

PRESENTATION RE DECISION ON SAME GENDER MARRIAGE

7 February 2009

On behalf of the Official Board I wish to address again the issue of same gender marriage; in particular the process we have gone through to arrive at a decision, the decision we have made and the reasons behind that decision.

As you are aware, the United Church of Canada through a decision of General Council in 2005 agreed that *all* who genuinely want a Christian marriage should be able to have one inside the United Church. Its position is that it supports *all* loving couples in an equal manner by welcoming them into its fold, by supporting them in their decision to be committed to one another and by celebrating that commitment in marriage. That is the policy of our national Church; but it is then left to individual Churches to decide on their own marriage policy. In this regard, it is important to note that the Church is very clear on how that decision is to be made. To quote Cynthia Gunn, Legal Counsel of the United Church of Canada:

It is the Session (or Church Board) that sets the policy for the Congregation on marriages. It is not the Congregation. The Board oversees the order of worship in the Congregation, and setting a marriage policy is part of that oversight responsibility. Last year, the United Church's Judicial Committee decided that setting marriage policy is the Board's responsibility. That Committee, by the way, included three judges from Superior Courts in Canada. The Committee's decision was based on Section 153 of The United Church Manual, which states that the Board has oversight of the spiritual interests of the Congregation, and of the order of public worship (marriage being considered part of "public worship" in our denomination).

To help us as a Board arrive at what was obviously a very difficult decision we have had a subcommittee of the Worship & Sacraments Committee in place for the last year. Over the past months they have conducted workshops, held conversations, received written feedback; all in an attempt to communicate with as many people as possible. Our workshops involved discussion and information on the nature of homosexuality, legal issues and biblical references. Many thanks to all who participated and you are to be commended for the dignified manner in which your opinions were expressed. Understandably there were strongly held points of view on both sides of the issue.

This process ended in December with the realization that the time had come to make a decision. Consequently, at our last Board meeting on January 27, on the recommendation of the Worship and Sacraments Committee, the following motion was made: **“that the congregation of Topsail United Church be open to marry *any* couple which approaches it, provided that couple satisfy the minister attending of their intentions to faithfulness and commitment”**. The vote was by secret ballot and the motion passed by a wide margin.

This has been very difficult for those few of us charged with the responsibility of making this decision, because we realize just how potentially divisive this issue can be. Perhaps the opinions expressed by most Board members can best be illustrated by the banner from our Sunday School that you see hanging above our Altar. Maybe in the wisdom of children they have shown the diversity of families in our present day society - old and young, families with children, families without, families with two parents, families with one, families of single races, families of multi races - and above it all the banner says “**welcome**”. We felt that if we are going to welcome diversity in our Church family that welcome, like love for any family member, must be unqualified and without restrictions. As we heard in a sermon in this Church back in November, when we read of hunger and thirst in St. Matthew’s Gospel it means more than the need for food and water, it means hunger for equal justice and thirst for human dignity; and being homeless means more than the need for shelter, it also means the need for acceptance and equal treatment. When it came down to a final decision we felt that our responsibility is to create a church community where all people regardless of age, sex, race, sexual orientation, differing abilities, ethnic background, or economic circumstances are protected from discrimination and injustice, and free to honour each other’s life passages in liturgy and celebration, including marriage ceremonies.

We realize that this decision will be met with a whole range of emotions. Some of you will be disappointed and hurt; some of you will be pleased; some of you will be unconcerned. At the end of day it is inevitable that on issues such as this there can be no right outcomes for everybody. The best that we can do is to strive to continue to walk humbly together as part of a Church family and agree to disagree with respect and affection; or as our minister reminded us a few times in our discussions over the past few months “we don’t have to see eye to eye in order to walk shoulder to shoulder”.

In closing I would like to quote from Rev. Marion Davis in speaking to her Congregation at Gower Street United when they dealt with the same issue last year:

Dealing with the outcome of any decision is an act of faith. We trust that after prayerful consideration that whether we agree or disagree with a decision that we are called to be faithful in continuing within the community, the family which nurtures us as we continue to walk humbly with God.

Thank you very much and God Bless.

Max Robbins
Chairman of Official Church Board