

OPEN HOUSE: MAKING AFFIRMING MORE THAN A PLAQUE ON THE WALL

INTRODUCTION:

Yesterday, the topic of my presentation was “Beyond sex, same-sex marriage and bathrooms: racism in the gay community and homophobia in the ethnic communities: celebrating the gay ethnic experiences,”

I spent much of the time discussing why we need to move beyond sex, same-sex marriage and bathrooms and do some self-reflection on one of the many issues that inhibits the welcoming of those on the edges.

Tonight what I would like to do in the time allotted is to share with you some ideas how, as an organization, church and even individually, we might move beyond welcoming and start celebrating the lives and experiences of those on the edges of this community.

Like yesterday, I am with you tonight representing all the hats that I wear – although not in any official capacity – but simply sharing from my daily experiences of once being a hospital chaplain and a behavioural counselor in Corrections and now a Parole Officer.

I believe strongly in the power of storytelling and so many of the stories that I will share with you tonight are also drawn from my very personal journey to embracing my sexuality, that of a bisexual woman. My challenges to you also emerge from a deeply personal place of being a person of colour, a visible minority in Canada and all that entails.

I would just like to take a few minutes to quickly recap some of the major points I made yesterday, the ones that hold direct relevance to this conversation.

1. If this organization is to put action – action that is not merely inclusive and welcoming of the marginalized - its leaders and soldiers will be well served by first recognizing and accepting that the lessons learned from the experiences of the residential schools in this country are pivotal to this process.
2. If members of this organization would like to continue honestly calling themselves follows of Jesus – i.e., Christians, then individually and collectively there is an urgent need to move beyond the “words” and the nouns such as Affirm, Pride, etc and become the verb and be celebrating, not welcoming, at the edges?
3. I spent some time yesterday sharing historical facts and statistics highlighting the diversity of Canada and its complexities. I did that to make the point that in an ever-changing, ever-evolving world, groups like Affirm, if they are to remain relevant, cannot continue operating as if there is a status quo. With the country’s visible minority rapidly increasing and the birthrates being the highest among Aboriginals, there will and in fact there has been an impact on not just the society but churches and organizations such as this one.

4. I spoke of a thread yesterday – a thread that daily weaves the stories of the “edge people.” I named that named that thread – not by the noun – or the colour but by its action: Making and Keeping them Invisible.
5. And in closing I challenged this organization to ask themselves this question whether this was the thread they want to continue sewing with or whether they would like to stitch differently.

SO WHAT NOW?

I don't presume to know the answer or answers to my own question. I don't have one-stop solution to the challenge that confronts us all. So, I am sorry to disappoint anyone who returned tonight expecting that.

The only thing I have to offer are these passages from the Book of these passages from the Book of Isaiah 1: 17:

“Learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

I am not attempting to be funny here or to take the easy way out.

In fact, this passage is not a map to the easy road – that I know for sure.

Several years, when I made a commitment to live my life as an open book and not just mystically but practically, this was one of the passages that came to me. At first, I just thought “wow that's awesome!” being the social justice junkie that I was – and am to a more tempered extent (I hope).

But as I sat with it, read it over and over again and prayed with it, it took on new dimension of meaning to me.

What I came to realize is that this passage wasn't saying I had to march in rallies, sign petitions or burn my bra. It didn't mean I had to start wearing dashiki's or growing a 'fro.

I didn't have to change my style of dress, mode of speech or start liking Indie music!

What I have come to learn is that this passage was calling me to live my life – mindfully.

No, I am not going to go to assume the position and start chanting now...that wasn't what this passage meant either. I must confess that I did go off for a bit on the guru search and trying to find Nirvana – obviously without success.

This was a key moment in my journey...among many before it and after.

At the root of this was a call to live a life expecting and knowing that the Divine is in everyone I encountered and therefore I must treat each person as I, as a child of God, wanted and ought to be treated.

I share this with you to say that that is the calling before you, you the leaders and members of Affirm at this juncture – to see the Divine not only in the faces of those who are familiar, friendly or are “like” you. It is time to look beyond the surface and see God in everyone – friends, strangers and foes alike.

It is time to move out of your comfort zones and into those dark, dank alleys, cell blocks, walk up apartment buildings, homes for the indigent, nursing homes – because you have brothers and sisters there.

Is it an easy journey? Will there be wine and cheese? Absolutely not!

Can you do it? Absolutely!

HOW?

I cannot tell you what to do but might I suggest how?

There is a hymn that I truly love. Whenever I hear it and I moved to tears and instinctively my hands are lifted: “Here I am Lord” or “I, The Lord of Sea and Sky.”

“I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people, cry. All who dwell in deepest sin my hand will save. I who make the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright. Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send?”

As far as I am concerned, that is how you do it. As Believers, as following of Jesus’ teachings there is no other way.

You will be amazed at how the practicalities of welcoming and celebrating those on the edge fall into place when one allow oneself to be guided by Spirit.

There are approximately 1.5 million visibilities minorities, 3.7 million seniors in Canada, approximately 20,000 homeless across the country, approximately 19,000 in prisons waiting on you to answer the call. God alone knows how many are being abused as we speak and 1,555 kids under 15 years old in group homes, 58,000 in facilities for persons with a disability and another 299,000 in special care facilities

The “struggle” is not over! Yes, a few of you are married (and a few have divorced since) but there are still many among us who are scared, alone, isolated and needing - not wanting - your support, initiative and leadership.

I read somewhere that in the first national survey on homophobia in Canadian schools, commissioned I believe by Egale Canada a few years ago, LGBTQ teens - lesbian, gay, bisexual,

transgender and two-spirit, queer and questioning - overwhelmingly said they're not treated as equals in the classroom.

More than two-thirds, for example, reported feeling unsafe at school based on their sexuality, as opposed to one in five straight participants. More than half of LGBTQ participants reported being verbally harassed, about half said they had mean rumours spread about them, and a quarter reported being physically harassed.

This article that I was reading, noted that although there are some positive social changes, like Canadians gaining gay marriage rights in 2005, the teen survey results show that LGBTQ people still aren't treated as normal, one participant told the surveyors:

"I think it's a bit easier now for youth to come out," said Chris Jai Centeno, 23, who lives in Toronto and attended a high school with a strong anti-harassment policy. "But speaking to friends growing up in small towns, their experience was completely different from mine."

What this said to me, and should be saying to you as leaders is that location matters and makes a difference in what resources and community/support groups are available. Cities such as Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal are reported to have a smattering of LGBTQ options - from drop-in centres, to theatre, art or writers' groups, to mentoring programs...but what about the youths in small towns across Canada?

And for those who are considering marriage, what is Affirm doing to promote the need for same-sex marriage preparation? I know that United Church officials in many places offering this kind of preparation – but is this something that is actively promoted as integral to help this community not fall into the same statistical trap as the wider society?

What about those considering marriage in areas where, if you can believe it, they are the only two “gays” in town? Where do they go for help given the social challenges and issues surrounding starting a family and "coming out?" Is Affirm offering that kind of support on its website, for example?

I mentioned yesterday, that immigration has increased to Canada exponentially and is predicted to keep growing until 2020. Those in business, including quite a few of you I am sure, understand what this means for your bottom-line – if the resources that this group of people brings are strategically tapped into.

Management consultants of all ilk and stripe are making their millions advising firms and even the government about how to use this large pool of new, foreign-born talent -- much of which is untapped and desperately needed to fill the gaps.

I was reading the comments of one such consultant, Lisa Mattam, who said that many companies have a rough “diversity vision” but few are actually tackling the issue or measuring how well they're doing in getting new immigrants on board.”

She makes a not new and obvious point that Alberta for sure can attest to that “Skilled labour is becoming harder and harder to find, and there have been individuals that haven't been included [in the workforce]. If they were, they could help us to do that work.”

Let's just look quickly at some of the way Mattam suggests that diversity training will help companies. I am taking the liberty to edit her statement somewhat by exchanging the words “companies or business” for “Affirm or Churches.”

She says:

1. The [Churches] more likely to succeed are the ones that already know what they want to accomplish and have checks and balances in place to ensure change does occur.
2. There are many ways in which {Affirm} can successfully hire [or use] new [LGBTQ] immigrants and make the [organization] more inclusive such as:
 - (a) Developing [leadership] mentoring programs to help new immigrants adjust once they [have joined the organization]
 - (b) Providing on-site language and cultural training.
 - (c) Respecting [and celebrating the uniqueness of observing] religious or cultural holidays.
 - (d) Ensuring [their leaders] undergo diversity training.
 - (e) Properly compensating [recognizing members] and promoting [their achievements] when deserved.
 - (f) Ensuring their skills aren't going to waste and that they're doing the work they've been trained to do.
 - (g) Having firm checks and balances in place to help them make their [place of worship and place of support] more inclusive.
 - (h) Showing new arrivals to the country that they care for them and their well-being.

What is suggested here is basically creating a support and equal opportunity system for all those who would come – immigrants, Aborigines, the poor, the battered, the homeless, etc – that would lessen the sense of alienation and/or isolation.

This can only happen though – whether we are talking about youths, seniors, whoever – if people feel respected. I have been at Affirm events, served as a Chaplain, and both I and some of those who came to speak with me felt unrecognized, disrespected and ignored. I remember one young man crying as he told me how he heard about the organization and used his welfare or disability cheque to come to Toronto only to feel like he wasted his time. He was an: ex-convict”, mentally challenged and completely living on the edge and this was his last bastion of hope.

The point I am trying to make and with which I am leaving you is that more will come, they will be loyal and committed, and less likely to leave the United Church, Affirm, your congregation if they that you truly celebrate them.

And you cross the line of tolerating and welcoming into the fields of celebration by:

- Learn more about each other's issues and perspectives.

- Be far more proactive in anti-racism issues
- Seeking out allies (Chinese, The Journeys of Black People and The Korean Associations for example that are within the United Church)
- Help to access and/or provide funding for support services to groups serving the particular needs of LGBTQ people of colour & Two-Spirited people.
- Be outraged and let your voices be heard and the power of your dollars talk, on issues that affect distant members of this community. An example, to stick to what I know, the situation with homosexuality in Jamaica, where gay men in their love for each other are actually committing a crime - the “abominable crime of buggery” and can serve up to 10 years of imprisonment with hard labor. a special collection and designated the money to go to help LGBTQ people in other countries.

As we leave this place, I ask you to remember that there are hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ people in this country, millions across the world, who need, are starving for your leadership, your answer to the call.

There are thousands, not necessarily LGBTQ, but black women dying in Quebec and Ontario from AIDS. How many of you knew that Black women in this country form the largest group dying from this disease?

How many of you every visited a prison and look into the eyes of men and women who find those walls the safest place to be because of their sexuality? How many of you fed the hungry LGBTQ family that lives in the shelter?

I quote Reverend Monroe as I close:

“Often in our effort to right the wrongs in our lives, we fail to see the wrong we create in other people’s lives. Racism is the continuing moral dilemma... and it is a tragedy of biblical proportion. As a nagging problem that seems to never go away, racism must be the issue we wrestle with in our attempts to do social justice work on behalf of all LGBT people — churched and unchurched, Christian and non-Christian. But for LGBT Christian activists especially, it is important that in our proclamation to create the beloved community as depicted in the Gospel of John in the New Testament, we not fail at being inclusive [celebratory] — because the thorn of racism impinges on our movement.”

I thank you and God speed.