



WHEN RAINBOWS TOUCH DOWN

The Lived Experiences of Openly Gay and Lesbian Ministers in the United Church
of Canada



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Abstract: *Homosexuality and the Christian church have long had a relationship rife with conflicting theologies and difficult choices. This qualitative research study, utilizes a phenomenological approach to examining the lived experiences of openly gay and lesbian ministers in the United Church of Canada since that denomination agreed to ordain them in 1988. What that has meant for the ministers, the church, and what might be gleaned from those experiences for both the United Church and other denominations working with similar issues are explored.*

Introduction

On June 12, 2016, a lone gunman shot and killed 49 people and injured 53 others at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida.¹ The shooting was the worst mass murder in the history of the United States.² Most of the victims were male, Hispanic, and most were gay.

A week prior to this happening a lesbian minister came out on the floor of the Iowa Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. She was defrocked for doing so. Her Bishop wrote the letter to her informing her of complaints lodged against her the day after the Orlando massacre.³ This is a quote from that article: “To my straight United Methodist colleagues, I want to say this: ***Lean in.*** Listen to the voices of LGBTQ people crying out in lament. ***Check in.*** Call/text/email/message every LGBTQ friend or family member, let them know you love them, that you care. Keep checking in. ***Confess.*** Name to yourself, to God, and to other straight people the ways you have been too quiet, too slow, too tentative, too conditional in your support. ***Repent.*** Recognize the ways you are complicit in the ongoing spiritual and physical violence against LGBTQ people. ***Do it differently.***”⁴

¹ Ralph Ellis, Ashley Fantz, Faith Karimi and Elliott C. McLaughlin, CNN, Orlando shooting: 49 killed, shooter pledged ISIS allegiance, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/>, June 13, 2016.

² Dan Barry, *New York Times*, “Orlando Shooting”, <https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/2016-orlando-shooting>, June 20, 2016.

³ Anna Blaedel, Ministry Matters, “The Church, Orlando and LGBTQ Pain”, <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/7009/the-church-orlando-and-lgbtq-pain?>, June 23, 2016.

⁴ Blaedel, “The Church, Orlando and LGBTQ Pain”

This article was the impetus for this grad project research. In 1988 the United Church of Canada determined that sexual orientation would not be a barrier to ordination. The following is a qualitative research study of the experiences of openly gay and lesbian ministers in the United Church of Canada.

Purpose

As stated, the purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of openly gay and lesbian ministers in the United Church of Canada. The United Church of Canada has always aspired to be on the leading edge of social justice. Forming in 1925 with a number of human rights concerns in its sight including temperance, poverty, and women's issues, in 1936 the UCC ordained its first female minister in the person of Lydia Gruchy⁵.

In 1988 the United Church of Canada took another monumental step forward when it ruled that sexual orientation would not be a barrier to ordination.⁶ That ruling was met with great discourse.⁷ More than 3000 petitions and letters against the ruling were filed with General Council.⁸ Those in attendance were moved by stories of gay congregants and ministry personnel alike who shared their suffering and by a vote of 3:1 the motion was passed.⁹ Some left the church over the decision. "Homophobia and heterosexism continue to affect ministry personnel, and presbyteries seeking ways to live out the policies of the church."¹⁰

⁵ Don Schweitzer, *A History: The United Church of Canada*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, 2012. p. 40

⁶ Schweitzer, p. 152.

⁷ Kenneth Freed, LA Times, Gay Issue Rocks United Church of Canada: Report Stirs Controversy Over Role of Scripture in Doctrinal Matters", http://articles.latimes.com/1988-04-23/local/me-1733_1_united-church, April 23, 1988

⁸ Schweitzer, p. 214

⁹ B.A. Robinson, Religious Tolerance, "The United Church of Canada and Homosexuality", www.religioustolerance.org/hom_ucc.htm, August 17, 2012

¹⁰ Schweitzer, p. 214

Others joined the church as a result of the decision. In the end the numbers pretty much balanced out. In 1992 Reverend Tim Stevenson was the first openly gay minister ordained in the United Church of Canada. Stevenson's spouse, the Reverend Gary Paterson would later become the first openly gay Moderator of the United Church.¹¹

In the more than 25 years since the church ruled it would ordain gay and lesbian ministers no formal research has been done on what the experience of being an openly gay or lesbian minister with the United Church of Canada has been like for those ministers. This is a significant gap that this study proposes to address. Are LGBTQ ministers being accepted by congregations and within the folds of the church (i.e. presbytery and conferences)? What experiences have they had – both positive and negative? How have those experiences helped shape and form their ministry? What might other denominations who are currently determining how to best deal with the issues surrounding the ordination of openly gay and lesbian ministers learn from the experiences of LGBTQ ministers in the United Church of Canada? This paper examines those experiences in an effort to learn about what is and is not working for and with gay and lesbian ministers within the United Church of Canada.

Methodology

A phenomenological research approach was utilized for this study. The purpose of this type of research is to capture the essence of the experience.¹² Participants are interviewed to examine how they experience a particular phenomenon. For instance, four people may be eye witnesses to an armed robbery. Eye witness accounts tend to be inherently unreliable. All four are likely to

¹¹ Carlito Pablo, "Coun. Tim Stevenson rejoices over spouse Gary Paterson's election to top United Church post", <http://www.straight.com/life/coun-tim-stevenson-rejoices-over-spouse-gary-patersons-election-top-united-church-post>, August 17th, 2012

¹² Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2009.

remember things differently including things like the race of the perpetrator, physical description, clothing, get away vehicle. However, most will be able to agree on things such as the weapon used (because most people will focus in on that aspect of the crime). The other thing that the witnesses are likely to share commonly are emotions – fear, anxiety, anger, helplessness – those are the things a phenomenological study looks for. What are the shared experiences of the participants? Through those shared experiences, we develop a better understanding of what it is truly like to live out and into that particular phenomenon.

Phenomenology, “seeks to understand how people construct meaning,”¹³ in the world around them. What is the impact of the phenomenon on those most closely connected to the event? Through this type of study, we can ascribe commonalities that will allow others a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Church Structure

Recognizing this unique nature of United Church governance is integral to understanding some of the experiences of the participants. Many people know the United Church of Canada ordains openly gay and lesbian ministers, but people who are unfamiliar with the structure of the church’s governance model may not be aware that national policies are not applied unilaterally. For this reason, the working of United Church’s governance is briefly described herein.

The structure of the United Church’s governance model is quite different from other denominations in that it is governed from the bottom up. The United Church of Canada can

¹³ Van Manen M. (1990) *Researching Lived Experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, Ontario: Althouse <http://www.health.herts.ac.uk/immunology/Web%20programme%20-%20Researchhealthprofessionals/phenomenology.htm>, Accessed March 22, 2017

make policy on the General Council level but cannot compel individual congregations to adopt that policy. Individual congregations have significant say about how they worship and adoption of policies for their own church. In an e-mail dated March 5, 2017, United Church Historian Reverend Doctor Ross Bartlett explains how that might look in relation to openly gay and lesbian ministers and same sex marriages.

The General Council adopted a couple of policies. In the case of clergy, it declared that (sexual) orientation in and of itself was not a barrier to ordination or commissioning. And you would be hard pressed to find a congregation that rejected a minister Openly and Officially because of orientation. That would be in violation of a whole bunch of church and civil law standards. However, there are numerous ways to quietly and unofficially make that choice. I've seen it happen. Presbytery would not be able to prove that and contest it. We can believe things (like the reason someone was not called to a church) and not be able to prove them. There is no way to compel a congregation to accept a minister they do not want. It is a covenant requiring willing partners.

As Human Rights tribunals have found believing we see discrimination and proving it are quite different things. Furthermore, what would be the practical outcome of forcing a minister on a pastoral charge -- both for charge & ministry personnel?

As for the marriage question, the right of congregation to determine what worship services will occur is pretty fundamental to our understanding of church. The General Council can pass policies, it can strongly recommend those policies, it can force congregations to make sure that other provisions are made-- but it cannot compel.

We might think that, in certain cases, power to compel might be a good thing. But I can think of situations in our history where it would have been very bad indeed. Because we agree with the General Council in one area should not blind us to the fact that such authority, if granted, would be across the board. What would be accomplished through compulsion. The congregation could simply decide to do no weddings at all. No one can force a minister to preside at a wedding.

These are hard questions for a church that has tended to opt for persuasion and education rather than compulsion.¹⁴

¹⁴ Reverend Doctor Ross Bartlett, United Church of Canada, E-mail dated March 5, 2017

Themes

The four main themes that came to light through this study are betrayal, marginalization, prophecy and hope/resurrection. The Christological framework under which this study was taken is critical to the development of these themes. Christology is the study of the life and lessons of Jesus Christ. In his lifetime Jesus experienced betrayal by his disciple Judas Iscariot, he worked extensively with marginalized populations, he prophesized as to how to live out the Christian faith in the world, and his resurrection provides hope to all Christians of salvation.

All participants stated that they had more good than bad experiences as openly gay and/or lesbian ministers in the United Church. However, as we talked it became clear that the bad experiences had serious and far reaching consequences. As one participant stated, “The bad stuff sticks because it hurts, these are the friends or the family who are supposed to protect you.” Consequently, we are going to spend some time looking at those experiences first.

Betrayal

Luke 22:47-48 While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus asked him, “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”

Most participants experienced some form of betrayal by the church and its various courts from being denied employment to simply not having the church follow through with actions that back up policies each participant shared their own experiences of how and where they feel the church failed them. Homophobia was experienced at almost all levels of the church by participants.

One participant who encountered homophobia during the church's screening process for ordination into the church said, "An interviewer in a conference interview board told me I was so out I wouldn't get settled so I could go through the process to become a minister and would probably be good but no one was going to take me. He named that as a problem for me; not a problem for the church. I thought that was bizarre considering the number of out colleagues I have all over the country but it was a truly problematic way to form the dialogue." This incident occurred many years after the 1988 decision.

Another participant identified newly ordained ministers being placed by the church in unsafe positions as a serious betrayal. This participant said, "I know of a case where an openly gay minister was settled in an extremely conservative area and the people there practically drove her out of town. LGBT people being put into unsafe situations and that was a huge failure on the part of the church." In recent years, the church has moved away from the settlement process for new ministers which saw ministers supposedly matched with congregations throughout the country. The church now has a call process where new ministers seek their own placement by viewing and applying for vacancies. This is providing more choice and safety for openly gay and lesbian ministers in the church when seeking employment but the settlement process is still being utilized for internships prior to becoming ordained.

Still another participant experienced homophobia in the church's hiring process and when he reached out he felt that the church abandoned him. He said he felt challenged by a job he applied for that everyone in their conference thought he was the perfect candidate for. He interviewed for the position and his application was taken to the board where it was turned down. He asked why and was given reasons that he found difficult to believe, he asked if homophobia was a factor and they said no. "For a year that gnawed at me because I thought it was a factor. I wrote a letter

saying what I was feeling and why I felt homophobia was a factor. They called a meeting and people from presbytery and conference were involved and they finally admitted that homophobia was a factor in why I did not get the call. I requested an apology in writing. After 4-5 months, I received a letter that said we are sorry you were upset with how the decision was made but did not mention or acknowledge that homophobia was a problem. I wrote back and said I am disturbed you did not mention that homophobia was the reason, I copied both presbytery and conference on my letter back to them. I have never received a response. So, when the United Church is talking about apologies but can't even name something that is right in front of them, with one of their own, it makes that apology seem hollow."

The United Church of Canada is currently working on an apology to the LGBTQ communities for mistreatment in the past. This participant is expressing a sense of betrayal in that the church is not even acknowledging what he, personally, experienced.

One participant said. "I think the church failed in pushing the issue forward. The decision happened in 1988 but many of us still didn't feel safe coming out. And, it was a long time before that societal change occurred that started moving the issue along and helped someone like me to feel safe coming out." This resulted in remaining closeted in her ministry well past 1988. During that time she was subjected to such comments as "all gay people are pedophiles who are coming after our children." She spoke of how difficult it was to be pastoral with a person who could hold those beliefs and shared them with her.

Another participant said she found it, "draining that those who are not affirming are coddled, it's like we need to uphold their bigotry. I find that challenging. I can be pretty diverse theologically but this is something I can't understand. It is difficult when people won't name it

(homophobia).” There was a considerable amount of frustration expressed by all participants that the church has been slow to move the issue forward.

One participant stated, “I hear a lot of people talking about going through the affirming process and I’m glad that they are doing the work but I feel a little bit like that ship has sailed. I personally don’t have a lot of patience anymore for places not being affirming. I have learned that just because a congregation says they are affirming doesn’t mean my son can show up there in a dress. There are never going to be places that are 100% affirming and I’m not even sure that should be a goal, for me the important thing is that the church is a porous organization and if we just keep focussing on the inside of who is there or who isn’t there we are going to die even quicker. If we are trying to reach new people you can’t just say that because you have gone through a process at one time that that is going to stay indefinitely. As new people come in, it changes so you constantly have to be doing that work. You need to be explicit about what are your values and how you display them. While I appreciate the affirming model and resources they have created, I don’t know that that is the best model for the United Church as a whole. We need to be more dispersive going into the next century of church life and those who are not affirming should need to figure out what they are doing in the United Church.”

Marginalization

As Jesus walked with the marginalized in his life, these participants have both personally experienced marginalization and have felt called to walk with others from marginalized groups.

One participant talked about how until same sex marriage became law that there was really no significant change in how LGBTQ people were treated in the church even though the 1988 decision happened well before the same sex marriage law came into effect in July of 2005. She

said that created a societal shift and that the United Church shifted with it. She said she finally felt safe coming out.

Two of the participants had accepted calls to churches that specifically worked with other marginalized populations. One said he was hired by that congregation in part because he was gay and the hiring committee felt that would better help him understand the experiences of their congregants who were also from a marginalized group that had and continue to suffer marginalization.

Participants believed that their own experiences with marginalization help them to better live out their ministry. They believe they have a better understanding of other social justice issues based on their own experiences. One participant said, “My sexuality is an integral part of who I am and informs me and the way I relate to the world around me, my ministry, my theology. The biggest thing is the experiences of marginalization and making due and translating on the fly, to me I am someone who is comfortable either ministering on the margins or seeing the church on the margins of society. I have some comfort with the church changing out of empire. I have some skills as an openly queer minister around navigating that.”

In total, there are 2888 congregations in the United Church of Canada¹⁵ but of those only 141 are affirming congregations.¹⁶ It is easy to see why many are still feeling marginalized and vulnerable based on those numbers. Some churches are “affirming in practice” without having undergone the formal process of becoming affirming. One participant said when she went to her current church they knew she was lesbian and it was not an issue, they were performing sex gender marriages and baptisms of children of same gendered couples but she told her

¹⁵ United Church of Canada

¹⁶ Affirm United

congregation that until they actually went through the formal affirming process that they were not truly standing with her. The church celebrated the conclusion of becoming affirming with a special service where congregants from any number of backgrounds were invited to pour sand into a common jar and share their stories. The sand was then mixed together symbolizing that they were all one. She said it had a powerful impact on her and the congregation.

Some participants experienced an increase in numbers with their congregations once coming out as people in their area learned there was an LGBTQ minister there, they decided this was a church they would feel more comfortable attending. All participants experienced varying degrees of marginalization in the church and in community but all of them felt it is getting better.

Prophecy

Participants and the church are playing a prophetic role in opening discussion and minds in regards to issues surrounding homosexuality and faith. One participant said, “I believe the key thing I do in my ministry is to let people know they are loved. That comes out of my experience of being gay where you did not feel you were loved by family and by friends. Christ teaches you to love your enemy, I try to teach people that they are loved and when I receive love from other people in the church it reinforces that. When we dialogue with one and other to share experiences of being hurt it and being accepted it reinforces the fact that I am loved by God and others. Which helps me to go out and tell others you are loved.”

Participants especially feel that they are able to better talk with LGBTQ youth in regards to sexuality. One said, “It has opened up conversation with youth who wanted to know what your experiences were with coming out and that is life-giving because you are able to share of

yourself. It creates a comfort level and others are more willing to have those kinds of conversations because of that.

‘I love it when congregants come to me and say I am really glad you are here because my son or daughter is struggling with their own sexuality. Will you come and talk to them? There has been a lot of misinformation out there and bad theology for many years but I do think it is getting a lot better.’

Another participant said, ‘The openness of the church in its philosophy have put me in positions where I can be a role model and because I can present openly as a gay minister people will engage in conversations with me that they otherwise might not if barriers were there, not only within the church itself but also in ecumenical forms as well. In terms of dialogue my sexual orientation has profoundly affected my ministry. People do want to talk about sexual orientation. At times people are just seeking knowledge, other times there is animosity but when we talk I can come at it from a theological standpoint rather than just because I am gay.’ She believes that makes a difference both in the way she conveys her message but also in how it is received.

Another participant agrees. He said, ‘I can preach on sexual orientation, I can engage in theological discussion and education and I can talk with anyone without feeling hypocritical about being me. I am able to bring my whole self into my ministry.’

One participant said being out, ‘has made me more open and honest and transparent in my ministry. It has made my ministry more personable. I don’t have to worry about if someone is going to out me, I can just be who I am and people have been very accepting of that. You also become more accepting of yourself when you can be open and honest about who you are too.’

Seventy-five percent of participants came from other denominations and did so because the

United Church offered them the opportunity to live out their lives freely and be true to themselves. All participants expressed that they enjoy being a role model for others who are and may continue to be marginalized. Just living in community with their partners affords them a sense of freedom and comfort they would not have if they remained closeted. Participants experience a sense of relief in not having to live a lie. They say living out their sexuality and relationships open themselves and others to conversations that allow both a better understanding of sexuality and faith.

One participant said, “In terms of sexual orientation and gender identity I think the institution has taken on a prophetic role and one of leadership.” Hope for the future is where the participants see the church moving next.

Hope and Resurrection

The United Church of Canada views itself as a resurrection church, rather than a salvation church. The cross at the front of the church is empty, it is not an image of a crucified Christ but one of hope in tomorrow – the hope that comes with the rising of a new day. Participants feel a sense of hope that the church and society are moving forward. One participant said, “I wish we lived in a world of full acceptance where (gay) people didn’t have to worry about holding hands in church but we don’t. I am an optimist, I have seen great changes and personal transformations of people, so I have hope that change continues to occur. I feel that the groundwork has been laid but the project hasn’t been completed yet.”

“In 1999, the United Church appeared before the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights in support of Bill C-23, the “Modernization of Benefits and Obligations,” as a tangible expression of the United Church’s commitment to the equality of heterosexual and same-sex

relationships. In 2000, the 37th General Council of the United Church affirmed that human sexual orientations, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are a gift from God and part of the marvelous diversity of creation.

‘Each year, the United Church, which is Canada’s largest Protestant denomination, blesses over 15,000 marriages in Canada. In 2000, the General Council resolved to work toward civil recognition of same-sex partnerships.’¹⁷ One participant said she noticed a significant change in the church when she also noticed a societal shift in the early 2000’s. In 2005 same gender marriage became legal in Canada and with that she finally felt safe coming out.

“The United Church of Canada congratulated the government of Canada on its proposed same-sex marriage (SSM) law which the Church called a "win-win solution in the same-sex marriage debate." Rev. Dr. Jim Sinclair, General Secretary of the General Council, said: "Marriage will be enhanced, not diminished, religious freedom will be protected, not threatened, and Canadian society will be strengthened, not weakened, as a result of this legislation.”¹⁸

Scripture and Theology

A paper of this type would be remiss if it did not provide some examination of the roles scripture and theology play in regards to homosexuality and the church. Gordon Allport said, “The role of religion is paradoxical. It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice. ... The sublimity of religious ideals is offset by the horrors of persecution in the name of these same ideals. Some people say the only cure for prejudice is more religion; some say the only cure is to abolish

¹⁷ “United Church Urges Ottawa to Recognize Same-Sex Partnerships” www.buddybuddy.com/church05.html, February 26, 2003

¹⁸ B.A. Robinson, Religious Tolerance, “The United Church of Canada and Homosexuality”, www.religioustolerance.org/hom_ucc.htm, August 17, 2012

religion.”¹⁹ It is disturbing that a Christian faith based on a good and loving God can be used to promote hate but that has been the case for many years in regard to homosexuality. Joseph J. Kotva Jr. points out that persons in biblical times would not have had a true understanding of the nature of homosexuality as we do today, that there were a number of forced homosexual interactions via master/slave, callboy and patron which would have involved forced homosexual acts on young males and connections between homosexual acts and idolatry.²⁰

One of the more infamous quotes from the Bible in this regard comes from Leviticus 18:22 (NRSV) You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. This single verse has long been used to condemn homosexuality and more specifically sodomy. Let us take a closer examination of the context of this quote and challenge the common theology that has surrounded it for centuries.

Bruce V. Malchow in his article, “Scripture as a Norm of Moral Deliberation and its application to Homosexuality”, explains that the laws in Leviticus pertaining to homosexuality being in relation to Canaanite worship and that they are not applicable to homosexuality today. It was a known fact that in worship by the Canaanites to Baal that sexual acts were performed. As such this particular code, has more to do with worship of false gods than it does to do with homosexuality. Sodomy was often used to demean and debase heterosexual men during this time rather than being a consensual act between same gender partners. He goes on to point out the many other Levitical Codes that would not be applied today including planting more than one

¹⁹ Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley 1954 p. 413

²⁰ Joseph J Kotva Jr., “Scripture, Ethics, and the Local Church” *The Conrad Grebel Review*, 7 no 1 Wint 1989, p 41-61.

crop per field, shaving or cutting of hair, tattooing, and wearing mixed blend clothing are just a few examples.²¹

Malchow says, " It is possible that any biblical texts that speak against homosexuals are based on prejudices that came out of the society of that day, prejudices that have endured until the present."²²

There are 613 rules in Leviticus – one for each day of the year and one for each bone in the human body. One would be hard pressed to find anyone who lives out fully each of those rules.

The actual term, homosexual did not come into being until the late 1800's.²³ As such, the word itself is never used in the Bible. The Bible does make reference to acts surrounding what we would now term to be homosexual behaviour. While Saint Paul in Romans 1:26-27 appears to definitively condemn same-sex coupling, when we look at his message in its entirety it does not appear that he is describing consensual sexual behaviours between two loving adults. Romans 1:26-27 (NSRV) "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error."

There is some current debate as to whether or not Paul is actually the speaker here at all. As this section is mostly written in the third person it is speculated that Paul is referring to the teachings of Gentiles and this is not his own thoughts but those of others. " BA Robinson points out that in Douglas Campbell's book *"The Deliverance of God."* Campbell suggests that in Romans 1:18-

²¹ Bruce V. Malchow, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 31 no 6 Dec 2004, p 471.

²² Malchow, p. 472

²³ *Oxford Annotated Dictionary* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/88110?redirectedFrom=homosexual#eid>

32, Paul was presenting an argument by others who actually oppose his own beliefs. He does this in order to refute the other writers' false teaching. For millennia, Christian theologians have generally interpreted this passage as representing Paul's beliefs. If Campbell's interpretation is correct, then the church has reversed the meaning of the passage and condemned behaviors that Paul would not have condemned.”²⁴ This interpretation is supported by others like Jack Levison who say this piece of scripture needs to be read in conjunction with the beginning of Chapter 2 where Paul condemns those who sit in judgement of others.²⁵ Levison’s theory is that the list of abominations in Chapter 1 are those things we should not be sitting in judgement of. If Levison’s theory is correct it provides brand new meaning to the reading of this verse.

In his article “The Bible and Homosexuality” H. Darrell Lance argues that what was natural to Paul may not be natural for others. So just because Paul deems same-sex relations to be unnatural to him does not mean they are for others. Lance points out that today’s scientific community have pretty much determined that sexual orientation is as much a part of human beings at birth as other characteristics are, and that knowing what we now do based on science we recognize the origins of the world differently than how it is depicted in Genesis that we must also now reconsider what is or is not natural when it comes to sexual orientation.²⁶ In this case the argument is basically that homosexual acts are natural to homosexuals and that the unnatural acts would be heterosexuals engaging in homosexual sex that is not natural for them. In any event, these new interpretations set in today’s context are just as valid as any that have come before and therefore must be granted some credibility.

²⁴ B.A. Robinson, *Religious Tolerance*, “Homosexuality in the Christian Scriptures, http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibc.htm, August 5, 2015

²⁵ Robinson, http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibc.htm, Accessed March 24, 2017.

²⁶ H. Darrell Lance, “The Bible and Homosexuality”, *American Baptist Quarterly*, 8 no 2 Jun 1989, p147-148

Sodom and Gomorrah is one of the most often quoted biblical texts people turn to when wanting to condemn homosexuality. However, a thorough reading of the text does not demonstrate condemnation of homosexuality at all. “Nowhere, where the Old Testament itself speaks of Sodom and Gomorrah, does it say something like, “and the sin of Sodom was men lying with men.” In other words, there is no evidence that it regards homosexual acts per se as significant when defining the sin of Sodom.”²⁷ Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott write that violent gang rape and lack of hospitality were the sins of the men of Sodom.²⁸ It was not male to male sexual relations that was the problem so much as it was subjugating the travellers to the level of a woman that appears to have been what was so objectionable. We often attempt to place our own modern day concepts upon things of the past and in doing so make egregious mistakes. In biblical times women were anything but equal to men. Lot’s offer of his virgin daughters was not suitable as they already were considered to be lesser than man. It was only through the rape and humiliation of the two strangers that they could be knocked down to the level of women. Scripture can, in fact, also be used to allow that homosexuality is not evil. In Genesis, we are told that created man in His own image. That assumes then that all men and women are created in the image of God, not just those who we deem to be. If this is true, then the homosexual is also created in the image of God. As such then it is grossly unfair to discriminate against homosexuals based on the Bible. As a matter-of-fact Jesus, never once in his teachings speaks out against homosexuality. The Gospels contain a number of other admonishments against things like adultery so surely Jesus could have chosen to speak against homosexuality but he did not. What Jesus did tell us to do was love thy neighbour. Jesus didn’t make exceptions to that rule.

²⁷ Lance, p. 143

²⁸ Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor*, p. 52

He never said love thy neighbour except your homosexual neighbour, or your Samaritan neighbour, or your Greek neighbour. Jesus commanded that we love all people. If we are to apply The Great Commandment equally than we must apply it to everyone. Jesus consorted with all kinds of people who in his day were considered less than desirable by most including prostitutes, tax collectors, Samaritans and lepers. Jesus did not confine his ministry to those who fit into any specific mold. It is through living out his example in this world that we become more like Christ. As such, I believe as Christians we are expected to love all people and treat them equally.

Implications

“As a Protestant denomination, the United Church is part of the Christian tradition that does not regard marriage a sacrament. Procreation is not a defining aspect of marriage in the United Church. Nor does the church condemn people who decide divorce is the only option for a marriage that is fraught by unhappiness. Divorced people receive the communion of the church and may remarry someone else.”²⁹ Other denominations have been working on ways these issues can be dealt with in their churches but are doing so carefully as they recognize they are dealing with not just varying degrees of theology in this regard but also with very different societal contexts in areas where they have churches in countries in Africa and South America. Other denominations do have LGBTQ clergy in their midst, some are out, some closeted. The Anglicans have consecrated at least 2 openly gay bishops in Canada and the US. In 2016 the Canadian Anglican province passed the first reading to change their Marriage Canon XXI to allow same-sex marriage. This amendment will have to be passed a second time in 2019 before

²⁹ “United Church Urges Ottawa to Recognize Same-Sex Partnerships”, <http://www.buddybuddy.com/church05.html>, February 26, 2003

any change can be made. However, some bishops have authorized any minister who wishes to perform same-sex marriages to do so.³⁰

The Lutherans often employ a don't ask, don't tell strategy. Steven L. Ullestad et al says in some cases in the US the Lutheran church has defrocked an openly gay minister only to have the congregation to continue to employ that minister, often with the threat of sanctions from the church but to my knowledge those threats have not been carried out.³¹ Churches fear schisms will occur in their denomination should they try to implement and impose unilateral policies on their congregations in regards to homosexuality.

While it is clear that homophobia does still exist in the church and society as a whole, participants made it equally as clear that the benefits outweigh risks for openly gay and lesbian ministers. The positives included new congregants coming to church when learning an openly gay or lesbian minister was presiding, opening discussions on homosexuality and faith, opening conversations with youth and parents, teaching others from within and outside of the church, being able to be transparent about who they are as ministers and people. The one resounding recommendation that participants had for the church was to continue to open conversations and minds through dialogue. When Gary Paterson became the first openly gay moderator of the United Church of Canada in 2012 he said, "The challenge for the church is 'to live into this moment; not to get overwhelmed; not to get paralyzed; but to be people of hope'".³²

³⁰ The Rt. Rev. John H. Chapman, 9th Bishop of Ottawa, <http://us8.campaign-archive1.com/?u=4393514612b85bc118ee359b6&id=22021bb6f1>

³¹ Ullestad, Steven L.; Mocko, George Paul; Hill, Anita C.; Martin-Schramm, James; Kolden, Marc. Dialog: A Journal of Theology. Mar2001, Vol. 40 Issue 1.

³² Marites N. Sison, "UCC elects gay moderator," Anglican Journal, August 2017

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