

General Assembly

Well it has been quite a week!! I left for Waterloo on Friday so that I could attend a workshop called **Affirm – making our churches a safe place for all!** It was intended to set the stage for General Assembly and to help educate the uniformed about the barriers in our churches that non-hetero-sexuals face. I was reluctant to put my name tag on. They had stuck rainbows to everyone's name tag. I have never worn a rainbow in support of the LGBTQ community before. I looked around, wondering who, jut by looking at I could identify as straight or gay. I wondered if others were looking at me for the same reason.

We heard painful stories from a number of people who had been shamed and excluded from their congregations, once others learned that they were not hetero-sexual.

Have you ever heard of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia? Have you ever heard of Scott Jones? Scott was the young man who was the organist at a Presbyterian Church in New Glasgow. He was stabbed and nearly

killed by a young man for being gay. Scott now will live the rest of his life in a wheel chair. He has started a movement called Don't Be Afraid.

We also heard some wonderful stories from those who had found Presbyterian churches, who believe that God loves ALL people, regardless of their sexual orientation.

“Unsafe” is a word we heard often. Non-heterosexual people have experienced not feeling safe in churches. They have been ignored, avoided, bullied, and excluded by those who claim their church is warm and welcoming. They have been made to feel like the lepers of Jesus' day.

We were asked to consider what it means to really be a warm and welcoming church. We were asked to consider what it means to love. It was a wake up call for many of us. We saw very quickly, the limits to our welcome, and the limits to our love.

General Assembly began the following day. The opening worship on Sunday night was wonderful. The first meeting that night after worship

was perfunctory. Brian Laughton and I attended meetings which ran daily from 8:30 am to 9:30pm.

On Monday, everything began to unravel. Hours were spent on motions and discussions of little or no significance.....that the

Moderator be asked to write a letter to the Canadian government to affirm them for this, to thank them for that, and on and on it went.

Meanwhile everyone was churning.....when are we going to get to this most difficult topic that we all came to deal with.

Much time was spent on process – very little time spent on content.

Finally, the Life and Mission Agency presented their report on the Human Sexuality Issue. We were told that the members of that committee could not agree on the issue. There was no opportunity for debate their report. Then the Church Doctrine presented their report. Their members could not agree on how to move forward either. Again, there was no opportunity for debate.

A group newly formed called the **Rainbow Communion**, made up of people who are hetero-sexual and homosexual, some in full time ministry, some not, presented their findings. There was no opportunity for debate.

Somehow, there was opportunity to debate the reports from the Trustees, the Atlantic Mission Society, the Women's Missionary Society, and many other groups. But there was nothing to debate there!

We were running out of time and still no debate had been permitted on the topic of Human Sexuality.

Suddenly, the Moderator declared that a committee comprised of past Moderators, was going to receive all of the reports pertinent to the Human Sexuality issue and report to the next General Assembly. Yet, once again, no discussion! There are 11 men and 3 women on this new committee. There are no people of colour, no openly gay people, and no one from the Rainbow Communion. The response by many, many commissioners was huge frustration and disappointment. We had

prepared well for this assembly. We had taken time away from our work for this assembly. We wanted to share our perspectives on this vital issue. We were denied. Enormous amounts of time and money from people across this country were spent and we have nothing of substance to show for it.

Many commissioners indicated how ashamed and embarrassed they were, at the way this Assembly had gone. We were all returning to our congregations and Presbyteries with nothing to report.

It took our church 33 years to approve of the ordination of women.

There continue to be congregations in the PCC that will not call a woman to be their minister.

So I am sorry to tell you, that after 18 years of debate, the PCC is no further ahead on the issue of Human Sexuality. Do we have 15 more years of debate to endure?

But this is what I did learn last week -There is great diversity within the PCC. There is great diversity within each session and congregation within the PCC - a broad spectrum.

Think about your family for a moment - Does everyone in your family have the same talents to the same degree? Does everyone in your family agree on who should run our city, or province or country? (Ford/Trump) Does everyone in your family hold the same position on social justice issues? Does everyone in your family like the same sports, or music, TV show, other forms of entertainment or food?

There is great diversity within each family.

There is great diversity within each church family.

There is great diversity within the PCC. It is a broad spectrum. There are many topics upon which people disagree. There are very few topics on which we all agree! But we continue to live together and for the most part, enjoy it. Diversity within unity. Continuing on with the theme of diversity within unity-

Some people, who, read and interpret the same Bible that I do, and living in the same country as I do, say that whatever sexual orientation a person has, they are a child of God, and loved by God. They are going to heaven. Some say that gay people need to know they are going to burn in hell forever.

Christ's own disciples were a family. They didn't always get along. His relationship with each of them was not the same. We mostly hear of Peter, James, John, and Judas. All of the disciples had different gifts and different points of view. They all had their own unique experiences which informed their lives in unique ways. Denominations, congregations, families, and disciples can find ways to stay united, even in the face of diversity in the body of Christ.

In every congregation, there is a spectrum – from conservative to liberal.

Is every word in the Bible from the mouth of God to the printed page....or did humans get into the mix and possibly contaminate the

process to some degree? At one time, it mattered to my faith that Jonah did in fact live in the belly of a whale for 3 days before being vomited up on a beach, still alive. Some of you believe that, word for word. I don't hold the same view, but I am fine if you do! After being raised in the church, 3 years in seminary and 32 years in ministry, it no longer matters. If scientists prove that it was indeed true, I am fine with that. If they prove that it is not true, I am fine with that too. My faith does not rise or fall based on this. For me, it is negotiable and not of great significance. What is significant to me is God's message to us in the Jonah story. It is a story of obedience, persistence, forgiveness, and God's relentless love for us. I have no problem with you believing the story literally. You might be right. Guess what - there is room in God's family for both of us! I do not share your belief on that issue, but I still love you and I still want to be a member of your church family. I am still a member of the Body of Christ with you. There is room for both of us here, even with our different understandings of God's word!

Have you discovered what for you is negotiable and what is not?

Eventually each of us need to know where it is that we draw our line in the sand. What is negotiable, and what is not? That may be different for each of us, and that is ok.

After years of study, prayer, discussion, listening, reflecting, these are at least some of my non-negotiables.

Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is the 2nd aspect of the Trinity. He lived, died, and rose from the dead. He ascended to be with God. God loves everyone. There is more, but that is the key. That is my rock. That is my line in the sand.

When I look at the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, words like kindness, compassion, grace, mercy, inclusion come to mind. He loves and welcomes everyone. But He also says "Go and sin no more". So very quickly the issue becomes, at least on the topic of Human Sexuality, is any sexual orientation, other than heterosexual a sin?

We have in the past few years learned the term transgender. It has to do with the reality of a person born physically one gender, but who's spirit, emotion, psychology, outlook, internal orientation is a different gender. As difficult as this might be to imagine, it is a reality for some people. And if you listen deeply to transgender people, you hear the pain, the disconnect, and the shame of not being in the body of the gender with which they identify. And if you listen long enough, you hear the joy, and thankfulness, and the truth they feel when they have made the difficult journey to change. Is it a sin when a person strives to live in a manner where their physicality matches their personality?

This week I heard people of all ages, from many walks of life, educated, professional and openly gay. There are romantically attracted to people of the same gender. They don't do this as a naughty prank. They have all gone through tremendous amounts of pain, guilt, self-examination, and shame. Some have lost family members, friends,

husbands, wives, children, jobs because of it. This is real. It is no joke. It is who they are. It is who God made them.

Remember the words of the song we sing – Good Good Father? He's a good good Father- It's who He is, it's who he is, its who he is ? And I am loved by Him, It's who I am, it's who I am, it's who I am....that is true of every one of us, with all our uniqueness and diversity and wonder. Loved by God. It's what He does. Who does He love? You and me...that's who we are....loved!

And so, because they are Christians, they show up to the local church on Sunday morning, and walk through the doors. This church that they show up to, claims that they are warm and welcoming.

Will these two professional, attractive gay women be welcomed to have a bulletin? Will they be welcomed to have a seat in the sanctuary? Will they be welcomed to sing the songs and pray the prayers? Will they be welcomed to put some money on the offering plate? Will they be welcomed to join the church - teach Sunday School

- join the choir- become an elder - become certified for ordination?

How warm is our welcome?

Jesus said, "Go and sin no more".

If we consider homosexuality a sin, our welcome will be limited.

Jesus also said, "Love one another."

If we believe that loving another person who happens to be of the same gender is a sin, our love will be limited. What is the extent of your welcome? What is the extent of your love?

The Presbyterian Church in Canada prides itself on being

Welcoming....on being Loving. So I am sad to report that at the 144th

General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada we did not move to Equality. Our welcome was limited. Our love was limited.

We did not move to Inclusivity. In fact we did not move at all.

Amen