

St Christopher's Burlington Submission to the Commission on the Marriage Canon

Our Journey

St. Christopher's, Burlington, is a multi-staff suburban parish in the Diocese of Niagara that has been actively exploring issues of sexuality and faith for more than fifteen years. We have engaged in several programs, both parochial and diocesan, to learn about and appreciate the scientific, theological, and experiential dimensions of the issues. While that dialogue was prompted by debates about blessing same sex unions at Diocesan and General Synods, we acknowledge that our perspective on the issues is shaped by the presence and participation of gay and lesbian parishioners and, especially, of parents and grandparents of LGBTTIQQ2SA (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, Two-Spirited and Allies) children and grandchildren.

Over the years, St. Christopher's has come to embrace diversity and to adopt an explicitly affirming stance. This is reflected in our mission statement:

We believe God is calling us to be
a dynamic, inclusive, diverse community
rooted in the life-giving, life-affirming, life-changing love of God;
reaching beyond ourselves,
caring for creation,
making a difference with others

This stance is also reflected in a *Declaration to Welcome and Affirm All Who Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, or Queer and Their Families* (attached) that was passed by our Annual Vestry Meeting in 2012. It expresses some of our core theological convictions as well as our intentions as a community of disciples. We see our diversity, sexuality, gender identification, and intimate relationships as gifts from God through which the image of the divine is revealed and in which we encounter the abundant life promised by Jesus. As God welcomes and affirms LGBTQ people as beloved, we seek to welcome LGBTQ people and their families in our community and affirm the dignity of all as full participants in God's new creation. We also acknowledge the sin of our exclusionary behaviour in the past and commit ourselves to continuing repentance and renewal as God seeks to remake us as ambassadors of Christ.

Because of our commitment to uphold the dignity of every person and to recreate the church as a safe space for all whom God loves, St. Christopher's now includes all kinds of people with all kinds of gender identities and sexual orientations in a variety of relationships. This growing diversity has been a blessing to us. As we get to know gay and lesbian couples and families, as we share our stories, as we work alongside one another in justice work, as we share in worship together- we find strong and compelling evidence of the Spirit at work in the loving, vulnerable, authentic and joyous same-gender relationships around us. As gays and lesbians have become part of the fabric of our faith community, we have seen even more clearly their faithful struggle and witness to the challenges of Gospel living. Our faith community has been richly gifted by the breadth and depth of their faithfulness, discipleship, and struggle.

A Parallel to the Gentile Issue

As we seek to understand our experience in the light of Scripture, we see some parallels between our journey towards inclusion and the early church's struggle with the "problem" of Gentile believers. In some ways, our journey is like the trajectory of the Book of Acts from a small, homogeneous, and closed group in Jerusalem to a larger, more diverse, missionary people that has spread all the way to Rome. We find that, just as Peter changed his mind about the baptism of Gentiles and the conditions of their inclusion in the church, we have moved from certainty about the practice of condemning and excluding same-gender relationships to a new conviction shaped by the Spirit that calls us to embrace and celebrate the faithfulness of gays and lesbians in our midst. We have come to confess *that God shows no partiality, but...anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*(Acts 10:34-35)

Just as the heart of the early church was opened to the Jesus-oriented life many Gentiles were embracing without 'becoming Jewish', so too have the eyes of today's church been opened to the faithful, Spirit-led Christian lives of many gay, lesbian and transgender people who live as they were created. We can echo the words of Acts 15: 8-9: *And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.* In the same way that Acts 15 describes the acceptance by the church of that day of the Gentiles as fully participating in the life of the community and its commitment to God's mission, so today is the Anglican church struggling to embrace the LGBTQ community where God's Spirit is already moving, growing, and witnessing. As is so often the case, the church is following where the work of the Spirit is even now at work transforming lives, creating social change, and bearing witness to God's mission.

Re-Thinking Mission for a New Cultural Context

We recognize that the marriages described by Scripture are quite different from marriage as we understand it today. Marriage as referenced in the Bible was a legal arrangement concerning the disposition of property (daughter/wife) between a father and a bridegroom and his family. While procreation was a primary value in a time when children were economic assets upon whom a family's survival depended, we live in an age where over-population is our reality and limitations on procreation have a high moral value. Given that the church exhibits no reluctance to marry those who for a variety of reasons (medical conditions, age, choice) will not have children, it seems specious to argue as some do, that gays and lesbians should not marry because they cannot procreate within the marriage relationship.

The Bible while rich in its observations, reflections and teachings on our relationship with the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier is also rife with cultural norms, many of which we have left behind with few qualms, such as the wearing of mixed fabrics, the eating of shellfish and pork, head coverings for women, etc. Other cultural mores have been more challenging to let go but nonetheless, we have been led by the Spirit to let go of aspects of life that seem to permeate the fabric of the Bible, such as slavery, women as property, divorce, and the ordination of women.

In fact, at St. Christopher's, we observe that same-gender relationships are just like the opposite-gender relationships in our midst: safe havens within and out of which human beings are shaped by and shape others by unconditional love, in which they embody the love of Christ. The difference we perceive is that same-gender couples and the children of these relationships are not supported by legal, social, and religious structures in the same way that opposite-gender couples and their children benefit. We see that exclusion, discrimination, isolation and judgment deprive loving gay and lesbian couples and their children of the very aids and encouragements that sustain loving opposite-gender relationships. We

cannot help but believe that Jesus' example and teaching point us to loving without discrimination or prejudice; that where there is love, there too is God (1 John 4:7-21). And we understand God to show no partiality between opposite-sex and same-sex couples as they engage in covenantal relationships.

The Sacramentality of Marriage

While civil marriage delineates property and other legal rights between the two parties and between the state and the two parties, Christian marriage is an invitation and witness to both the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the mission of the church. We understand Christian marriage to be sacramental in nature: a relationship in which two people make a lifelong commitment in front of God and God's people to live a shared life that mirrors the divine intentions for humanity. As we love one another unconditionally and share in one another's joys and adversities, we experience something of God's covenantal love. As we raise families together (when we are able) we also take part in the creation and re-creation of humanity. The discipline and the grace of the marriage commitment supports couples in their individual and joint intentions to live a godly life. We have witnessed those lives of grace and redemption in the marriages of same-gender and opposite-gender couples.

Loving relationships are an extraordinary challenge for people. We have all been hurt and hurt others in our attempts to love and be loved. At its best, the faith community is a laboratory in which we can safely learn and begin to employ the vulnerable and authentic interactions with one another to which Jesus calls us; a place in which we can try on new ways of being together and new language without fear of rejection or ridicule. The bonds of marriage are another such school or laboratory of love in which we feel safe enough to try to love with more vulnerability and more authenticity, in which we try to mirror the unconditional love and forgiveness we experience in our relationship with God. We believe that the same bonds and discipline of the sacrament of marriage should be available to both same-gender and opposite-gender couples. And again, we understand God to show no partiality between opposite-sex and same-sex couples who engage in this covenantal relationship.

Diversity within Marriage and a Theology of Gender Difference

To limit gender categories within marriage to a dichotomous male/female paradigm ultimately limits our perception of the vastness of the immense, creative power of God. Perhaps, it would be beneficial to see gender identity as a marvelous continuum to better understand human experience and God's wisdom in creation. Adopting this perspective may require an open mind and a genuine inquiry into the individual experiences of our LGBT parishioners. This may also include incorporating a fresh understanding of the fluidity of gender, as well as noting that gender is essentially a social construct that has changed throughout time. A quick inquiry into various, historical gender-associated, social trends would indicate that notions of what it means to be male and female fluctuate. Perhaps, staying supple of mind and being open with wonder at God's creative force would allow us to look deeper at the beautiful tapestry that is being created. If there is one thing that is consistent with the character of the Holy Spirit of God is that it is a moving and transformational force. Perhaps we can learn from our LGBT friends what it takes to be shaped and molded by God's infinite power, to be comfortable with occupying the spaces between dichotomies where our hearts can be open and we can truly become a new creation in Christ.

The Integrity of our Mission

Our discernment on this issue has led us to conclude that the sacrament of marriage should not be the exclusive domain of opposite-gender couples. A blessing rite is a 'second class' acknowledgement of the sameness of opposite-gender and same-gender covenants that denigrates the sacramental nature of the same-gender relationship while simultaneously privileging the relationships of opposite-gender couples with the grace of a sacrament. As well, the convoluted process of forcing same-gender couples who desire to make a commitment before God and their faith community to first engage in a civil ceremony that does not acknowledge the role of God and the faith community in the couples' life in order that they may later experience a blessing that will somehow put God back into the picture is completely lacking in integrity. This kind of discriminatory "inclusivity" diminishes the integrity of the faith community's witness to the Gospel for both the church and the world outside the church, and it fails to acknowledge that God graces, blesses and redeems same-gender couples in exactly the same way that God graces, blesses and redeems opposite-gender couples.

Conclusion

The community of St. Christopher's believes that the Anglican Church in Canada has engaged in a long, thoughtful and prayerful discernment about the place of LGBTTIQQ2SA people within the church and, like Peter and Paul, we have come to understand that God shows no partiality. We, like faith communities all across Canada, have witnessed the gifts of grace and redemption in same-gender marriages: gifts for the couple, for the church, and for a broken world. The parish's commitment to the inclusivity and full participation of all God's people has been a sign of grace and a mark of God's love for all, including LGBT people and their families. This commitment also draws in people who have been called to witness to the justice proclaimed by the Gospel who have not felt that witness in other faith expressions.

We believe God is calling the Anglican Church of Canada to open Canon XXI to include same-gender couples and that, in the Spirit of love and justice, the church must do so.

endorsed by the Parish Council on September 23, 2014

**St. Christopher's Anglican Church
Diocese of Niagara
662 Guelph Line,
Burlington, ON
L7R 3M8
905-634-1809
www.stcb.ca**

A Declaration to Welcome and Affirm All Who Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer and their Families at St Christopher's Anglican Church in Burlington, Ontario

We have learned that

- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (hereafter LGBTQ) people have experienced discrimination, prejudice, exclusion and even violence for loving who they love and being honest about who they are.
- sexuality and gender identity are not choices but a matter of inherent identity.
- the process of 'coming out' and living honestly in society is one fraught with fear and stress.
- LGBTQ children and teens, and the children of LGBTQ parents are especially vulnerable and at risk.
- our Holy Scriptures have been and continue to be misused, misunderstood and misrepresented as words that judge, hurt and condemn.

We acknowledge that

- we are part of a Church that has failed to support and protect its LGBTQ members and the Queer community who are our neighbours.
- we have allowed hatred, violence and injustice to go unchallenged.
- historically the Church has shared a message of hatred, exclusion and condemnation for LGBTQ people.
- fear, prejudice, oppression and persecution have been generated by the Church in the past and continues to be promoted by most Churches today.
- many have left our Church and others see us as irrelevant and hateful.

We celebrate that

- The Diocese of Niagara has already authorized a rite for the blessing of same sex couples.
- We have been able to meet our LGBTQ local community through our presence at Burlington Pride.
- We are blessed with the presence of LGBTQ people involved in our ministry and life together here at St. Christopher's.
- We have added LGBTQ resources to our library and run an educational program here at St Christopher's.
- LGBTQ people have come to St Christopher's because we fly the Pride flag.

We affirm that

- God loves everything God has created.
- our diversity, sexuality and gender identification are gifts from God, and in living and worshipping together, we encounter the fullness of life promised by Jesus of Nazareth to all people.
- our diversity, our sexuality and our gender identification are gifts by which God's image is more fully revealed in us and in our community.
- all LGBTQ people are welcomed and affirmed as full members of our Church, in community life, in leadership and in our ministry.
- regardless of sexuality and gender identity, all faithful and loving relationships are blessed by God and are blessings from God.

We condemn

- all acts of hatred, bullying, intimidation, discrimination, inequality and violence against people because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

We intend to continue to be a welcoming, affirming, accepting, understanding and loving faith community where LGBTQ people and their families feel safe, and participate fully. We will do this by:

- educating ourselves about the issues facing the LGBTQ community.
- learning by practice how to become a welcoming, positive and affirming faith community.
- building bridges to our local LGBTQ community and promote healing for past wrongs.
- speaking out against all hatred directed towards the LGBTQ community and all forms of discrimination
- working prophetically for justice and equality for the LGBTQ community.

adopted by the Vestry of St. Christopher's Anglican Church, February 12, 2012