance and movement history (both general and 2SLGBTQIA+), strategies for making change, an introduction to nonviolence as a transformative power, and the spiritual strength—from any tradition—that can support us as we work to publicly affirm and protect the beloved community. We will continue to lean into this important training alongside faith communities in the next year.



## Chinook Winds Region Annual Gathering



**May 2024**

We had a fantastic time connecting with folks from across Southern and Central Alberta at the Chinook Winds Region gathering. We had dozens of meaningful conversations with folks who are passionate about making a difference and advocating for 2SLGBTQ+ communities in Alberta.

Director Pam Rocker was honoured to be on a panel of voices reflecting on what inspires our work and where we see hope. Thanks to everyone who stopped by our booth and shared their stories with us!

## Pacific Mountain Regional Annual Gathering

June 2024



We loved connecting with the Pacific Mountain Regional Council Gathering in Vancouver! We're grateful to get to support some of their Affirming work alongside their Regional Minister of Justice, Kendra Mitchell-Foster. We also got to be part of their Affirming night, where the Rainbow Chorus of New Westminster performed some

beautiful songs (we're not crying, you're crying!), and the impactful documentary, 1946: The Mistranslation That Shifted Culture, was shown.

## Rural Ministry Conference

November 2024



Affirming Connections was happy to offer a workshop on "Coming Out In Faith: A Look at Affirming and PIE" at the 2024 Rural Ministry Conference, graciously hosted by Trinity United Church in Fort Macleod. Thanks to everyone who attended the workshop, and for all the great conversations!

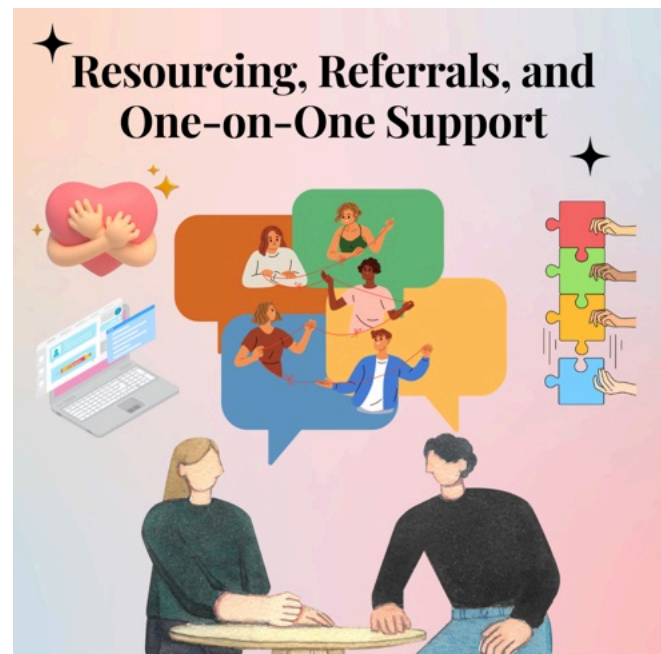


## Resourcing and One-on-One Support

As often as possible, we provide personal connection points through one-on-one resourcing conversations, both at in person events and digitally. This includes faith leaders as well as referrals and resource connection for families, loved ones, or individuals struggling with the intersections of faith and 2SLGBTQ+ identities.

From youth contemplating transition or how to come out to their loved ones, parents and grandparents looking for affirming faith communities, 2SLGBTQ+ serving organizations and educators looking for affirming resources, and much

more - we estimate over **70 virtual one-on-one conversations** in addition to **hundreds of in person conversations** and **hundreds of resourcing emails** this past year.



## Affirming Connections Support Team



We are so thankful for the brilliant and engaged volunteers on our Affirming Connections Support Team (pictured on the left). We meet monthly to discuss emerging issues, future plans, navigating roadblocks, and generating ideas.

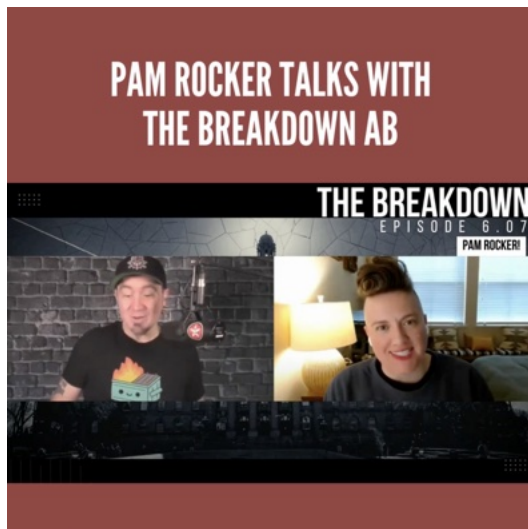
They are a much needed shoulder to lean on and source of wisdom.

(L-R: Pam Rocker, Rev. Sheena Trotter-Dennis, Chair - Rev. Tracy Robertson, Graham Loudon, Miranda Martini, Rochelle Lamoureux, not pictured - Hannah Walkes)

## In The Media

### Pam Rocker talks with The Breakdown AB

The Breakdown, February 2024



Director Pam Rocker spoke with the popular podcast “The Breakdown AB” about anti-trans policies released by Alberta's Premiere, Danielle Smith, what it means for all of us, why faith is part of the conversation, and what we can do.

### Queer Interfaith Coalition co-founded by N.S. rabbi aims to fight 2SLGBTQ+ hate

November 2024

Thanks to the CBC for their interest in the Queer Interfaith Coalition, which Affirming Connections founded alongside Rabbi NS!

We started the Queer Interfaith Coalition in November 2023 to bring together queer identified faith leaders from across the country. One of the Coalition’s first acts was to write an open letter calling for people of faith to step up


#### Queer Interfaith Coalition co-founded by N.S. rabbi aims to fight 2SLGBTQ+ hate

Anglican bishop of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island signs coalition's open letter



Andrew Lam - CBC News - Posted: Apr 06, 2024 2:00 AM PDT | Last Updated: April 6





and speak out about the anti-2SLGBTQIA+ hate that is spiking.

We're so thankful for the 200+ and counting spiritual and community leaders who have signed on so far, including representatives from Muslim, Jewish, Anglican, Lutheran, Buddhist, Mennonite, Christian, Quaker, United Church, Presbyterian, Baptists, Methodists, Roman Catholic, LDS (Mormon), Unitarian, and Tao backgrounds.

## Feedback - a few words from others

### Love Resists Non-Violence Series

"In our small community in Alberta, where things are really difficult, it was an encouragement in that we were equipped and also affirmed that change takes time."

"It was one of the most valuable online courses I've taken. I've had a whole mind shift with regard to non-violence, and understand the strategy and tactics much better, as well as its effectiveness."

"Thank you for a deeply meaningful, sometimes challenging but always enriching engagement."

"It's been a very enriching and powerful course...Very deep and inspiring principles requiring ongoing study. Thank you very much Pam and Miranda and team for hosting this."


"Thank you for this awesome opportunity to prepare to make our voices heard."

### Affirming Media Conference

"Thank you for offering this learning opportunity. I would definitely recommend this conference and these sessions to others."

"It was such a validating experience being surrounded by folks who are in the same arena as me with regards to the type of affirming marketing work we do."





"This was the most useful conference I've attended in a long time. I came away with new skills I can use in my work as an individual and as a contributor to the work being done in communities I'm a part of. I can put the skills to work now!"

"Thank you for providing options by having in person and livestreaming!"

## Citywide Pride Interfaith Service

"The energy, love, and search for common ground was palpable. The Affirming Network & Affirming Connections just keep raising the bar every year. This was the best ever City Wide Pride! And the Calgary Unitarians were exceptionally gracious & enthusiastic hosts!"

## General

"Affirming Connections does such good work holding important conversations with care and engaging in much-needed capacity building. Everyone, including faith communities, needs to receive this type of important information and guidance. Having conversations at the intersections is key to making sure that no one is left behind." —Kathryn LeBlanc, Principal Consultant and Founder, LeBlanc & Co. Communications

"Pam and the entire Affirming Connections are doing vital work in Alberta and beyond. Speaking at the Affirming Media Conference in November 2024 was an honour, and I loved getting to connect with non-profits, advocates and affirming faith organizers from across western Canada. I was so impressed by the enriching community space created by Affirming Connections. Particularly in the wake of Alberta's newly introduced legislation targeting the LGBTQ2S+ community, bringing together organizations and communities fighting the good fight is essential work and I'm glad Affirming Connections is so committed to that work." —Mel Woods, Senior Editor, Audience Engagement, Xtra Magazine