

Submission to the Commission on the Marriage Canon

I write to you from the perspective of a hospital Chaplain. It is my sincere belief that the Anglican Church of Canada should move immediately to equal rights for same sex and opposite sex couples in the matter of marriage in the church. I agree with the many articulate arguments that have been put forward by others in favour of this action. I am writing to share some reflections from the pastoral, clinical environment in which I minister. It represents a perspective that is personal, intimate and immediate.

One thing that the church is called to do, and that I am called to do as its representative within a hospital, is to relieve people from the burden of shame and restore their dignity as persons in Christ. Many GLBTQ+ persons are suffering under a heavy burden of shame that we (the Anglican Church of Canada) have placed within them regarding their sexuality. We have done this through systematic institutional discrimination. I have witnessed excruciating personal suffering caused by the judgments of “The Church”, specific church leaders, and clergy. It has caused spiritual and psychological suffering to the point of trauma in some individuals.

I have seen people with suicidal ideation and extreme eating disorders resulting from trying to purify themselves and/or get into a state of numbness from the pain of being judged as lesser people because of their sexuality. I have heard stories of how the church has stripped away security, dignity and personhood from its most vulnerable through its various attempts to “point out” or “correct” perceived deviance. This is not an intellectual discussion. This has effected and will continue to affect real people, members of our families and communities, every day. Regardless of the decision made by the Marriage Commission and General Synod, a legacy of pain and suffering will continue in individuals and families for years to come. Sadly, our beloved Church has become a place of institutionalized discrimination. We realize this is wrong. We have been actively correcting the discrimination against our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, and against women and children. It is time to root out the rest.

How many of my colleagues in ministry have been forced to hide themselves and their relationships because we have made no room for them to even be acknowledged in Church-land? How many of them have been personally attacked and driven out of the

church and ministry once they are “discovered”? How many of them are civilly married but have not been able to share that blessing in their churches, or to feel safe doing so? Why are there only two choices for how God allows love to be shared: celibacy or marriage? How ironic that our civil government is leading the way in the fight to abolish discrimination against the GLBTQ+ community instead of our Church. We have missed an opportunity for certain. We, the Church, have communicated both with words and with silence our disapproval and our disgust about who “they” are, and why “they” should be denied equal access to the sacrament of marriage and sometimes even priesthood. Why is this? I suspect it has something to do with a very real human fear of those who differ from us than it does to do with anything theological. Scripture is not holding us back. This is not the sheep and the goats. We are all in this together and there is no way to pretend that we are not one human family which is created equal and good in the eyes of God. When any of us suffer, the whole body suffers. To maintain a belief to the contrary would be to continue to live with an incredible level of dissociation from ourselves, each other, and from God. Are we not tired of maintaining this falsehood?

Fear is a tangible thing in a hospital room, and there are many kinds of fear. In health care, individuals are driven into a corner where their fight or flight response is pushed beyond normal limits and there is nowhere to go. Sitting, waiting, and hoping for some cure; some care is a tense place to be. Walking into this setting and introducing myself as an Anglican Chaplain, I have seen fear and almost heard the walls or fortification rising up to protect the person from “the Church” that I represent. I can see wounds deep within eyes and, if I am allowed, sometimes hear about the injuries. I have held people weeping out torrents of grief and despair, wondering what is wrong with them to be made into such a scapegoat. “There must be something wrong with me, but if that’s true, how come I can’t fix this? How come God won’t fix this? How come the despair and the pain only gets worse whatever I do?” I have been asked the question, “Why would God do this to me?” I have heard stories of abuse, and stories of ruined lives because of people trying to be “normal” because of God supposedly placing the highest value on male-female traditional marriage and places punishment on anything else. These are the voices of discerning people trying to fight their way out from under a belief that is simply false without having to declare that God and everything about the church is also false. The result can be an internalization of the false belief which leads to self- judgment and self-condemnation. What a position to be put in. We can “treat”

this pain by turning from our mistake and re-telling the “truth” as it has now been revealed to us. There is no shame in that.

I have heard people tell me about how “the gays” have ruined the church and how clergy who facilitate conversations about sexuality are obsessed or deranged. When I listen to this kind of hate speech and I see the individual looking to me for signs of agreement, I feel ill. I think of a meeting I attended very early on in my seminary days when the priest chairing said, “We are going to hold this discussion with real knowledge that someone around this table is gay or lesbian. It could be any one of us and I want you to think about everything you say from their perspective.” It is my hope that I would consistently have the courage to offer this observation to those who are repeating hateful speech in my presence. Anger and condemnation will not lead us to the kingdom. Admonition with an humble heart is what we are always called to do when we have fallen into error. I believe this is what the “mainline” Anglican Church needs now.

Generally speaking, it is hard to admit we were wrong, but it is time to swallow pride, admit we were wrong about this, and ask for forgiveness. We have sinned against our neighbours and we are accountable for that. We cannot begin to apologize, correct ourselves or ask for forgiveness from the GLBTQ+ community until we accept that they are equal to heterosexuals under God and in the church. Period. They must be offered exactly the same access to the sacraments that we offer to heterosexuals.

Submitted by The Reverend Keirsten Wells, Diocesan Health Care Chaplain, Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.

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