

SPECIAL COMMITTEE RE LISTENING (LGBTQI PEOPLE)

To the Venerable, the 144th General Assembly:

BACKGROUND

At the 2017 General Assembly, in the section of the joint report of the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Life and Mission Agency Committee entitled “Responding to 1994 Call to Repent of Homophobia”, a recommendation was made for The Presbyterian Church in Canada to repent of homophobia and hypocrisy by establishing a special committee with specific terms of reference. The Assembly agreed to establish this special committee with the following terms of reference (A&P 2017, p. 45–46):

1. The Special Committee shall create a safe and respectful environment in which confidentiality is assured, in order to encourage LGBTQI people:
 - a. to tell their stories of harm done to them within and by the church; and
 - b. to share their stories of God’s grace experienced by them and Christian ministry performed by them, even in the midst of the challenges they have faced.
2. The Special Committee shall invite LGBTQI people to submit their stories orally or in writing. Stories will be included in the committee’s report to a future General Assembly with permission of those who have shared.
3. The Special Committee shall make use of relevant documents of the church, including but not limited to:
 - a. the 1994 Human Sexuality Report;
 - b. *Body, Mind and Soul* study document and the individual responses received by the Life and Mission Agency and the Committee on Church Doctrine to it; and
 - c. any other such documents as the committee may deem relevant.
4. The Special Committee shall provide an appropriate response to the issue of homophobia within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.
5. The Special Committee shall recommend concrete actions addressing homophobia to the General Assembly for implementation within the church.
6. The Special Committee shall report its progress at each upcoming General Assembly, with a final report by or before the 2020 General Assembly.
7. The Special Committee shall be made up of seven members drawn from across the church. The special committee shall be reflective of the ethnic diversity of the denomination and shall include at least two members of the LGBTQI community.
8. The Assembly Council shall be instructed to support the special committee with an appropriate budget and appropriate document support.

MEMBERSHIP

Members of the special committee were named by the Moderator and include the Rev. Dr. Robert Faris and Ms. Sue Senior (co-conveners), the Rev. Dr. Tim Archibald, the Rev. Joseph Bae, the Rev. Dr. Jean Morris, Ms. Sydney O’Brien and Ms. Bassma Younan. The committee has had three face-to-face meetings and three meetings by teleconference.

NAMING THE COMMITTEE

The committee spent time in discerning a name that would be welcoming for those we sought to hear. The name “Rainbow Communion” was selected for this reason to intentionally reflect its mandate and purpose. “Communion” is central to our life as Christians and, in a broader sense, reflects the sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially when the exchange is on a mental or spiritual level. “Rainbow” as a symbol of God’s promise, has its origin in the biblical covenant with Noah and his family. It is also a term or symbol often used to represent the inclusion of the full diversity of people and emphasizes the inclusion of persons who identify as sexual and/or gender minorities.

THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

The committee met face-to-face in three two-day meetings and one full-day meeting, and three times by teleconference. In this first year, the focus was on identifying what is needed to create a safe, welcoming and

respectful environment in which the stories of LGBTQI people can be received. The Rainbow Communion met and consulted with a number of people who have expertise in respectful listening; the reality of homophobia in the church; and terminology, vocabulary and descriptions currently in use with respect to persons who identify as LGBTQI, especially in relation to those in faith-based communities.

Understanding Homophobia

In the 2017 Committee on Church Doctrine and Life and Mission Agency Committee joint report, homophobia is defined as,

An irrational fear or hatred of people who are, or perceived to be, gay, lesbian or bisexual, often exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, intimidation or acts of violence... Homophobia can be internalized, where the experience of shame, aversion or self-hatred is in reaction to one's own feelings of attraction for a person of the same sex. Homophobia is institutionalized where organizations carry attitudes and policies that discriminate against people on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. (A&P 2017, p. 476)

Although LGBTQI people are most obviously harmed by homophobia, others suffer because of it as well. Relatives, friends, co-workers, members of the same congregation, ecumenical colleagues and others may find themselves bullied, excluded or compromised because of their relationship with or advocacy for LGBTQI people. People who are perceived to be LGBTQI, but are actually heterosexual, can also be victims of homophobic bullying, harassment, abuse and violence. The stories of these people are also important to hear.

Recommendation No. 1

Adopted/Defeated/Amended

That the terms of reference of the Special Committee re LGBTQI People and The Presbyterian Church in Canada be modified to read as:

1. The Special Committee shall create a safe and respectful environment in which confidentiality is assured, in order to encourage LGBTQI people and others:
 - a. to tell their stories of harm done to LGBTQI people and others within and by the church; and
 - b. to share their stories of God's grace experienced by and Christian ministry performed by LGBTQI people and others, even in the midst of the challenges they have faced.

Understanding Transphobia

We have learnt that the language and the constructs that have generally been used in the church do not adequately reflect the realities and lived experiences of those who identify as sexual and gender minorities. In particular, it has become evident that the lives of people who identify as transgender are all but invisible in The Presbyterian Church in Canada and that transphobia is rarely named in addressing the experiences of LGBTQI people. It is therefore important to hear and include the stories of transphobia as well.

Understanding Heterosexism

The 2017 Committee on Church Doctrine and Life and Mission Agency Committee joint report states that,

Concerning sexuality, churches have often agreed with much of society and mistake what is for what ought to be; that is, because the majority of people are heterosexual, it has often been assumed that this is the only normal way to be, to the point that we have predominantly structured our communities and pastoral approach in support of society's model of heterosexuality. Such strong Christian endorsement of a broader culture which preferences heterosexuality as the assumed default standard has enforced silence, secrecy and shame upon those who stand at the margins of what is "normal". (A&P 2017, p. 476)

This is heterosexism and the Rainbow Communion has determined that heterosexism further marginalizes and stigmatizes LGBTQI individuals and their families. We believe that heterosexism must also be addressed in our work of listening and in making recommendations to the church.

Understanding Hypocrisy

The 1994 Report on Human Sexuality proclaimed that,

The church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supportive community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported. Sadly, the Christian church

has frequently shunned homosexuals and failed to minister to them and with them. The church as a whole must repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy. (A&P 1994, p. 267)

Recommendation No. 1 in the joint report and the Moderator's Letter of Repentance of 2018 also echo this call to repent from homophobia and hypocrisy. The joint report states,

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has not done enough to combat the homophobia within it and with its people. While officially exhorted to show hospitality, few congregations implemented policies or practices that would support gay or lesbian Christians who lived by the church's teachings. (A&P 2017, p. 477)

The Rainbow Communion understands that repentance from hypocrisy in the church is also important in naming the harm done to LGBTQI people. The psychological and spiritual damage caused by the dissonance of being told that God loves all and that all are welcome combined with the experience of being marginalized, and sometimes shamed, in the church because of sexual orientation or gender identity is soul destroying.

Recommendation No. 2

Adopted/Defeated/Amended

That the terms of reference of the Special Committee re LGBTQI People and The Presbyterian Church in Canada be modified to read as:

4. The Special Committee shall provide an appropriate response to the issues of homophobia, hypocrisy, heterosexism and transphobia within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Understanding Fear and the Threat of Censure

The invitation to come and participate in the Rainbow Communion listening process can produce a high level of fear, especially for those who are subject to the discipline of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Many people have lived hidden lives because of the fear of censure, loss of employment and shame. This is reflected in the Committee on Church Doctrine and Life and Mission Agency Committee joint report,

Without such pastoral strategies, restrictions on marriage and ordination based on sexuality have created a situation where those most affected by The Presbyterian Church in Canada's stance – LGBTQ members – have been heavily discouraged even from raising the issue from fear of possible repercussions within the church, including everything from loss of employment to losing the church families to which they belong. (A&P 2017, p. 477)

Participating in the Rainbow Communion listening process could be seen as a form of "outing" and put people who are subject to the discipline of The Presbyterian Church in Canada at risk of censure. Similarly, the terms of reference for the establishment of the special committee state that,

The Special Committee shall be made up of seven members drawn from across the church. The Special Committee shall be reflective of the ethnic diversity of the denomination and shall include at least two members of the LGBTQI community. (A&P 2017, p. 46)

For the LGBTQI members of the committee, their acceptance of the invitation to serve, and to ensure that the committee's demographic requirements were met, meant that they put themselves at risk of censure as they had to self-identify. The climate in the church to date has been one of "don't ask – don't tell", but with the establishment of this special committee it is now asking LGBTQI people to tell their story and be encouraged to reveal their identity. For this reason, the Rainbow Communion is recommending that for those who serve on the committee and those who come to tell their stories, censure and discipline with respect to The Presbyterian Church in Canada's stance on homosexuality would be suspended indefinitely.

Recommendation No. 3

Adopted/Defeated/Amended

That those who are subject to the discipline of The Presbyterian Church in Canada who accepted the invitation to serve on the Special Committee re Listening (LGBTQI People) or who accept the invitation to tell their stories of harm done or grace experienced, even in the midst the challenges they have faced because of homophobia, hypocrisy, heterosexism or transphobia in the church, would have potential censure with respect to The Presbyterian Church in Canada's stance on same-sex relationships suspended indefinitely in order to allow them to participate freely and honestly in the work of the special committee.

THE LISTENING PROCESS

Conversations with those to whom we will listen

After careful deliberation, consultation and prayerful discernment, the Rainbow Communion has developed a process whereby those who have graciously offered to come speak with the Rainbow Communion will be able to do so by whatever means is best for the storyteller. The Rainbow Communion shall create a safe and respectful environment whereby the stories are received through face-to-face meetings, written submissions (letter or email), video conference or by phone, and will also ensure that the stories are recorded and kept only with the express consent of the individual. The method to record these stories will be determined by the storyteller(s) and include the option of video recording, audio recording or notetaking by the listeners. The Rainbow Communion also respects that there may be those who do not wish to have a record of their story kept, but simply need a space to be heard. Where consent for the keeping of records is provided, the Rainbow Communion will maintain a secure and confidential database that includes the number of storytellers, demographic data (age range and province) and the content of the stories. Names will only be associated with the stories where the storytellers have expressly requested that their name be recorded and shared. The location for the listening space will be determined in consultation with the storytellers according to what they would consider to be a safe, welcoming and respectful space.

The Rainbow Communion will be collecting stories from May 15, 2018 to June 15, 2019

Invitation

An invitation to those who wish to share their stories in accordance with the mandate as set out in the terms of reference has been made available online at presbyterian.ca/listening, PCPak distribution, PCConnect e-newsletter, PCConnection newspaper, organizations with close ties to LGBTQI persons, word of mouth, the Rainbow Communion's resource materials and personal contact.

Contact

The Rainbow Communion can be reached confidentially by email rainbowcommunion@presbyterian.ca, by telephone 1-800-619-7301 ext. 300 (secure line) or by mail.

Intake

Once a request to be heard is received, the listening team will work with the storyteller to determine all the logistical considerations (method of collection, date and time, location and listeners). The storyteller will provide some information using an intake form that includes a disclosure statement from the Rainbow Communion about the process. The information provided on the form by the person wishing to share will help the listeners prepare the listening space so that it meets the needs of those to whom we will listen. This includes but is not limited to: accessibility and language requirements; a safe, welcoming and respectful location in the eyes of the storyteller; the method to record the story; consent for archiving story; and consent for inclusion of content in the committee's report to the General Assembly.

Listening Space

Two listeners will meet with the person who is interested in telling their story. This sharing will normally occur face-to-face, but could also happen by video conference, on the phone, or in written form by letter or email. The storyteller is welcome, and even encouraged, to bring a companion who might be emotionally and/or spiritually supportive and with whom the storyteller can debrief afterwards.

While the Special Committee re Listening (LGBTQI People) is comprised of seven members, additional listeners have been trained and deputized across Canada so that more people will be able to share their stories, in their own communities, where it is feasible to do so. Attention has been given to identifying listeners who are bilingual or multilingual so that as many stories can be shared in the first language of the storyteller as possible. Deputized listeners have been identified and trained by the Rainbow Communion. A translator and/or sign-language interpreter would be requested if one is required.

Ideally, storytellers will be encouraged to consider a few prompting questions before preparing their story to share. These may include open-ended questions such as: What would you like to tell us about your experience within The Presbyterian Church in Canada as it relates to homophobia? Why do you feel it is important for us to hear your story at this time? If seeking reconciliation, what form might it take?

The Listening Approach

Listening to the storyteller is the main purpose of the work of the Rainbow Communion. Listeners might ask for some information for clarification which the storyteller can elect to answer, or not. Storytellers may end the listening space at any time if they do not feel comfortable for any reason. The storyteller will be encouraged, if possible, to discuss the decision to end the listening space so that the listeners might come to understand those concerns. The listening approach is one based in gratitude as well as pastoral listening.

Follow up

Within a reasonable amount of time of receiving the story, a member of the Rainbow Communion will contact the storyteller seeking approval to verify the content of the story as recorded is accurate. With this approval it could then be used to form the basis of the special committee's report to the General Assembly.

The Rainbow Communion wishes to convey its deep gratitude to those who have placed their trust in the listening space and have participated, or plan to participate, in the listening process. The Rainbow Communion and The Presbyterian Church in Canada are indebted to the storytellers for their generosity in sharing their experiences so that the church may be in a better place to address its homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism and hypocrisy...and work towards healing and reconciliation in the future.

Recommendation No. 4

Adopted/Defeated/Amended

That individuals and groups be encouraged to tell their stories of harm done by homophobia, hypocrisy, heterosexism and transphobia, and to share stories of grace received in the midst of challenges in The Presbyterian Church in Canada through the listening process developed by the Rainbow Communion until June 15, 2019.

Robert Faris and Sue Senior
Co-Conveners