



Same Sex Marriage: A Challenge to Christian Unity

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S P E A K E R S

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Same-sex Blessings : A Challenge to Christian Unity — Opening Remarks

Jacques Faucher

Some of us are old enough to remember the title of a book published in the early sixties: *Honest to God* by Bishop Robinson from England (1963). This title appeared inoffensive at first sight but the content of the essay stirred a lot of controversy for many years.

The topic proposed by the Christian Council today is straightforward and raises serious concerns. *Same-Sex Blessings: a Challenge to Christian Unity*. This title does not steer clear of the field of controversy. I might add; we are invited to be « honest to God », in dealing courageously with this topic.

We will try to deal with this topic in a genuine ecumenical way. This leads me to underline the quality of a resource offered to us in this endeavour by the Canadian Council of Churches. We all have in hand a copy of a public letter from Professor Richard Schneider, president of the Canadian Council of Churches, dated October 7, 2004. I will try to highlight some of the issues he raises in the letter, in order to set the tone for our panel and discussion today.

The title of the letter, available on the Web site of the CCC is « Ecumenical reflection on same-sex marriage ». This tightly-worded message offers a model for the type of reflection that we wish to conduct today in our own ecumenical forum.

At the outset, Professor Schneider writes: « Far more than for civil legislators, the demand for a public position about ‘same-sex marriage’ is a call to churches ». This affirmation is quite straightforward. In other words, we are all called, as disciples of Christ, to be « honest to God » in dealing with the issue – at the invitation of the CCC. Professor Schneider goes on : “Canadian Christians might hope for a statement of position about ‘same-sex marriage’ from the CCC. But our only statement can be that at present no such pronouncement is possible, and none will be

made ».

What is the alternative then? To remain silent? In my opinion, this is where the rest of this letter offers us quality advice in the way we conduct « forums » on the controversial issue.

The president of the CCC affirms : « This situation is a source of great pain, at the CCC – as it is, of course, among all sincere and faithful Christians ». Four times, in this two page letter, the same words « pain » or « painful » are written. « The topic of ‘same-sex marriage’ is one of those issues of painful separation ». Let us therefore begin by acknowledging this factor, with humility and compassion..

Four times also, the author of the letter warns us about a temptation. « All of us are tempted to think that the others must have this wrong, because we got it right ». This is one more invitation to be humble in our forum. Professor Schneider goes on : « The CCC will continue to approach the topic in our Forum spirit, keeping forth with honesty and yet trying to be constructive ».

We have accepted this « challenge » today: to try to be constructive, in sharing our remarks, our observations.

We all know by experience that a genuine dialogue between Christians of various traditions is an exchange of gifts. Our forum offers us an occasion to share our views about doctrine, about the pastoral care of persons in our respective communities, about our attempt to witness to the Good News. Our dialogue is not a debate. It is rather a genuine conversation where we explain truthfully our respective positions to others, where we take time to listen to other views with an open mind, where we open our hearts to the « Spirit of truth » given to all of us through the Risen Lord. May our dialogue reflect this high standard.

Let me add a final quote from Professor Schneider. « In this matter, what is at stake for Christian is to discern the Spirit of truth and to articulate God’s message of salvation ».

Let me highlight the word « discern ». This verb is a call to action. I cannot affirm here that the word « discernment » is written explicitly in the original language of our biblical books. I call on scholars to enlighten us on this point. But I am sure that many of our modern translations in English and French use the verb « discern » in a number of passages. In our Christian tradition, to discern is to exercise our human judgment enlightened by the Spirit of Christ, in dealing with concrete actions affecting both our personal lives and the life of the Church community.

It is my hope that our conversation in this forum today will be one more step in this exercise of discernment. Let us all be truly « honest to God ».

Same-sex Marriage — One United Church Experience

Barbara Faught

The United Church of Canada sees same-sex marriage as a positive step towards justice.

In its submission to the Supreme Court of Canada, the UC spoke in support of same-sex couples to be legally married, and also in support of the right of religious officials and congregations to decide for themselves whether they will make religious marriage services available to same-sex couples.

Choice Okorno, the United Church's program officer for human rights, says that "the UC believes that equality and religious freedom can live side by side, supporting each other and building a stronger society."

Some United Church congregations have decided for the present not to discuss the issue. At Parkdale United, the minister Rev. Dr. Anthony Bailey had been approached soon after the UC position was known, and asked if he would marry a same-sex couple. The congregation needed to decide for itself what its policy would be. Since Parkdale's governing structure is based on the Presbyterian system of Elders meeting in Session to decide matters of this sort, the final decision would rest with them.

The Session held its initial discussion of the question on October 7, 2003. In preparation, all members were given materials to read covering both sides of the issue. Dr. Bailey is chair of Session and did not state his position so as not to influence the discussion. It was agreed that the congregation should be consulted before any decision be taken. A questionnaire was mailed to all members and adherents inviting them to express their views. A "Town Hall" style forum was held on November 15, 2003. Of the 17 speakers at the forum, 8 opposed same-sex marriage, 6 were open to it while 3 expressed uncertainty and the need to examine the matter further.

On November 25, 2003, the Session discussed the question again in light of the views expressed at the forum and in the questionnaires returned at that time. It was decided to consider the formulation of a policy statement at the following meeting of Session. On January 27, 2004, Session reviewed the question and the views expressed again. By then, one hundred and thirty of approximately five hundred questionnaires had been returned, of which, 67% opposed the performance of same-sex marriage at Parkdale, 21% supported it and 12% expressed indecision. A large majority of the respondents, however, wanted Parkdale to continue to accept gay and lesbian members and adherents into the life of the congregation and to minister to them. By motion made and seconded, Session adopted as policy that same-sex marriages would not be performed by Parkdale's ministry staff, nor by any other authorized person on the premises of Parkdale Church. In view of the covenantal nature of the relationship between ministry personnel and the pastoral charge they serve, ministry staff may not perform same-sex marriages at venues other than Parkdale either. On March 30, 2004, Session approved the policy outlined above and informed the congregation by letter and through the church's monthly news-letter. In addition, it

was noted that the policy of the United Church is that if a congregation does not approve of same-sex marriage, the minister is obligated to refer the couple to a consenting congregation and its minister.

The following paragraph was contained in the letter sent to the congregation: The Session opposes injustice against all persons, but does not support the institutionalization of same-sex relationships as “marriage.” The Session reserves marriage as the voluntary union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others and accepts this to be well grounded biblically and theologically. The Session affirms that all persons are loved by God and that all baptized, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members in the body of Christ. The Session humbly acknowledges that those who support the policy and those who disagree with it are each seeking to be faithful to God and to the witness of Scripture. The Session recognizes the need for on-going study and consideration of the way in which same-sex relationships are acknowledged by the Church and by society in general. The Session expects the congregation at Parkdale to continue to welcome, to support and to respect all who seek to worship at Parkdale and to enter into the life of the congregation.

Same Sex Marriage — A Small Church Experience

Daphne Craig

Hawthorne United church building houses a very small congregation on the south-eastern edge of the city. it became a one-point charge about three years ago - a congregation composed mostly of elderly couples who had been rural supporters of the church almost all their lives. Gradually those couples have disappeared and younger members of their families have moved on to schools, colleges or work situations that have removed them from the neighbourhood.

Now we find ourselves in the midst of a diverse community, many members of which are immigrants. Some of these have found a welcome at Hawthorne and they struggle to fit their own religious understandings into this new experience of church in a new country. Not all of these people stay in the community permanently and we lose them to job opportunities elsewhere.

Our strict membership is 48 families and there are almost as many adherents, some of whom attend services regularly. A little over a year ago Hawthorne congregation called a new minister who came to us on the understanding (among others) that he would lead us in studies of various issues that were before the presbytery, conference and general council. It happened that this issue of same-sex marriage was at the top of the list during the next few months - for people in church and in politics. A study guide was ordered - one that covered all aspects of the argument. A series of four meetings was set up for each of two groups: an afternoon group of 12 - 14 people and an evening group of 6 - 8. At the end of the study each group produced its own statement of commitment. It surprised us all that the statements were so positive and were so close in content, and that those who were not completely in accord with their friends said they could live with the

conclusions.

The afternoon group's statement was short and to the point: In response to God's call we felt committed to welcoming all who came to our doors. The evening group wanted the "all" spelled out in the same conclusion. These statements were brought to the Executive Council - twelve people, some of whom had not attended the group studies. Council decided that a final, combined statement of commitment would need to be placed before the AGM of the congregation and that happened last January. There were forty members and adherents of the congregation present at that meeting. Discussion and debate were intense and tensions ran high until a secret ballot was proposed - to which all agreed. Of the 40 people, 27 voted to support the commitment to receive all people regardless of race, colour, creed, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, educational level, economic circumstances, or family connection, barring none from services of worship, marriage, baptism or Holy Communion.

This decision was received quietly; the statement has since been printed in some of our Sunday bulletins and it appears on the power-point screen before each service. There has been a quiet acceptance within the congregation but we did lose one dearly-loved person who came to us from Jamaica and who just could not accept that statement for his church. A few others were a bit ambivalent but say they can live with the majority decision. There have been some discussions with our minister, but they tend to happen outside the congregational time and space! And the questioners are almost all folk who did not attend any study sessions. About ten new people have come to services regularly, have seen the statement and experienced Hawthorne hospitality. It is hoped that some of them will move into full, active membership.

Has this issue divided our congregation? Not really. Is it providing challenge? Yes, but any challenges that I have seen or experienced have been done in good faith and I believe that is the best we can expect.

The Same-Sex Marriage/Blessing Debate and Ecumenism

Joel Crouse

Last December, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hamilton pulled out of the annual renewal of baptismal vows with the Anglicans and Lutherans. For at least four years, during the week of prayer for Christian unity, the three churches had participated in a special ceremony in the spirit of ecumenism. But this year, the Roman Catholic Bishop decided that he could not participate because the Anglican Dioceses of Hamilton had voted to approve same-sex blessings. The vote had not been endorsed by the Anglican bishop, who said the church needed more time to study the implications. But the Roman Catholics nonetheless decided that they could not participate. The renewal of baptismal vows went ahead with only the Lutherans and the Anglicans present. When I spoke to my Bishop, Michael Pryce, about the turn of event, he said he was disheartened by the step backwards, but was hopeful that dialogue would continue.

As we have already heard this morning, it goes without saying that the issue of same-sex marriage is a difficult and emotional one for Christian churches. The situation in Hamilton demonstrates that it is clearly having an impact on our ecumenical relationships – and will continue to do so as the debate moves forward. Where same sex-marriage is concerned, we Christians find ourselves at different stages, and often reading from different pages. A survey of denominations around the world by the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon found that there was no consensus among major ecumenical partners on either the subject of same-sex marriage, or the granting of ecclesial blessings to same-sex partnerships. Some churches – particularly the new-line, more fundamentalist congregations - have come out as clear opponents to the issue, while others have embarked on a period of study, and still others, such as the United Church, Quaker Fellowship and now the Lutheran church, are considering local options to allow individual congregations to decide their own path.

Meanwhile, like few other issues in recent times, same-sex marriage has emphasized the theological divisions among churches, stirring up a growing split between the conservatives and liberals sitting in the pews of our congregations.

The full effects of the impact of the same-sex marriage debate on ecumenism are only beginning to be realized. But it shows signs of being more complicated for churches than simply pitting opponents against supporters. It has caused clear rifts, as the Hamilton situation shows. It has sparked single-issue advocacy among denominations in agreement, particularly those who oppose altering the definition of marriage – such as the joint press releases to the government from the Roman Catholic church, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, (as well as the Jewish and Muslim faiths—an interfaith element not necessary for this discussion, but interesting to note). And it has polarized opinions within congregations, pushing like-minded parishioners to bond across denominations, to a degree that appears unique to the time and the intensifying debate about how to interpret scripture in a modern age.

The same-sex marriage debate, which on the surface would seem to personally impact only a small percentage of our membership, has managed to preoccupy our faith discussions, and galvanize both supporters and opponents. It has become the issue – the litmus test for how the future church will be defined. I would like to suggest several reasons for this.

First, while the theological scholarship is obviously more complex, the same-sex issue is one that for lay people can be distilled down to a deeply personal question: how do we define marriage? Since it impacts the nature of one of our most fundamental institutions, it is the kind of question that leads to passionate, emotionally charged answers. People find themselves almost automatically on one side or the other – believing the other group has got it wrong. On the floor of our synodical meetings – and perhaps it has been the same at yours - what I have witnessed is the two sides talking, hammering out their points, but neither side listening. As Professor Richard Schnieder, president of the Canadian Council of Churches has written, there is a “temptation to demonize opponents.” Supporters of same-sex marriage are told they are re-writing the Bible to be fashionable. Opponents are said to be misusing the Bible to endorse an ancient prejudice. Either

way, in such a fierce debate, it is hard to find the common ground necessary for ecumenism.

Second, there has been no hiding from the media on this issue; the church has been forced to sort out the theological and pastoral questions raised by this issue under an onslaught of unprecedented publicity, that has highlighted every dispute and every incremental vote. This has not always been done delicately, or in context. It has required churches to defend decisions even while they are still in the process of making them. Clergy who express their opinions, or act as their conscience dictates – like the Anglican Bishop of New Westminster - find themselves immediately in the media spotlight. On the one hand, we should be heartened that a faith issue is getting such attention. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that for practical consensus building purposes, this kind of media attention can often accentuate divisions and work against efforts to reinforce common values.

Third, the Christian church, like many other faiths, finds itself at the peak of a trend started in the 1970s; the most fundamental disagreements are now brewing within denominations not between them. For most of history, it has been the other way around, but today, a liberal Anglican may find she has more in common with a liberal Roman Catholic – then with the conservative Anglican sitting next to her in the pew. The narrative is much the same across denominations – United Methodists, for starters, and Presbyterians, Anglicans, and certainly Lutherans: perhaps a group of bishops bless a gay union, or those pastors supporting same-sex marriage push for a vote on the floor of convention. In a counter move, a group of opposing pastors organizes against it, with some even choosing to leave the church. Often the issue is put over, to apply a band-aid to the breach.

An ongoing study sponsored by the Pew Forum On Religion and Public Life – and detailed recently in Atlantic magazine - has captured these growing religious fault lines with surveys. The study subdivides evangelical churches, mainstream Protestants and Roman Catholics into three groups: traditionalists who “have a high view of the authority of the Bible” and say they want to preserve “traditional beliefs and practices in a modern world.” Centrists who want to adapt beliefs to new times. And modernists, who worship infrequently, and support abandoning old doctrines for the realities of the current century. On a broad range of social and moral issues, the study found, traditionalists agreed with each other across denominations, but strongly disagreed with modernists in their own religion. One example, presented in the magazine report, was that 32 per cent of traditionalist evangelicals and 26 per cent of traditionalist Catholics say abortion should always be illegal; compared with only seven percent of modernist evangelicals and three per cent of modernist Catholics.

On the same-sex issue, the same kind of fragmented inter-denominational bonding has occurred. It is true of pastors as well as lay people: as a pastor who supports same sex marriage I often find myself having more in common on broader issues with liberal pastors from other denominations, than the conservative, anti-gay marriage clergy within my own. Clearly this is form of ecumenism, though not the denomination-to-denomination framework that has long been envisioned. We need to ask whether ecumenism is weakened if it only happens between splinter groups within individual denomination, if we continue to hive off only with those who agree with

us. I ,for one, would hope that the divide over marriage would not pre-empt our collective call for the government to end child poverty, or our unified stance against racism and religious intolerance. But unless we are careful, it may be heading in that direction.

Just as the same-sex marriage debate requires us to decide how we will interpret scripture, it has also inadvertently called upon us to assess how we will sustain ecumenism in a way that make a valuable contribution to society.

Ultimately ecumenism is like a marriage itself - a coming together of distinct partners for a shared purpose who agree, at least some of the time, to disagree. It should be more mosaic than melting pot.

The same-sex marriage debate promises to become more volatile and passionate as it continues. We cannot turn off the media coverage. We cannot expect all our congregations to speak with the same voice. The challenge then for ecumenism – as well as for individual denominations - is the same as it always is: to accept a diversity of stances, while holding to the common ground we all share.



Christian Council of the Capital Area
Conseil chrétien de la région de la capitale

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