Lament and Reconciliation as Essential Components to a Theology of Apology

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The United Church of Canada's current work in creating an official apology to members of LGBTTQ[1] communities has been largely motivated by the findings of the National GLBTT[2] Consultation. This consultation was mandated at the 40th General Council (2009) in order to "collect usable data regarding current conditions within the United Church for all people in the sexual orientation and gender identity continuums, and regarding where the church needs to be in the future" (United Church of Canada 2012, 3). One of the key findings of the consultation was that members of the United Church wanted to see the church acting as a leader for LGBTTQ justice on a denominational level (United Church of Canada 2012, 10). This included the explicit suggestion that the "General Council offer a formal statement of apology to all people that have been hurt by the practices and polity that encourage and reinforce the right to discriminate based on sexual orientation and gender identity" (United Church of Canada 2012, 10).

While the creation of an official apology is missional in the sense that it sets an example to other communities of faith, the main focus of the missiology of an apology in this context is inward-looking. Rather than seeking out another place to 'mission to', an apology requires asking God to help us see the work we are being called to do in our own communities. For the

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[1] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Two-Spirit, and Queer

[2] At the time of the consultation, it was decided to use the acronym LGBTT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Two-Spirit) which has since been expanded to the acronym that will be used throughout this paper.

purpose of this paper, the missiology of apologizing will be explored through the theological themes of lament and reconciliation.

Lament as a Challenge to Denial

From my personal experience engaging in this work, it is apparent that there are many stories of hurt and anger that have been left unspoken due to the interconnecting effects of ignorance and denial. Within the context of the United Church of Canada, inclusive and affirming policies around gender and sexuality have been a double-edged sword. While policies have been effective in mandating the ongoing work of LGBTTQ justice in the past several decades, it has also fueled the assumption that the policies have 'fixed the problem' and therefore work is no longer needed. Based on recurring comments that surface during discussions of Affirm United's 'Affirming Ministries Program' it is safe to conclude that there is a sense of denial within the United Church of Canada about the harsh reality of how present oppression based on gender identity and sexual orientation is in many communities of faith. If, as O'Connor notes, "the first condition for healing is to bring the pain and suffering into view", it will be important for the apology to enable a church-wide participation in lament (2002, 95). As O'Connor explains, "the act of lamenting can help overcome entrenched denial because it puts truth into the open and brings awareness in accumulating layers of that which has been denied" (2002, 94). Therefore, lament's ability to create a framework where denial can be challenged through truth-telling is essential not only in ensuring people who have experienced injustice feel heard but by challenging those who have engaged in denial. Intentionally creating space for lament would be an essential asset in ensuring that people's stories of injustice are

heard. Without truth-telling and lament, the apology runs the risk of making people's pain feel erased or overlooked. In this sense, engaging in an apology speaks to the mission of the church as a truth-telling institution.

It is my hope that the act of lament would foster a graceful understanding of the fear that has motivated denial. If the church can embrace the idea that "falling apart is not necessarily a bad thing" there would be potential to break down the many barriers that have been created from decades of policy creation that was met with fear and denial without any opportunity for truth-telling at the time (O'Connor 2002, 108). Lament is not merely an opportunity for those who have been oppressed to air their grievances, but for every individual to explore their own emotional journey as it connects to the United Church's history of LGBTTQ justice work.

Lament teaches us that the justice that comes from truth-telling is the work an entire community; "it calls Christians to become the communion of saints, the church united, the body of Christ broken together, the sacrament of healing for the world" (O'Connor 2002, 132). Framing lament as a communal process where each participant embodies multiple roles as student, teacher, witness, and truth-teller is important in ensuring all those involved understand the need to be accountable for their own growth in order to support the growth of the entire community. As O'Connor explains:

> Without knowledge of our own pain, and no matter how good intentions are, we make objects of others. We treat them as we wish to be treated, not as they need and desire to be treated. We determine what is good for them, not they. Or we callously disregard their suffering because it frightens us too much or because we do not perceive our connections to them. (2002, 92)

In this sense, lament is not a spiritual practice solely intended to benefit those who have been hurt; it restore wholeness from oppression and ignorance.

Lament as creating space

Not only does lament encourage the aforementioned spiritual gifts of faithful witness and truth-telling, but it also encourages an approach to justice that makes space for prayer. As Katongole and Rice articulate: "the first language of the church in a deeply broken world is not strategy, but prayer…We are called to a space where any explanation or action is too easy, too fast, too shallow – a space where the right response can only be a desperate cry directed to God" (2008, 77). From this perspective, lament is a process which slows down reconciliation so that community have enough time to sink into the complexity and hard work of justice-making rather than acting from an anxious desire for the absence of tension (Katongole and Rice 2008, 81). Therefore, "stepping back" to engage in lament "is not a retreat from the world of brokenness but an invitation to receive God's imagination for the world" (Katongole and Rice 2008, 41).

For O'Connor this creation of prayerful space is exemplified by the missing voice of God throughout Lamentations as it represents a "vacuum of meaning" where "the old life has ended and no new imaginings are yet possible" (2002, 84-85). The absence of God's voice ensures that focus remains on the reality of human experience instead of "sliding prematurely over suffering toward happy endings" (O'Connor 2002, 86). There is a need to challenge superficial answers to complex questions and the glossing over of emotions we may not necessarily want to associate with God such as sadness, anger, and despair. This can take place through noting both the

absence of God, and prayerfully inviting God into a justice-seeking process within a community of faith.

Lament in the bible

The aforementioned norms of truth-telling, faithful witness and creation of prayerful space within the spiritual practice of lament can be further informed by the examples and insights offered by the book of Lamentations. For example, while the book of Lamentations have several voices and perspectives, "the book honours each by not resolving them into a unified vision, and it treats these multiple voices of pain as hallowed ground" (O'Connor 2002, 84). This practice teaches us the importance of honouring a multiplicity of experiences in regards to how pain has been experienced and how pain is being expressed. In essence,

> the biblical book of Lamentations refuses denial, practices truth-telling and reverses amnesia. It invites readers into pain, chaos, and brutality, both human and divine. It conveys effects of trauma, loss, and grief beyond tears. Because God's voice is absent, it gives primacy to suffering like no other biblical book. (O'Connor 2002, 94)

The book of Lamentations and the spiritual practice of lament are both integral assets to creating an apology to members of LGBTTQ communities.

Reconciliation

Not only is the church called to engage in a process of lament in regards to the impact of homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, cissexism, and transmisogyny, but the apology is also a process of reconciliation. While lament offers us the spiritual tools to be broken open, reconciliation enables that sense of openness to be transformed into active and ongoing justice.

Reconciliation, which happens on personal, communal, and social levels, is "inspired by the biblical vision of the eschatological restoration of the original shalom, the promised final realization of the kingdom of God, when all will have been healed, made whole again and united in God" (Matthey 2005, 81). In this sense, reconciliation can be understood as mission as it enables the church to participate in God's mission of justice. To engage in a ministry of reconciliation involves a sense of "humility and self-emptying...and at the same time an experience of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying and transforming power" (Matthey 2005, 85).

Within the context of an apology, invoking the language of reconciliation is helpful in articulating the need for radical transformation in the pursuit of justice. Rather than being informed by liberal complacency, reconciliation understands justice as God's mission for the world which urges people to take "their history of trauma, division, and oppression seriously" (Katongole and Rice 2008, 28). In their work, Katongole and Rice draw on Jeremiah to call attention to the implications of "reconciliation without memory, an approach that ignores the wounds of the world and proclaims peace where there is no peace" (Jer 8:11) (2008, 11). In Jeremiah, we learn of the shortcomings of 'shallow peace' (Jer 6:14) and are reminded of the importance of creating radical peace that cannot be created by the superficial treatment of wounds (Matthey 2005, 86). In her remark that "reconciliation necessitates that people come together and agree on the future of our world" Isasi-Diaz illustrates the eschatological nature of reconciliation which "involves building a common programmatic vision about our world" (2006, 78).

Bringing focus to communal reconciliation

Since the term reconciliation holds a multitude of meanings within Christianity and political science, it is important to clarify the meaning in which this paper is evoking. In many Christian contexts, emphasis is placed on personal reconciliation with God which detracts from conversations about communal reconciliation (Clegg 2006, 127). As Kongole and Rice suggest, "to appreciate why Christians should care about reconciliation, we need to step back from the dominant expectations that reconciliation either has to do with personal salvation alone or with mediation and conflict resolution" (2008, 40). The communal importance of reconciliation is illustrated in 2 Corinthians 5, which notes that "reconciliation is not limited to a few but is for 'anyone in Christ'" (Katongole and Rice 2008, 50). Isasi-Diaz elucidates on this notion even further in her argument that "reconciliation is one of the means God uses to enable human beings not only to relate to the God-self but to participate in divine nature itself" (2006, 77). In this sense, reconciliation is not only an invitation that is offered by God to all, but it is a calling to participate in God's mission.

Reconciliation as addressing conflict

Another key concept which merits further definition is conflict. In her work, Lefebvre lifts up Bar Tal's work on reconciliation which states: "reconciliation is a process of change in intergroup relations: a change from hostility and conflict to mutual acceptance, respect, and future cooperation" (2013, 14). Lefebvre's work exemplifies some of barriers that occur when trying to apply discussions regarding reconciliation to the United Church context of an apology to members of LGBTTQ communities. Most of the research currently available which discusses the church's mission of reconciliation is based on situations of political conflict such as civil war

and genocide. While there may be situations of hostility and overt conflict within the United Church in regards to gender identity and sexual orientation, the nature of the conflict differs greatly from war and mass-killings. In many United Church contexts conflict is often rendered invisible through ignorance or presents itself in the form of microaggressions in which well-intending (yet problematically unaware) individuals do not even perceive conflict at all. In many situations, the greatest challenge for communities of faith may be the need to understand that cissexism and heterosexism will not be challenged through denial masked as politeness.

Dynamics of Repentance and Forgiveness

As Liechty aptly notes, "the Christian traditions, and with it the broader Western tradition is heavily weighted towards forgiving rather than repenting" (2006, 60). Therefore, as the United Church of Canada engages in the act of apologizing to members of LGBTTQ communities it is important that there is equal emphasis among both repentance and forgiveness. It would be unjust for the church to expect forgiveness without offering any signs of honest repentance[3]. In addition, it will be important for the concept of forgiveness to be framed in a way so that is not understood as the "condoning of past wrongdoings," but rather an acknowledgement of the past that "seeks a different relationship both to the wrongdoer and to the deed" (Matthey 2005, 80). As Christians, we are enriched with images of a "God who forgives sin (Mark 2: 7-12)" and of Jesus who "come among us preaching the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47), pointing to the graciousness of God and the possibility of overcoming past for the sake of a different kind of future" (Matthey 2005, 80).

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[3] While I do believe that the church has committed itself to work in the areas of gender and sexuality it has not lead to any intentional expression of lament on a denominational level.

Reconciliation in the bible

There are many examples of reconciliation throughout the bible which can offer theological insight on what it means to engage in reconciliation from a Christian perspective. Within the Old Testament, the "family stories of Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:19-33:20), or of Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37-45) are examples for interpersonal – and perhaps also communal – conflict" which demonstrate the "power of reconciling attitudes of people who try to solve strife, enmity, and experiences of perceptions of injustice through negotiations, repentance, forgiveness and searching for a common basis and a shared future" (Matthey 2005, 71). Both the unresolved and reconciled nature of these stories "acknowledges and bemoans the dimension of violence and underlines the need for and the power of reconciliation" (Matthey 2005, 71). Throughout the Old Testament, examples of conflict are used to elucidate "the estrangement between God and God's people and God's desire and urge for reconciliation and restoration of a relationships that was broken and fragmented through human pride and various forms of rebellion against the God of life and justice" (Matthey 2005, 71).

While the New Testament does not offer the same multitude of stories which explore the topic thematically, reconciliation still plays a prominent role through Paul's interpretation of the concept as an integral element to the Christian identity (Matthey 2005, 71). Paul's use of reconciliation to explore "the nature of God, to illumine the content of the gospel as good news, and to explain the ministry and mission of the apostle and the church in the world" creates the sense that reconciliation "is at the heart of the Christian faith" (Matthey 2005, 71).

Apology missiology in practice

The much needed work of lament and reconciliation in regards the hurt that has been caused by heterosexism, cissexism, homophobia, transphobia, and transmisogyny has been centered on the idea of the United Church's General Council offering an official apology to members of LGBTTQ communities on behalf of the denomination. Although the process of developing an official apology has been met with the fear that this work will not be sufficient enough to create justice, I argue that it is at the very least, a useful piece of a long-term process; especially if it capable of incorporating lament and reconciliation within the apology itself.

The United Church of Canada's history shows that it has not been afraid to wrestle deeply with questions of gender identity and sexual orientation; especially at the level of denominational policy. However, the creation of places for transformational lament and reconciliation is an ongoing challenge. While there are currently communities of faith throughout the United Church who are actively engaged in educational processes about gender and sexuality, these opportunities are forward-looking and do not intentionally create space to talk about past harm that has been done.

In order to create space for lament and reconciliation, I have suggested the use of an art-based ritual to create an opportunity for members of the United Church to personally participate in the apology. The use of an art-based ritual as the site for the apology is useful in its ability to meet the needs of those who have been hurt by religion, encourage transformation at the personal and communal level, and create space for dialogue.

First, recognizing that many people from LGBTTQ communities may have experienced harm through more traditional liturgy, I believe that the creation of a new ritual will help address the

spiritual needs of those who are still healing and would not feel safe or affirmed in a traditional church setting. In particular, the use of art may be helpful in bridging the spiritual gap that has been created by religious ritual and liturgy that has either been dysfunctional and non-existent in regards to meetings the needs of members of LGBTTQ communities (de Bruyne and de Maesner 2013, 33).

Furthermore, the creation of a space where people's stories can be publicly displayed and shared is an important aspect of upholding lament within the apology. The sharing of truths is important in its ability to create a larger story in which people can situate themselves. For those who have been impacted by homophobia, transphobia, transmisogyny, heterosexism, and cissexism within the United Church, the collection of truths can act as a mirror "sorrow, loss, and doubt" where "individual and communal suffering can be related" (O'Connor 2002, 94-95). On the other hand, the public confession of truths also serves as a "way of unlearning innocence" that calls us to "keep naming the truth, keep being disturbed, keep remembering the awful depth of brokenness" (Katongole and Rice 2008, 92).

Lastly, I argue that use of ritual in the implementation of an official apology is an essential component to this work enabling personal and social transformation. As Driver illustrates:

> Rational political methods alone cannot bring about transformation of society from a less to a more just condition, because they cannot fuse the visionary with the actual (the absent with the present) as rituals do, thus profoundly affecting the moral life. Nor can ideas alone do this, for in order to bear fruit ideas require flesh-and-blood performance. (1998, 184)

It is my hope that engaging in the act of apology through ritual will give all members of the United Church an opportunity to engage in the apology where their presence feels valued and necessary. Contrary to formal speeches, ritual is dialectic in nature and, if done effectively, is

capable of creating grace-full dialogue (Driver 1998, 118). In his work, Liechty makes the astute point that apologies are inherently relational in nature (2006, 61). While all members of the United Church have their own personal work they must undergo in regards to gender identity and sexuality, an apology is the emotional meeting point of this journey.

Conclusion

The creation of an official apology to members of LGBTTQ communities has given the United Church of Canada an opportunity to engage in a ministry of lament and reconciliation. By turning the church's missiology inwards, communities of faith will be called to wrestle with difficult emotional work and slow transformational change. It is my hope that as the church prepares to ask big questions about its future[4], the spirit of change will make room for the much needed change of in regards to LGBTTQ justice.

[4] Presently, the United Church of Canada is undergoing a Comprehensive Review, which will be discussed at the 42nd General Council to take place this summer.

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