

**RESPONSE OF THE REV. KARLA WUBBENHORST**  
**TO PRESENTATION OF THE REV. HUGH DONNELLY**  
**FORUM ON HUMAN SEXUALITY – SATURDAY, JANUARY 30, 2016**

Why does this issue matter so much? Clearly it matters to the 10% or so of the church who identify as LGBTQ. But my conviction is that what is at stake, is something much more basic than what role in the church this 10% have. This issue goes to what is the deepest, most basic, most personal question we can ask ourselves as Christian believers: **do I trust God to know wherein the good of my life is to be found, or shall I insist on self-definition, self-expression, self-rule, and a rearrangement of the world around me to accommodate and affirm what it is I say I want and need and am.** Basically the question is: **will I be ruled in my Christian life by desire...by what I *want*..., or will I be ruled by the *vision* of what God wants for me.** So the experience I want to share as I begin, is my experience of embarking on the basic journey of Christian discipleship -- which had everything to do with Scripture, the Holy Spirit, my call from God and the Christian community.

I grew up not so very far from Hugh -- just across the Northumberland straight on the North Shore of Nova Scotia. But my early memories of the church back home are quite different from his. The *culture* was not too tolerant of anyone who was different, but we had lots of people who were different *in the church* and they were fully included. People did not throw "proof-texts" around or use Scripture "as a weapon," and the church leadership consistently drove home the message of love and compassion and inclusion. We had at least two lesbian ministers who served the church quietly and faithfully. My earliest lessons in the church were that it was important to love the neighbour, including the gay neighbour -- to be nice, to be kind, and I think I've retained those ethics from that early teaching. But if that were the only teaching the church had given me, I don't think it would have retained *me*, as it failed to retain my peers. What made the difference for me was that when I was about 12 my minister gave me a Good News Bible, and I started reading through it on my own.

I started with the gospel of Matthew. There's a lot in Matthew about discipleship. Some hard sayings: *'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;/' 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me./ 'If your hand or foot or eye causes you to stumble, cut them off, pluck them out; better to enter into life maimed than to be thrown whole into the eternal fire./* ..... So somehow the Jesus who spoke there was not the censored Jesus who spoke in the church, *only* in terms of love and compassion and inclusion. Matthew's Jesus reminded me of Aslan in the Narnia books: not a Tame lion, but Good. I was smitten. But I remember asking myself, "Would I want this Jesus for my friend?" Friendship with him certainly wouldn't be comfortable all of the time. But by 13 I began to answer that question, which has been the most basic question of my life, with a "Yes."

When I was 13 we got a new minister. I'd run to him with all the questions which arose from my reading of the Bible. Other ministers had taught me to feel embarrassed at some of the things the bible said, but this minister showed me how to *interpret* the bible, balancing the scandalous texts with others from the fuller text and theology of Scripture. And so gradually I began to TRUST that God's Word would not embarrass me. Since much of Hugh's paper has had to do with Scriptural interpretation, let me begin my response to him there:

Hugh has stressed the need to read scripture *in context* and to recognize that every reading of Scripture involves *interpretation*. I think sometimes traditionalists are regarded as not having a very nuanced view of Scripture, as if we just take everything literally, or as divine oracles, disembodied from context. Often we are accused of missing the overarching themes of the Bible by our fixation with chapter and verse. I want to say "Au contraire: I *do* read my bible with that level of nuance: it is *because* I can distinguish between the ceremonial law (what belongs to purity and the life of the temple) and the moral law in Leviticus, and between literal and metaphorical writing, and *because* I can read Jesus' teaching on Genesis and divorce within a rabbinical tradition, and *because* I am compelled by what I understand as the overarching marital *theology* of the Bible, stretching from the creation of the male-female complementary pair in Genesis to the hetero-togetherness of Christ and his Bride in Revelation, that I reach the conclusions I *do* about homosexual practice."

Where I think that traditional and revisionist hermeneutics of the Bible diverge is that traditional interpreters see *coherence*, not irremediable *ambiguity*, because we believe a unity is lent to the message by the Divine Author who works above and through and within all the human authors, and that the Divine Author can speak perennially and commandingly because the things that are on the heart of God do not change. I believe it is possible for us to discern a coherent message because God accommodated the Scriptures to the capacity of the human mind, as well as giving us the Holy Spirit to enlarge our hearts and minds to the greatness of the message. Hugh has told you what he believes about Scripture -- that it is impossible to discern "a unified theology" except that it "points us in the direction of love" -- so that when we come to the question of homosexual relationships, the Bible is, in the end, "not clear." I don't believe it needs to be all so *very* ambiguous, not in a case where all the texts speak one way. And for what it's worth, the official doctrine of our church concerning Scripture, is more in line with the understanding I've just outlined than it is with Hugh's. When all of Scripture speaks with one voice on a matter and when we see general themes used to *overturn* individual texts, traditional biblical interpreters begin to suspect that *clarity* may not, in fact, be the problem, just our *will*, desiring very strongly that the Bible should say something other than what it does say.

It was certainly a battle at the level of WILL, that was played out as I took the first steps of my journey as a Christian disciple. I remember very clearly the first time I bumped up against something in Scripture which I willed to be different. It was when I was about 16, and the plan to enter the ordained ministry of the church was already in place for about 2 to 3 years by then, that I encountered those discouraging things Paul says about women speaking and teaching in the church, which Wes was kind enough to share with you in full. I wrestled with those passages. I knew that the PCC said that women's ordination was allowed, but what did that matter if God had forbidden it? I *wanted* to be a minister. By then my ministerial fantasy was fully imagined. But my vocation had never seemed to me like a human right. It arose out of a desire to *serve* God, not to *vex* God. So if God was saying to me, "find another way to serve;" I decided that is what I would need to do.

But of course I went to my minister to talk about those texts, as I always did when I came across something difficult, and I recall, gratefully, that he didn't set the scriptures aside and say "but what do you feel in your heart?" or "is it logical that God would give you gifts and a calling and then bar you from ordination?" Instead he showed me other places where Paul commends the ministry of women and includes them as his fellow workers in teaching (Priscilla) and leadership office (Phoebe). Later when I read Richards Hays' book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, I saw that this is a basic interpretive rule-of-thumb which Hays uses when reflecting biblically on ethical questions: "Is this a case where all the Bible speaks with one voice? Or is this a case in which you have what Hays calls a dialectic -- two views that chafe against one another and lead you higher to a kind of

integrated synthesis?" So when I hear these oft-drawn analogies between the way the church has appropriately updated with respect to the ordination of women, and the way the church, it is argued, should update with respect to the ordination of practicing homosexuals, I want to say "*but can you find ANY word or example in Scripture which would give the least encouragement to the idea that you can live in a same sex erotic relationship and NOT have a problem with God at the level of basic Christian discipleship, let alone leadership in the Church?*" There are no such words or examples. And that's why women's ordination is very different from the question we now have before us.

Now of course there are lots of things that present problems with God for us at the level of basic Christian discipleship. The bible also says that there's a sin involved in anger, and in envy and in pride, and in the love of money, and in the love of other people's spouses even if you're a heterosexual, and ministers wrestle with all those things, and claim the forgiveness of Christ regularly for all the ways in which their sinful *wants* lead them astray, but what they don't do is say "I want my anger or my pride, or my divorce-for-any-reason, or my adultery affirmed by the church. I want to construct my domestic life around this particular desire that I have, so that I can lean into it and fully explore it". If they do that, then we depose them. The New Testament community opened its arms to Gentiles, slaves and women-in-leadership because it was able to reimagine the social order, having gotten a peek into the future order of the kingdom of God. But what it did not hurry and rejoice to include, was any practice it continued to regard as *sin* (and Romans 1, I Corinthians 6 and I Timothy 1 leave us in no doubt that homosexual practice was in that category). Here's a news flash: being a *woman*, is not a *sin*! Faith and repentance for sin, were the things which distinguished righteous Gentiles like Cornelius "who fear[ed] the Lord and [did] what was right," from those who remained unwashed children of the Gentile world, with its paganism, its sexual permissiveness, and its ultimate consignment to the fate of all that is not grafted into the life-giving olive tree. Basic Christian discipleship (let alone leadership in the church) always requires that we choose which we love more, Jesus, or our sin.

But what if we don't *have* to choose? What if the church has gotten it wrong for 2000 years and what the Bible is calling *sin* when it speaks of homosexual practice, is not the same as the *love* between two women or two men, that exists in the stable homosexual couples we know in the church today? Hugh has told you that he has "no evidence for this" but is quite sure that the Old Testament or the Jewish culture around Paul "couldn't have imagined" the kinds of homosexual relationships we have today. And how I wish Hugh were right!! The fact is, though, as we can see from the classical sources, that Paul knew about the whole range of homosexual relationships we know about today, and when he speaks **against** them as an option for Christians, he means all of them. So it's not just a case of traditionalists having our scholars and revisionists having their scholars. There are many classical and biblical scholars who are themselves either gay or gay affirming -- Louis Crompton, Bernadette Brooten, William Loader -- who agree that though homosexual practice is, in their view, unobjectionable, *you can't get that sort of reading out of Paul*. Luke Timothy Johnston and Diarmaid MacCulloch are two other gay or gay-affirming scholars, with the intellectual honesty to admit that if you want to affirm homosexual practice, you can't do so on the basis of the Christian sources. You have to call in the authority of experience, which is what the study guide Body Mind and Soul tries to do with its appeal to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Our denomination still nominally, at least, espouses the *sola scriptura* principle, but my sense is that for many people in the pews, the Bible is no longer the most important thing. They want to say "But what about the people?" "What about my gay son or daughter? What about my own experience of same sex attraction and my growing sense that my humanity is atrophying in this celibate desert, when I could be building a good fulfilling life with a same-sex partner?" "What about my experience of a same sex loving relationship, which *feels* like something beautiful and holy, not like *sin*, whatever

Paul may say?" As a pastor, I'm aware that you not only have to be able to give an account of the cogency of the Bible, you have to persuade people that it holds up against the weight of their experience, and is *trustworthy* as a faith-operating system for their life. So while I don't want experience to wag the dog, I'm not dismissive of experience either. There's a case to answer, for me and my welcoming-but-not-affirming co-religionists, which is first of all "Can you live out that balance you so glibly commend: 'love the sinner, hate the sin?' Or do you single out for censure only sexual sin, and particularly homosexual sin?" and secondly "What good news have you for the homosexual? What respite along the road of hard obedience you would impose?"

When a new member of staff in my congregation came to me and said he had lived in the closet for years, had come to accept his sexual orientation, and didn't want ever to live in the closet again. I said, "Fine, you come to me if anyone in this congregation gives you hassle or disparages you in any way, and I will have your back. You are worth more than a label, and we will not see you reduced to that." I also said, "Understand that homosexual practice is still considered a sin by us Presbyterians - not like the United church from whence you've come. That's the doctrine of our church, and whatever leadership you have in the congregation, you can't use to promote any other sort of doctrine." He readily agreed to that. He's still employed with us, and I'm happy to report that in deep ways our congregation has been loving, accepting, affirming and enabling of his *life*, even if our pulpit and our session and our denomination *still at this moment*, are not affirming of homosexual practice.

The experiential case to answer, of course, can cut both ways, and one of the frustrations of people with views like mine is that amid the great appetite for telling stories and the insistence on listening..., *our* stories are seldom told.

Where are the stories of those struggling with unwanted homosexual attraction who will say "please just stop telling me it's all okay -- I've ventured down that road once or twice, it's created shameful memories for which I can't easily find forgiveness, and it's put a huge stumbling block in my relationship with God. Don't reinforce the very thing my flesh wants me to do; help me as I try to live a healthier, holier life?"

Where are the stories of the lesbian woman who later married heterosexually and adopted 4 children, saying ruefully that she would have liked to bear her own children, but spent her childbearing years having sex with women? Or the homosexual man whose immersion in the gay culture with its contempt for "breeders" never bothered him in his 20s, but now concludes in his 60s, with so many of his friends dead of AIDS, or liver disease, or bowel disease, or rectal cancer or suicide,<sup>1</sup> that his one male friend who also had homosexual tendencies but who nevertheless chose a heterosexual life with children and grandchildren, may have chosen the better part?" (I'm not saying that any of us choose our desires. Nor are we guilty for them, (and isn't that a relief)! But we do choose our *life*, within the limits of what is available to us, and we are responsible for *that* choice. We do reap it's consequences, not even only just in the hereafter, but also *here*).

Where are the social science studies which cite the lack of sexual fidelity and relational permanence even in those homosexual relationships which are called monogamous? According to one study, 79% of so-called monogamous gay men had been unfaithful to their primary partner. That's as compared to 19% of lesbians, and 10% of married heterosexuals. The percent of male homosexuals living in monogamous relationships just for the preceding year was only between 10 and 25%, whereas 80% of the total male population was monogamous over the same 12 month period.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp. 474-476

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp 452-460

Where are the voices from those parts of the global church where homosexual practice is strenuously resisted? Is it just that they haven't had Christianity for as long as we have so their views are not so evolved, or could it be that they lack the individualism and narcissism of Europe and North America and place a higher value on the family, the community, and on corporate survival? Perhaps it's no accident that their churches are alive and growing, while ours are declining and dying. What's their secret? Could it be that they have simply received God's Word as a thing to be believed and obeyed?

Experience is much more open to interpretation, than even the Bible, so I don't draw any conclusions from these data. But they corroborate what is basically a statement of faith for us Christians -- that the Bible is wise and trustworthy after all, because the God who gave it, is All Wise and Eminently to be Trusted. Hugh has confessed a boggled mind and a broken heart that we should try to put limits on love, when it is clear to him that the love Tom and his partner express is God-imagining. Is that not terribly subjective? God puts lots of limits on love, some we understand, others which aren't immediately transparent. In either case though I believe God can be trusted, not to deprive us of pleasure merely to be a killjoy, but to spare us pain, and injury and death. There is some experiential evidence for that, if we let *everyone* tell their story.

Since I'm 42 and unmarried, some in the church have seen fit to ask whether I'm a lesbian. I'm not going to tell you which way my sexual orientation leans. But with no evidence of a significant other and as a eunuch in the kingdom, I can speak feelingly to the need for TRUST. I have to trust God daily that the plan for me is not for disaster -- for an empty, negligible life -- but for an abundant life, and for a future with hope. And I'm not *too* morose, because I can see that the married ones don't exactly have a cake walk either. In this time before Christ comes again, and requites every desire, *everybody groans*. It is part of our sinful condition that we fixate on our wants, we make idols of the things we are denied, and we become very demanding that we be not denied them. The only way to break our obsession is with those things we are denied is what Thomas Chalmers called "the expulsive power of a new affection." We must get *more excited* about the life God is opening up to us, than the one which God's Word closes off. I've spoken about the denial of self which belongs to the way of discipleship; let me now cast the positive *vision*. It's something the homosexual can experience as good news, as well as the rest of the church. It's something which if the Presbyterian Church in Canada grasped, would reawaken its passion and re-establish its future.

The advocates of "full inclusion" so called, do have a vision of the church. It is of the church as a place of grace -- you've heard that compelling line with which Hugh ended his presentation "If I err I will err on the side of grace." If you've read the overtures of East Toronto and Calgary MacLeod they also make an appeal to grace. In a way this whole debate is about the nature of grace. What is our vision of a gracious Christian community? It is one where we agree not to ask the hard questions to one another, not to wrestle with God and with Scripture, or at least not in those private areas where they challenge us personally, not to *really* believe in the power of the gospel to touch and transform the deepest areas of our brokenness, but simply to accommodate to sin and expect no better of ourselves or the God we worship? **I don't want a church community like that.** *That*, I believe is why people are giving up on the church -- because it doesn't go deep enough. You can come to church on a Sunday morning with your heart breaking and hear nothing which goes anywhere near the depth of your inner turmoil, and speak to no one who can really be bothered to get in there and do or say what it takes to address what's wrong in your life. This is why having ordained leaders who are "in it all the way" as far as their own discipleship is concerned, is so important. Otherwise you have big areas of Scripture to which they cannot speak without blushing. Big no-go areas, or areas of the Bible about which they have to suppress and pervert the truth. **I don't want a half-**

**gospel like that.** I don't want a Christian community in which the people are half "in it." I want to do church where the people fall on their faces before God every Sunday, and live before God every day of the week. I want a gospel that calls my sin *sin*, so that I can get it forgiven, and I want a Christian community that recognizes what it takes to prop one another up as we all limp our way along toward holiness and the vision of our transformed future selves. I want nothing less for my homosexual church members. I want their **full inclusion** in that basic Christian journey, not special pleading for special interest groups.

What we have to decide as the Presbyterian Church in Canada is what kind of church we want to be for the future -- a church which lives by repentance and faith and which stands under Scripture, as the precious Word and Wisdom and Revelation of our Good but Untamed God, or a church which offers cheap grace: assurance that all is well, when sin abounds, that the rites of the church can bless and consecrate what God does not. If we truly love one another, if we truly want to be instruments of grace to one another, we will not settle for harm reduction. We will not take our culture's adage "What's it to me? Whatever makes you happy," into the church, where we know that our greatest good and our greatest happiness cannot lie outside the will of God. Our wants lie very close to the bone, but there is something which can rock our lives and rock the church with an even greater energy than the expression of the deepest longings of our hearts, and that is God's expression of the divine longing for our redemption. If it's a choice between getting what I want affirmed, and getting what God wants for me, even with all the death to self that that entails, I'd choose God's vision every time. Wes is right, "What kind of God is God?" is precisely the question. *A God I can trust.* If I err, I err on the side of *Faith*.