

Response to Referral of “On The Question of Unity and Diversity” From the Session of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Moncton.

The paper has much to commend it, and we applaud the work gone into its preparation and are grateful for the opportunity to reflect deeply on the question of unity. There are several things about the paper itself we would like to comment on, contributing to the issues facing the church regarding human sexuality and the current work before the Committee Of Moderators.

On the paper itself, at the outset, the various scriptures quoted are helpful, and the second paragraph asks the question of what unity is, but does not answer it in its essence. The answer provided points to three facets of unity, in the holy catholic church, within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and individual congregations, which is different than defining what it is. Like the differentiation of the word translated as ‘peace’ in the bible, does it point to the absence of war and the binding together of that which had been separated, as in the Greek word *eirini*, or the more encompassing concept of peace found in the Hebrew word *shalom* ? Drilling down to provide a definition of unity would have been helpful.

In the section entitled ‘The Presbyterian Church in Canada’s History,’ there is the presumption that readers are familiar with details of the 1925 vote around Church Union. They are not well known even to today’s clergy. Apart from the sordid history around details of that history and the years that followed is the hope that we can learn from the lessons of history and do better in graciously dealing with one another rather than again struggling through years of enmity and protracted litigation.

The section entitled ‘Denominations and Unity’ rightly points out “what distinguishes different traditions is their sense of where the essential unity of the church lies.’ It would have been helpful to point to the role of our Subordinate Standards as an expression of that unity expressing traditional views on human sexuality. The section is well done, and we would emphasize its conclusion, “a reformed church, always reforming, ***according to the word of God.***”

The section entitled ‘The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Polity and Unity’ is more problematic. Reports of the Clerks to General Assembly, are not authoritative in establishing the polity of the church, although this section quotes them as if they are. We particularly take exception to the second paragraph regarding congregational finances and the assumption of what donors are contributing to. Denominational connection does not apply to contributions made to this or any other denomination, and our denominational identity is increasingly irrelevant to, and in some cases an irritant to, donating congregants. The patterns of denominational support through Presbyterians Sharing is illustrative of that reality in many cases. The last paragraph in this section makes mention of our ‘impulse to ecumenical unity,’ and our participation in various

ecumenical bodies, including the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) in which we hold observer status. Over 40 denominations hold official “Affiliate Status” with the EFC. “Observer status” does not exist except for the graciousness of the EFC, and whereas we participate officially with membership in other ecumenical bodies, we do not do so within the EFC which sadly illustrates the theological prejudices within The Presbyterian Church in Canada and is not an expression of unity. This is a precise antithesis of what the paragraph seeks to illustrate.

The section entitled ‘Commonality and Contextualization’ rightly points to the ordination of women as an example of beginning to interpret the scriptures differently. It eludes to the battles of former days around ‘freedom of conscience but not of action,’ while using different language – an issue which continues to be problematic for many, which in itself has nothing to do with the ordination of women. The section also begs the question as to why church discipline is not exercised against those whose practice and polity around human sexuality is not consistent with that of The Presbyterian Church In Canada? The example given around infant baptism is a fitting example. A lack of discipline for those who have performed or participated in same sex marriages, ordained practicing LGBTQI persons, or declared themselves as an “affirming church” is not an exercise in ‘charity,’ but is an exercise in seeking to change polity through the practice of the church. In a denomination that prides itself in doing things decently and in order, practice follows theology, not the other way around.

In the section entitled ‘Can We Agree To Disagree?’ David Gushee is quoted, and we believe he is correct. It resonates with Wolfhart Pannenberg who wrote (emphasis ours):

“Here lies the boundary of a Christian Church that knows itself to be bound by the authority of Scripture. ***Those who urge the church to change the norm of its teaching on this matter must know that they are promoting schism.*** If a church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognized homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would stand no longer on the biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of Scripture. A church that took this step would cease to be the one, holy catholic and apostolic church.”

The section entitled ‘Disagreeing in Faith, Romans 14,’ is largely well done. In the second to last paragraph on page 9 we begin to look at a hermeneutic of harm. It makes the statement “Continuing to cause harm and contribute to harm cannot be an option for The Presbyterian Church in Canada as it seeks unity in the bond of peace.” Agreed, but the question arises, ‘Who and how is harm defined?’ Without an extrinsic source of authority which we agree on, like the authority of scripture and its interpretation, we rely on intrinsic and subjective notions of right and wrong. John Ehrett, *Against the “Hermeneutic of Harm”* writes:

“What is understood as authoritative is not interpretive tradition, the plain meaning of the text, or the overarching message of Scripture: what is understood as authoritative is any given individual’s classification of a given principle as “good” or “bad.” The hermeneutic of harm is, in a very real sense, the fullest flowering of Christian Smith’s “moralistic therapeutic deism.”

Without the basis of the extrinsic authority of the word of God, what is left is a mere raw contest of powers and competing strengths.

In the section entitled ‘The Debate Today’ the second paragraph says, “some believe the traditional doctrine itself causes harm to LBGTQI people, including an increased risk of suicide” and then goes on to quote from the Moderator’s Letter of Repentance. Without a doubt LBGTQI people are more prone to various mental disorders including depression and have an increased risk of suicide. However to link the suicide rate among LBGTQI people and the practices of the church is an unfortunate and unsubstantiated juxtaposition from which the breaking of the sixth commandment does not logically follow. Welcoming and accepting does not mean affirming; a loving pastoral response is needed, but that is different than pastoral accommodation of sinful practices. In fact, great harm is done when we fail to ‘speak truth in love.’ The more complete reference of Ephesians 4:14-15 reads:

“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”

The last paragraph in this section points to the ordination vows “to follow no divisive course but to seek the peace and unity...” It also says, “This promise means more than simply defending the organization of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.” Agreed. While sounding overly reductionist, the debate before us struggles primarily with the tensions of institutional maintenance and theological integrity. As uncomfortable as it may be, we indeed need to get out of ‘a continual cycle of contentious debate,’ which has consumed decades of our attention and has contributed to exposure of the theological polarization of the denomination, distracting all parts of the denomination from our mission in Christ.

In the section entitled ‘The Church’s Current Conversation’ mention is made of the various study documents and responses received. It appears to us that having taken the time to contribute a response in 2017, it is unjust that the responses summarized however imperfectly summarized from all respondents, are not being shared with The Presbyterian Church in Canada. We understand the rationale, but still believe the church would benefit from full transparency exposing the conflicting views and practices, differences in approach to Scriptural authority and hermeneutics. Unquestionably, human sexuality has exposed the deep divisions within the church and

the Committee of Moderators literally needs the wisdom of Solomon in charting a way forward.

It is our position that further delaying any decision will simply contribute to the acceleration of the established pattern of the fading away of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and it is time for courageous decision making.

Regardless of what decision is made, whether it be a change of doctrine and practice of the church with respect to LGBTQI people, or an affirmation of traditional views, people will be hurt, some congregations will be divided and the denomination as an institution will have to re-imagine the nature of its existence.

There may be better, more positive proactive options worth exploring allowing the various factions of our denomination to function with integrity according to their theological convictions. A multiple Synod denomination formed along theological lines, is one option. Another may be the practice of the Protestant Kirk of the Netherlands.

Inevitably there will be some congregations for whom no offered way forward will be amenable, and for such congregations, the option of gracious dismissal should be offered, whereby congregations could leave the denomination with buildings and assets, without punitive measures being imposed upon them. There may be considerable wisdom in determining gracious dismissal procedures fully before any decision is made on the LGBTQI question in the PCC. Jesus' words in John 15:2 are on our minds when He says, "...every branch that does not bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

We would conclude with a quote from J.C. Ryle: *"Unity and peace are very delightful; but they are bought too dear if they are bought at the expense of Truth."* With our prayerful support of the Committee of Moderators, the Committee on Church Doctrine, Assembly Council and The Presbyterian Church in Canada, on behalf of the Session of St. Andrew's Moncton,

In Christ,

Rosemary Smith, Clerk of Session

Rev. Dr. Martin Kreplin, Moderator.