

Welcoming Congregation Service April 17, 2011

A few weeks ago, I received a telephone call from a professor in Waterloo who is doing a paper on GLTC and needed information of related activity in this church. I had been suggested as one who could provide some information. As a result, reviewing our history in relation to the Welcoming Congregation program has been uppermost in my mind. In our conversation he remarked on the high esteem and respect in which our congregation is held for our leadership in the subject. It seems most timely to be requested to share this history with you today.

Let me say first off, it was not because we are a group of kind, generous-hearted, smart people. Possibly it was because many of us were come-outers and did not hold the Bible as a final authority and other churches had not been a kind place for gays and lesbians. There were many interwoven threads in this achievement. It is my task this morning to share my memories of the many different threads which I believe contributed to that outcome.

History:

Thread 1. In the 1970's the UUA offered training in the program for our youth entitled "About Your Sexuality". As a social worker I was curious what our denomination would teach on this subject and so I attended. As a result we led several youth classes and the required parent orientation classes. (parent permission required for children to attend this class) We also did the program with a number of groups of adults in our church. Over the years this program was repeated. As a result understanding and shift in attitudes regarding GLT was growing in many of our members. One major learning fact: difference is just difference, it is not right or wrong, good or bad, and most importantly, homosexuality is not a communicable disease.

1972: Stan Calder joined UCE. Later this courageous, gentle man wrote a hymn about his life which he performed at the Come Out Service and later it was included in the field testing for the new hymn book. Stan participated in establishing our Vision group and was also a member of Interweave and UUGLC.

1974: Rev Norman Naylor of Winnipeg "service of union" publicized.

1975: CUC requested Rev. Rob Brownlie conduct a training program for Chaplains in the Western Canada District. Elaine Roberts and I were then licensed to serve this congregation.

Rob had also started doing Services of Union in 1974 and ultimately the Chaplains across Canada were also conducting them. In 1981-82 UCE chaplains did more Services of Union than the total of all other chaplains in Canada.

Thread 2. 1981: Police raid of the Pisces Club. Rev. Rob Brownlie was interviewed by

the CBC and that interview was rebroadcast a number of times. He was a very strong advocate for the GLT.

Our church became known as a place gay and lesbian could ask for service.

1984: May: The CUC Annual Meeting adopted a resolution affirming services of union. In June, as President of CUC, I was then able to speak in support of a similar resolution at the UUA General Assembly.

Thread 3. 1986: John Marsh minister. UUGLC had conducted a Sexual Discrimination Audit. I was one who attended a meeting to hear that report to the Congregation by David Ready and Lorraine Butchart. In the following discussion, John Marsh challenged Vision to reach out again to other GLT groups and find ways to improve the acceptance in the congregation.

We undertook potlucks – chose 25 families who had shown the most acceptance and sent invitations to them and other GL clubs. That first time everyone was tense -- our gay/lesbian guests and our church members. Peaked with introduction of minister to say Grace: John Marsh. Story dissipated all tension. Such success! After 2 ½ years the potlucks were not needed.

As a Board member of UUGLC, Stan Calder involved Vision in field testing the Welcoming Congregation program. Stan Calder, Shona Wehm, Gilbert Bouchard, Anita Jensen, Steve Unger, Audrey Brooks and I were among those involved in the leadership. Ultimately this led to changes in our Church By-Laws and we were registered as the first Welcoming Congregation in Canada.

Stan also volunteered our Congregation to host the Annual Meeting of Inteweave—Convo '94. Registrants came from across the USA and Canada. I have attended a number of UUA Annual Meetings since and each time I have heard the same report. The acceptance and welcome the registrants had received at UCE had not been matched. We were truly a welcoming congregation! This was high tribute directly responsible to the leadership of Stan Calder.

I am humbled at the privileges being a member of this congregation has allowed me: to work with Rob Brownlie, Stan Calder and so many gifted others in this experience; and thus to take part in such a major change in the quality of life for many individuals. I pray all of you may have such opportunity in your life with us.

M. Ruth Patrick

**When I Told
by Gordon Ritchie**

When I told my Mother I was gay, she said,
“I thought you would never tell me.”

When Bonnie told her Mother she was lesbian, she said,
“I’m going to knit you a rainbow sweater.”

My partner Robert never told his Grandmother he was gay.
But I believe her spirit knows and is smiling on him.

When Marjola told her Mother she was in love with another woman she said,
“I accept it even though I’ll never understand it.”

Fatma can’t even consider the possibility of telling her family
she loves another woman.

When Ron told he parents he was gay,
his Father left the room and his Mother began to cry.

When Jocelyn told her Father she was lesbian, he said,
“Well at least you won’t end up pregnant.”

When Bruce told his congregation he was gay,
they excommunicated him.

When David told his principal he was gay,
he was asked to resign.

When Beth Ann told her family she was transgendered, well,
they haven’t spoken to her since.

When Allan told himself he was gay, he said,
“I will be alone for the rest of my life.”

Steven’s parents read their son was gay
in a letter they found beside his lifeless body.

Mark’s parents found out from the police
who told them he had been murdered.

When Stan told this congregation he was gay, you said,
“We affirm the worth and dignity of every person.”

And to that I say, “Thank you.”

April 14 2011

“Being Whole” a service affirming GBLT rights
Rev. Brian J. Kiely Unitarian Church of Edmonton
April 17, 2011

Last week I spoke about the Jewish tradition and Passover which starts tomorrow. The heart and soul of Judaism, and indeed every religion I know, is living the life of integrity. For Jews the idea of sin is wrapped up not so much in the idea of breaking some law, but rather in the concept of ‘missing the mark’, of not living up to our expectations –not being in whole and harmonious relationship with God. The purpose of all the rules is merely to help you define that true path to right relationship.

Right relationship is key. Even the eternal punishments threatened in some religions reflect that. I know that a good many fire and brimstone preachers have, over the centuries, gotten obsessed with the torments of Hell, but in truth the real pain of Hell is not supposed to be fire, but eternal conscious separation from God.

Even good Unitarians have some sense of that. We don’t believe in a divinely created Hell, but most of us do believe in the hell of our own making, the kind of hell we live through on earth. And what is the core of that? It is, again, broken relationships, isolation: exile from community, a fundamental brokenness of body and/or spirit with ourselves or others. It appears in addictions of various kinds, dangerous behaviours and sometimes mental or physical illnesses caused, at least in part, by our own thoughts and actions.

When we get away from ourselves, when we lose sight of where we are going, when we lose touch with some inner sense of identity, when we feel we cannot live a life of integrity or wholeness because of our own choices, it is then that we, well, go to Hell. We feel cut off, dispirited, anxious, out of body. Sometimes we get sick, sometimes we hurt ourselves.

But sometimes that feeling of disembodiment and disempowerment does not start inside of us. Sometimes it is imposed upon us in the form of expectations. Maybe the expectations come from our families, our lovers, from society or the too narrowly defined precepts of religion. Wherever they come from, we are given to feel that we are wrong, that our feelings are wrong, that our very understanding of who we are as living, loving human beings is wrong...and maybe sinful, or twisted, or perverted or evil.

Well, this may seem an unusual start to a reflection on Gay, Bi, Lesbian and Transgender rights and issues, but I don’t think it is irrelevant. Gordon Ritchie’s reading eloquently revealed the emotional aspect of what I am trying to say. One of the toughest thing about being a GBLT person is coming out. It’s about revealing – no confessing -to use a loaded religious term- confessing not some kind of sin, but an essential truth – a secret - about yourself and not knowing how it will be received.

Now most of us have had secrets at some point in our lives that burdened us. Most of us have had to confess to something and know what it’s like to spend some time fearing the consequences. But for most of us those secrets and confessions had to do with something we did or did not do, something over which we had a measure of control, something where choices were involved. Taking that step might not have been easy, but even when the consequences were serious, it was still about what you did, not who you were.

How much harder is it when your confession has to do with the very nature of your being? ... when it means risking being cut off from family and friends and maybe church and career, cut off from everyone who has loved and supported you and everything that gives your life meaning? How much harder is it to come out when it

may mean going out...exile from all you have known? How much harder is it when that coming out means first admitting who you are to yourself when who you are is different from who you are "supposed" to be?

Gordon's beautiful reading brought me to tears – tears of empathy for the people who were hurt so badly, who lost so much by coming out, and tears of joy for those who had good outcomes. When I try to put myself in their places, well I can't. I have never had to risk anything on such an essential level. No wonder the rate of suicide attempts among teens who are GBLT is two to three times higher than heterosexual teens.

And maybe this is the worst part: Canadian society has never been more tolerant of GBLT people than it is now. Their rights are theoretically protected by law, discrimination is - again theoretically – illegal. They have pension rights, can get married, can raise families born to them or adopted. Heck they have role models in film and TV shows!

We have made all of those advances and still GBLT teens attempt suicide at an outrageous rate.

There are a couple of reasons for that that we as members of society can address.

The first is that tolerance is not enough. Ruth Patrick in her historical reflection spoke of the Welcoming Congregation program. One of the key concepts in that program was that toleration is a long way from acceptance. In a just society, in a compassionate society, a "live and let live" attitude of tolerance is not enough. It ghettoizes people whether they are immigrants, people of different religious values, people of different genders or economic status...or people with different sexual orientations.

"Live and let live" only means "Don't bother me and I won't bother you." That is hardly a way to build a healthy, caring and respectful society.

"When Ron told his parents that he was gay,
his Father left the room and his Mother began to cry."

That, sadly, is a version of a tolerant response: walk away; abandon the conversation; keep your feelings to yourself. No one attacked Ron, they just abandoned him as they live and let live. But how hurtful was that for Ron? How empty did he feel? How did he keep himself from swallowing a bottle of pills or jumping off the High Level Bridge?

Tolerance is merely the absence of abusive or attacking behaviour. Tolerance is not putting people in jail or assaulting or killing them because they are Gay. Tolerance is letting them suffer in their private Hells of isolation and self-loathing because no one they used to know will talk to them anymore.

Tolerance is not enough. It is self-centered and close minded. And yet, it is the best some people can do.

The Welcoming Congregation challenged members of this congregation almost 20 years ago to move from tolerance to acceptance. It challenged us to think very hard about that first principle of ours, you know, the easy to say but hard to accomplish one, the one that says we affirm the, "inherent worth and dignity of every person".

Every person...not just the ones who are like us.

Affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person takes work. It means we have to look – really look at people who are different from us, different culturally, different physically, different ideologically. It means learning about their stories, their

challenges and their lives, their joys and their concerns. It means talking to them. In the context of this sermon it means getting to the point of looking at two men or women kissing as they get married and seeing it as a beautiful thing.

Our ministers and Lay Chaplains have been embracing that experience since 1975, and while the congregation has permitted it, it has not meant that everyone accepted it. At first they didn't. The good news, in my view, is that official sanction like that has slowly led to an ever broadening acceptance in the community. I won't claim that we have achieved total acceptance, but we have come far enough that GBLT folks tell me that they feel comfortable and welcome here.

We need to keep that climate of acceptance strong, and that involves all of us standing up to intolerance and maybe doing a little personal work on our own level of acceptance and affirmation.

The second reason why we must stay aware of this issue is complacency. Because we have gay marriage, and pension rights and adoption rights and all the rest, because we have achieved these things in this country it is really easy for anyone not involved in a GBLT community to think that the battle has been won.

It hasn't. In a few weeks I will be joining people from Westwood staffing an information table at the Queer Prom. It's an event that has now been running for a few years in this city. It is for youth who are 'sexually variant' as they say on their website or questioning their sexuality. It began and continues because some schools in the country refuse to allow same sex couples at their proms...one of the most significant events in a teen's life.

A couple of weeks later I will be moderating a panel on Religion and GBLT issues as part of Pride Week. Rev. Anne Barker from Westwood will be a panellist.

That the Queer Prom has to happen shows that the issue is still not resolved. That the Pride Week has to happen shows that the issue has not been resolved.

It's easy for us to look at our acceptance levels and think the issue is behind us. It's not, not in society and maybe not in this church.

Years ago we retired the Vision group, the committee that looked out for GBLT issues. Why? Because the group's leaders were on the church Board, were running the youth group, were leading worship services and so on. GBLT people were fully accepted in this congregation, at least institutionally. And in the years following the Welcoming Congregation program, they were probably pretty broadly accepted emotionally too.

It's been a long time since we ran that program, and most of the membership has changed. I would like to think that the welcoming climate still continues, but maybe we have to have a talk about that. Maybe we even have to rerun the program. We must guard against our own complacency.

Being Gay or Bi or Lesbian or Transgendered is not wrong- not legally, not morally or any other way. Being GBLT is right and A right in this land. Being made to feel that you are less than fully human by anyone, well that is wrong. It denies wholeness to a fellow human being, it encourages them to feel less than whole, it pushes them towards a personal Hell they do not deserve. Surely we, as members of this community and as citizens of this country, can do better than that.

