

I have wondered at the appropriateness of my writing a reflection of this nature as a straight white male. Surely there are more voices that have direct experiences on this matter and I am convinced that the LGBTQ2S+ community does not need any more unaffected individuals to tell them about their experiences or identity. As such, I decided to write my reflection in address to other straight Christians.

I consider myself fortunate to not remember a time in the life of the denomination when, at least in policy, the LGBTQ2S+ community was not fully included in the life of the Church. Now that I am older (and hopefully wiser), I see that this has not always been the case – nor is it yet a universal standard to which The United Church of Canada adheres. However, I still count myself lucky to have never been in a denominational body (local or larger) that had to second-guess its involvement in a small-town Pride picnic or its affirmation of the legalization of gay marriage in Canada.

As a teenager, I found it a relief to not have to make some convoluted intellectual and theological defense of a “traditional understanding of marriage” to my affirming-yet-secular friends in high school. In fact, I took it as a point of pride that “*my church*” (though I now cringe at such possessive pronouns) took a “progressive” (equally cringe-worthy) path on the “issue” (still cringing) of LGBTQ2S+ inclusion. However, when I reached university and made friends from other Christian denominations that were not of one mind with The United Church of Canada in this matter – not to mention friends from diverse faith communities whose traditions are also not of the same mind – I realized that a simple “well, *my church* accepts gays and lesbians” was not a sufficient theological account for our affirmation of LGBTQ2S+ Christians. Indeed, I was rendering a theological disservice to those individuals with whom I claim to ally. I needed to go deeper, as we all must, and so I turned to where all Christians must turn: prayer and Scripture.

We read in 1 Peter: 14-15:

“Even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

That is to say, as followers of Jesus Christ we must account for the entirety of our lives – including our convictions and our subsequent actions – in light of our faith in him. As I found myself beginning to wrestle with why it was that I believed what I believed – and I certainly believed that the inclusion of queer Christians was “right” in light of the God revealed in Jesus – I realized that I had to abandon my preconceived notions about “rights” that were somehow normative or self-evident aside from God-in-Christ and to allow “Jesus, crucified and risen: our Judge and our Hope” to take the center of my theological consciousness from which all ethical and social considerations find their bearing. Certainly, this seemed at first to be a “non-position” – and perhaps it was – yet in the end, I must say that I am grateful that I have and am taking such

a posture. For I truly believe that it is only through Jesus Christ that the acceptance and full inclusion of our queer siblings in the Church are intelligible.

I am glad that The United Church of Canada is following what I believe to be the Holy Spirit's promptings toward a greater inclusion of the wider Body into the light of Christ. Looking at today's global ecumenical landscape (not to mention the ecumenical landscape within this country), we can reasonably deduce that this was not a popular theological conviction to articulate nor to continue to defend. Furthermore, though being "affirming" (as we say in churchland) is an increasingly accepted secular conviction, it is well worth noting the risk that the United Church took in solidarity with our queer siblings in 1988. After the doubling-down on the ostracization of the LGBTQ2S+ community in the wake of the AIDS crisis, to state that there existed no barriers to the baptized queer community regarding participation in the life of the Church was nothing short of 'gutsy'. For this work, I am thankful.

However, having grown up in the post-1988 church, I was under the distinct impression that "1988" and "The Issue" (as I understand it was then called) was a *fait accompli*. It was assumed – or at least, I assumed that it was assumed – that framing gay marriage or the ordination of a trans\* Christian as a "rights issue" or a matter of "justice" was a sufficient basis for their acceptance into the denomination and enough to suppress any naysayers. In my circles, that seemed to work. To my friends who were already "converted" on the matter, it certainly worked. Yet, when I came against theological or secular opposition to the matter, I realized that LGBTQ2S+ identity and inclusion is not *prima facie* accepted as a matter of rights or justice; that is to say, borrowing from our siblings to the south, they are not truths which we hold to be self-evident. (Perhaps that is among the reasons why I have come under the wing of Karl Barth and his fervent rejection of natural theology.) Admittedly, theological resources which give a robustly scriptural and faithful account of our denominational stance on LGBTQ2S+ identity and inclusion exist and have existed for some time within our denomination and in the wider Church, though I do wonder about their accessibility to lay-people, clergy, and to the non-catechized individual.

I will not go into detail of my theological formation on the matters of LGBTQ2S+ identity, ecclesiological inclusion, and marriage; I presume that whomever happens to read this has also been "converted" on the matter and there are many more authoritative and experiential voices on the matter than mine. Suffice it to say that it was a process saturated in prayer, Scripture, community engagement, and above all growing in closer relationship with queer friends from diverse backgrounds and contexts. Those individuals showed me that they are not a "problem to be solved" or an abstract theological quandary to be entertained at leisure; indeed, they showed me that they are not a disembodied "they". Their stories and experiences were and are real and I have come to believe that the Living God has something to say to them and to all of us who have never had to share their experiences.

I have mentioned to friends before that my generation (the Millennial generation) seems to be more-or-less open to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals – but it is transgender identity and genderqueer expression that we seem to have difficulty understanding, encountering with generosity, and accepting in the same way we accept the individuals who identify with the former labels. It is my growing feeling, therefore, that the Church needs to be able to articulate its hope in the Triune God and how that hope sheds light on the issues that members of any marginalized or opposed community – in this case, our queer and trans\* siblings – such that we might be able to speak the liberating and life-giving word of the Gospel into a world that so desperately needs it. This is work being pioneered by queer theologians and their allies, by clergy and Church leaders on the ground in congregational ministry, and by queer Christians who offer a witness to the world simply by their existence qua queer Christians. It is my belief that the Holy Spirit sustains especially this latter group whose situation and position within the Church and the world is contested and questioned, if not threatened.

It is my hope, then, that The United Church of Canada will not simply take for granted its denominational policy regarding queer inclusion. It is my hope that we will recognize how far we are from embodying that policy and how much farther yet we are from assimilating it into the earth-shattering welcome of the people of God through the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ. It is my hope that we will not simply rest on LGBTQ2S+ inclusion as a *fait accompli* or as a self-righteous symbol of our “progressivism”, but as a corollary statement of the Christian faith at the center of our denominational identity; a faith which (though it may seem counterintuitive to some both within and outside the Church) makes intelligible our celebration and acceptance of the LGBTQ2S+ community. It is my hope that we will continue to atone for the sins which we have committed and continue to commit against our queer siblings in Christ in the name of a Gospel which we believed and believe somehow limits their humanity. It is my hope that we can recognize that our reconciliation to God in Jesus Christ stands as our mandate to effect that reconciliation with a community we have wronged and which we continue to wrong; for to inaugurate a Living Apology which would result in a richer, more faithful Body of Christ.