

SPECIAL COMMITTEE RE LGBTQI LISTENING
(RAINBOW COMMUNION)

PURPOSE

The Special Listening Committee re. LGBTQI, also known as ‘Rainbow Communion’, was established by the General Assembly in 2017 to: 1) create a safe and respectful environment in which LGBTQI people can tell stories of harm done to them; 2) listen to the stories told by LGBTQI people; 3) draft an appropriate response regarding homophobia within the denomination; 4) name concrete actions that the General Assembly considers implementing; and 5) report to a future General Assembly within the next 3 years.

REPORT SUMMARY

The Special Listening Committee re. LGBTQI, also known as ‘Rainbow Communion’, was established by the General Assembly in 2017 in order to respond to the call to repent of the harm done by homophobia and hypocrisy in the church first identified in the Report on Human Sexuality of the Committee on Church Doctrine in 1994. This is the final report of the committee and follows two interim reports with recommendations presented and adopted in 2018 and 2019.

The report is based on stories that were told to the Rainbow Communion verbally and in written form recounting harm done as a result of homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism and hypocrisy in The Presbyterian Church in Canada to LGBTQI people and others. It also includes stories of grace received in the face of challenge. Most stories were told in Listening Spaces that were coordinated by the Rainbow Communion and held in locations across the country.

The report is divided into three main sections: Identifying Harm Done, Responding to Harm Done and Ensuring that Harm does not Continue. It also contains eight appendices that provide further information and expand on several sections of the report. It draws extensively on the Letter of Repentance to LGBTQI People and The Presbyterian Church in Canada written by the Moderator in 2018 and builds on its call for the church to confess its responsibility for harm done and to build a new covenantal relationship with its LGBTQI members.

This final report contains a large number of quotations drawn directly from the 139 stories shared with the Rainbow Communion. In the interest of maintaining confidentiality, reducing speculation and mitigating additional potential harm, **NO NAMES** are used in conjunction with stories told except for those that are already on the public record and/or have given their consent in writing. Throughout the report, quotations from storytellers are italicized and usually indented.

The terms of reference of the Rainbow Communion ask that the committee provide “recommendations for concrete actions to address the harm done for implementation in the church”. The committee believes that the following recommendations will provide a further step toward addressing the harm that has been done, and continues to be done, and point the way to a community of love in which all are welcome and may know God’s loving embrace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

THE STORIES

A Precious Gift

The heart of the work of the Rainbow Communion has been the gathering of stories from people across the country from every province, and represented a wide range of age, gender, ethnicity and theological perspectives. Over half told their story primarily through their experience of identifying as a sexual or gender minority. Others told their story primarily through their experience of identifying as a partner, a family member, a friend, an ex-partner, a work colleague, a minister, an elder or a member of a church community. As the stories unfold throughout the report it is important to remember the lives and people behind them. One storyteller emphasized that, “The church has to realize that they are talking about real, live, living, people.”

It was the only time that I ever felt that the church was listening...really listening...and that I had anything to say of value.

Recommendation No. RCL-001

That the gratitude of the General Assembly be extended to all who have told their stories as part of the Special Listening Committee re: LGBTQI (Rainbow Communion).

When God Works through LGBTQI People

What was conveyed in many stories was that people who identify as LGBTQI understand themselves to be part of the church, members of the body of Christ. It is important to recognize that LGBTQI people are mediums of God's grace, not only recipients of it through others. It often happens that a false dichotomy is drawn between the church and the LGBTQI community. All people are a gift from God and exclusion not only harms those who identify as LGBTQI; the life of the church and its witness to the world is diminished when LGBTQI people are excluded. In order for the church to move in a new direction, it is essential to affirm that all people whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity are equally beloved by God.

In responding to a parent who was troubled that their daughter came out, I replied, "Don't worry about her salvation; it's in God's hands. Just love her."

I can see how my journey and my pain and all that has transformed my life...can be used to walk with other people. And maybe, to also walk with The Presbyterian Church in Canada...and maybe that is where grace can be found.

Recommendation No. RCL-002

That The Presbyterian Church in Canada affirm that all people whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity are equally beloved by God.

GOD'S COVENANTAL EMBRACE

A Call to Confession

The stories shared with the Rainbow Communion have been painful and disturbing, as people have recounted their experiences of emotional, spiritual and financial harm done. This harm is extensive and includes alienation, family division, separation from community and church, spiritual distress, bullying, harassment, loss of vocation, loss of income, loss of reputation, internalized homophobia and self-loathing, self-harm, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, death by suicide, and a sense of separation from God. It is truly a sign of God's grace that people who identify as LGBTQI and others who have been harmed remain in the church and continue to offer their gifts in the midst of these challenges.

Many people remain skeptical and doubtful about the church's ability and willingness to repent. Repentance requires a full recognition of the harm that has been done and continues to be done by the church to people who identify as LGBTQI. In addition, concrete actions that address this harm will need to be implemented in order to bring the healing that is needed and the assurance that harm will not continue.

Over and over again, the Rainbow Communion heard the call for The Presbyterian Church in Canada to make a public confession of the harm that has been done to people who identify as LGBTQI and to pledge itself to change in order to stop harm from continuing to be done. Only this will provide a context in which those who identify as LGBTQI may feel fully welcome in the body and fully welcome at the table where Jesus is present in the breaking of bread.

The Moderator's Letter of Repentance (A&P 2019, p.19), states that: "This letter of repentance is neither the beginning nor the end; it is but a part of a longer conversation. This conversation is being taken up in part by the Rainbow Communion, a committee with the important mandate of creating a safe space where experiences of LGBTQI people will be told and heard." The letter clearly lays out the need for a new way, as do the experiences shared by the storytellers.

There are examples where the church has been oppressive with respect to race and gender throughout history. But there are also examples where the church has also repented for these actions. It is possible.

I want The Presbyterian Church in Canada to follow up on its letter of repentance through substantive action/changes that demonstrate its repentance in acts of restitution contrition, and penance.

Recommendation No. RCL-003

That The Presbyterian Church in Canada offer a public confession to all individuals and congregations that have been harmed by the church in excluding and marginalizing people who identify as LGBTQI. The confession would acknowledge the church's responsibility for the harm done, seek forgiveness from God and from those who have been harmed, and commit the church to a true change of heart and behaviour.

Recommendation No. RCL-004

That a Special Committee be appointed by the General Assembly, to prepare the Confession for harm done to LGBTQI people before the next General Assembly. The Confession will be given public expression in a Service of Worship led by the Moderator which will be live streamed and recorded and made available for use by the church.

Public Expression

Many storytellers recounted that in their local congregations, information regarding the church's studies and recommendations related to human sexuality had not been made available to them or that members had been actively discouraged from engaging in the studies or responding to requests for feedback. Many said that the minister or the session acted to limit discussion or to discourage the expression of alternative views to their own.

The members of the Special Listening Committee believe that we have had an Emmaus Road experience in listening to those who have been deeply wounded by the church, and particularly by The Presbyterian Church in Canada. We have provided a space for stories to be told and heard. We must look together at how we continue to walk together and develop a new story in the relationship.

Re: Moderator's Letter of Repentance: Our congregation was never made aware of the letter and there's been absolutely nothing said or shared from our church leadership. It has never been printed or given out to us.

Recommendation No. RCL-005

That members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada be encouraged to participate in the service of worship that gives public expression to the confession for harm done to LGBTQI people and to work individually and as congregations and the courts of the church to live out this Confession and commitment so that harm does not continue.

More than Just Words

It is time to take action and to offer support and care to those who have been traumatized and harmed within and by The Presbyterian Church in Canada and whose relationship with the body of Christ has been broken. A funding mechanism needs to be established to enable those who have been harmed to access support for their healing process. Given the number of people who have already shared their stories of harm and the extent of the harm perpetrated, it is estimated that the fund should begin with a minimum of \$500,000. It is not known how many others might need to access this funding. An oversight body will need to be appointed to administer the fund and criteria will need to be established for those harmed to access this funding.

To make church a place of love and acceptance and welcome for everyone...will take a lot of learning...concerted and intentional action and humility to reconcile with those we have hurt for so long.

Recommendation No. RCL-006

That a fund with terms to be formed be established and administered by the Life and Mission Agency to provide resources to support psychotherapy/counselling for those who have experienced harm done by homophobia, hypocrisy, transphobia and heterosexism in the denomination and provide a report on the funding accessed to the next General Assembly.

Providing Pastoral Care

For some people, the resources to address the harm that has been done are simply not available in the church or in the wider community. In some cases, there is no minister or other person available who can provide the pastoral care that is required. For others, their experience has meant that they are not comfortable or able to talk with ministers or members of the local church. Some people live in regions that have very little access to the resources of Presbyterian churches. The Rainbow Communion did hear about congregations and presbyteries that are already providing pastoral support on a local basis, but it is imperative that there be a national program of pastoral care that is available to all.

Many people who told their stories felt very isolated and alone. It was difficult for them to know whether their experience was unique or if there were others who had had similar experiences. In addition to the need for support to all those who identify as LGBTQI, there were also particular needs expressed for groups to support parents and caregivers of people who identify as LGBTQI and also for serving and retired clergy who face particular challenges within the church.

I want to be able to be part of a church community where I don't need to 'code-switch' or hide parts of my life because I'm worried that someone won't understand or accept what I'm talking about; where the people around me are past stereotypes or misconceptions of what it means to identify as part of any group within the LGBTQI+ community. I hope that one day, congregations will have the knowledge and resources to adequately support people who are questioning their sexuality or gender.

Recommendation No. RCL-007

That the Life and Mission Agency, together with synods, presbyteries, sessions and theological colleges encourage the development of organic networks of support groups and formalized pastoral care relationships across the church, both in person and online, to provide resources, guidance and care for people who identify as LGBTQI, and in particular for serving and retired clergy and for family members of LGBTQI people.

Care for Youth

In many of the stories, there was a particular and pressing need to address harm done to youth who identify as LGBTQI. Appendix 5 references the terrifying statistics associated with mental distress and with rates of suicide and attempted suicide among LGBTQI youth, particularly those who are members of faith communities. Youth in The Presbyterian Church in Canada continue to be at risk of harm as attitudes and policies of exclusion continue to be perpetuated.

The church's current position is quite worrying to me. Because of its position, I am concerned and very worried that I am unable to foster a safe loving environment for the kids that participate in the programs that I run.

There are kids who have killed themselves and they were part of the PCC and were gay. We are very sinful; in that we are complicit in their deaths.

Recommendation No. RCL-008

That resources and training events developed and gathered by the Life and Mission Agency, for the purpose of equipping ministers and youth leaders to provide exceptional care and appropriate support for LGBTQI youth, be recommended for use in congregations, presbyteries, synods and camps.

Debunking the Myth that Falsely Links Paedophilia with Those Who Identify as LGBTQI*

The myth that falsely links paedophilia with those who identify as LGBTQI must once and for all be rejected by The Presbyterian Church in Canada. For too long, LGBTQI people have lived under this shadow. The harm it has done and continues to do is immense. This demonstrably false accusation has been used as a weapon and has led many gifted people to be driven away from working with children and youth because of the erroneous perception that their orientation or gender identity immediately makes them abusers.

Although there is no justification for this belief, it persists in the church and in the broader society.

Even among those who identified as allies, some felt the need to clarify that the LGBTQI people they knew were not paedophiles. Some storytellers also felt the need to recount incidents of child abuse to the Rainbow Communion. It was shocking to recognize how deeply this identification is ingrained in thinking in the church and beyond even after decades of recognition that this is not the case. This was clearly stated in the Report of the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation in 2003 (A&P 2003 p. 537 and see Appendix 7). It is still often the elephant in the room when talking about the inclusion of those who identify as LGBTQI.

I have come to understand that The Presbyterian Church in Canada doesn't trust me because of my orientation and links my identity to the abuse of children.

There was an elder at our table who said, 'I will not allow somebody who identifies as LGBTQI to teach my children'.

Recommendation No. RCL-009

That The Presbyterian Church in Canada reject without qualification the false claim that those who identify as LGBTQI are any more likely to be involved in paedophilia or the molestation or abuse of children or vulnerable adults than any other persons.

Responding Appropriately to Abuse

The invitation to participate in a Listening Space was to share stories of harm done due to homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism and hypocrisy and/or grace received despite those challenges. However, there were those who felt compelled to share stories of other kinds of harm. Some did so because there were great efforts to provide a safe and respectful Listening Space, while others perceived that the Rainbow Communion was to hear any story of harm especially if it was sexual in nature including assault. Some people related stories of gender-based violence, misogyny, sexual harassment and abuse. Some people who had experienced abuse from both same-sex and opposite-sex abusers shared their stories as they perceived the Listening Space to be a safe space to do so.

In response to those who bravely shared stories of harm done, even outside the mandate of the Special Listening Committee, The Presbyterian Church in Canada needs to be alerted to the need for spaces and opportunities for people to safely report these experiences and receive care.

There I was still trying to discern my call, still trying to figure out what I was doing there. I had vicious hate notes pushed under my door regularly. I had horrible posters posted on the bulletin board in the common room where I lived and also in the classrooms where I went to school. I had terrible things said to me personally. Every year that I was there, a constant barrage of nastiness. And it was personal attacks on me.

Recommendation No. RCL-010

That The Presbyterian Church in Canada, through the Life and Mission Agency, provide a means for people to safely tell their stories of abuse and offer an appropriate pastoral response.

METANOIA

The Greek word that is used in the New Testament that is usually translated in English as “repentance” is “metanoia”. It means “turning around”, “changing our ways of thinking”, “a transformative change of heart”. Of course, repentance involves risk. Things will not be the same. What has been considered to be true and proper will be challenged. Each member will have to listen as well as speak, will have to receive as well as give, will have to bless as well as be blessed. But if harm is ever to come to an end, if those beloved members of the Body of Christ among us, our friends, our family, our companions on the journey, who are being harmed and excluded, are to be truly welcomed and able to share their gifts, then there must be a willingness to take that risk and to embrace a new way.

Policy

It is important that all decision making, educational and program bodies of the church intentionally review and change their policies to reflect the belief that all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity are equally beloved by God and to challenge homophobic, transphobic, heterosexist and hypocritical assumptions and practices.

Churches can become safe spaces. Use gender-inclusive language, install gender-neutral washrooms, act on the Moderator’s Letter of Repentance, and encourage affirming people to stay in the PCC and not leave.

Recommendation No. RCL-011

That with the support of the resources from the Life and Mission Agency, the courts of the church, agencies, colleges, and camps review and update their policies, procedures and practices, including the language used, by June 2022, to ensure they reflect the full inclusion of all people.

Creating Safer Spaces in the Courts of the Church

There are particular concerns about addressing harm done to people who identify as LGBTQI in the courts of the church. There is a need to address exclusive language and homophobic slurs and to make the courts places where people who identify as LGBTQI can feel safe and included in order to participate fully and openly.

When reviewing policy, it is important to look at the language that is used. The Book of Forms 55 already addresses issues of offensive language. “When a member in speaking utters language that another member regards as offensive or censurable, the latter may require that the words be taken down by the clerk.” It needs to be recognized that homophobic, transphobic and heterosexist language is offensive and censurable.

Similarly, The Presbyterian Church in Canada Style Guide and Web Standards, addresses the use of inclusive language based on Living Faith 8.4.6, and is a useful tool in beginning to address language that can be harmful or exclusive. It states, “Acknowledging this, great care should be taken to avoid language that is demeaning or that stereotypes others on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, income, geography, mental and physical characteristics, and age” (*PCC Style Guide*, p. 37).

People should not ever communicate ‘disgust’ about homosexuality because there may be a struggling LGBTQI person present...and therefore made to feel unsafe.

We need to develop non-gender-specific pronouns. The language we use will probably have the broadest impact in people being able to see themselves as included.

Recommendation No. RCL-012

That, by June 2022, the Life and Mission Agency develop guidelines, including how we speak to one another, for helping make the courts and committees of the church safer spaces for all.

Care for One Another

The virtual invisibility of people who identify as LGBTQI in the courts and other bodies of the church, the lack of any policies related to their inclusion, and the lack of concern regarding homophobic and transphobic language means that there are also no policies related to the resolution of disputes related to exclusion and abusive language and practices. These issues are often overlooked and remain unnamed because of the lack of any specific guidelines or policies to which those harmed can turn.

I just keep living in the hope that all who call themselves Christians, will respond pastorally and with love, once they learn about the harm caused by exclusion...because the harm is real for someone like me.

The church needs to become ‘non-accusatory’ with respect to gay people and their relationships.

The church will need to develop conflict resolution materials for inclusion-related disputes.

Recommendation No. RCL-013

That the Life and Mission Agency in consultation with the Clerks of Assembly create appropriate guidelines and policies to be used by the courts, agencies and congregations of the church to resolve disputes related to inclusion and report to the next General Assembly.

Resources

It is important to recognize that the work of repentance and of ensuring that harm will not continue is not the work of any one office or staff person, it is the work of the whole church. However, much of the oversight and coordination of this work will be located within the Life and Mission Agency.

We need to begin healing conversations by recognizing and acknowledging our own power and privilege. Diversity, inclusion and anti-oppression training should be mandated for church leaders and staff.

I wish that there was a resource I could use, because I am not a trained counsellor, for supporting people coming out in toxic situations.

Recommendation No. RCL-014

That all congregations, presbyteries, synods and committees be encouraged to consult with the Program Coordinator, Sexuality and Inclusion, concerning the ongoing work of resource and policy development, education, and support for the full inclusion of LGBTQI people in all dimensions of the ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Representation

One of the deep frustrations reflected in the stories that have been told to Rainbow Communion is that people who identify as LGBTQI have not had a voice in decision making in the church. Their exclusion and being made invisible has meant that they have not been able to contribute to the debates about their own inclusion and in other decision making in the church. In most instances, LGBTQI people are objectified and talked about rather than making their

own contribution. It is imperative that people who openly identify as LGBTQI be deliberately, visibly and consistently included in all courts, agencies and other entities in the church and their voices be welcomed and heard.

For healing to truly happen, we must listen to the voices of LGBTQI in the PCC and continue to create spaces where we can say, ‘We want to hear your story and you are not going to be punished for it’.

Recognize that when ‘LGBTQI’ is debated...it is about real people not mere labels. They are talking about ME.

Recommendation No. RCL-015

That Committees to Nominate at all levels and in all courts of the church, be urged and encouraged to include LGBTQI representation in the membership of committees of the sessions, presbyteries, synods, colleges and the General Assembly.

Removing the Threat of More Harm

Although the inclusion of people who identify as LGBTQI at all levels of decision making is important, it does raise a serious and systemic dilemma for them which was clearly illustrated in the work of the Rainbow Communion. The church invited people who identify as LGBTQI to tell their stories and also required that at least two members of the Special Listening Committee identify as LGBTQI. This call and this requirement in fact demanded that people “out” themselves in a church that formally remained opposed to same-sex relationships and to the ordination of anyone married to a same-sex spouse.

All people, whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity, are equally beloved by God

People who identify as LGBTQI need to know as beloved children of God they can be fully included in the church and in its decision-making processes and bodies without the threat of harm or the fear of direct or indirect discipline or censure because of their committed relationships with the people they love. This should not be a matter of pastoral exception but rather a recognition by the church that those who identify as LGBTQI and who choose to enter into a committed relationship with a spouse of the same-sex cannot be disciplined, censured or excluded for this reason. This will enable those who identify as LGBTQI and/or are married to a same-sex spouse to participate freely and honestly in the life of the church as all others.

Clergy already have liberty of conscience regarding who they marry in a religious ceremony, so that will not change in the future. No one can force a minister to marry any couple regardless of them being heterosexual or homosexual. For those who are non-affirming, they lose absolutely nothing; they do not have to give up anything except to acknowledge that we [LGBTQI] are present and have gifts to serve with as well ... should the PCC ever become inclusive and affirming.

In the midst of all of this mess, sometime after the presbytery had found me **not** guilty...it was made clear to me that I would probably never find a job in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. It didn't really matter that I had come out of the process with my credentials intact and without having been disciplined. I was on a blacklist [sic] and every time I would apply for a job, there would be some push back and reason not to hire me...simply for the allegations of being gay at that time.

Recommendation No. RCL-016

That identifying as LGBTQI and/or being in a same-sex marriage not be grounds for discipline and censure in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Worship

The church has no higher calling than to offer the worship that belongs to God day by day, Sunday by Sunday. (Living Faith 7.3.1). Members of the Body of Christ join together to worship God in Word and Sacrament and to find strength and hope for the task of proclaiming the coming of God's reign in the world. Those who gather include members who identify as LGBTQI.

The Rainbow Communion heard from many storytellers that in sacred spaces, those who identify as LGBTQI routinely feel marginalized and excluded. Language used in worship shapes the way we understand who God is, our theology, and also how we understand ourselves as the Body of Christ. When the language used in worship is heteronormative, homophobic, and/or binary, those who identify as LGBTQI do not understand themselves to be included in the body nor do they see themselves as being created in the image of God or being part of God's covenantal embrace. This has

left many feeling unwelcome to participate in the life and worship of their home churches and feeling alienated from spaces that are meant for all to celebrate God's love and grace together.

It is important to mention LGBTQI in public discourse and in prayers. Remove the fear of saying the actual words out loud: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex.

Recommendation No. RCL-017

That all congregations, presbyteries, synods and theological colleges be encouraged to use the Life and Mission Agency updated resources for worship and to review their own practices and the language that they use in worship.

Recommendation No. RCL-018

That congregations and other worshipping bodies be encouraged to be inclusive by providing opportunities for all to offer their gifts in worship and in the life and ministry of the church.

Theological Education

Some storytellers recounted experiences of harm done in the church's theological colleges. They also spoke about theological formation that did not address the harm done to people who identify as LGBTQI. The Rainbow Communion requested and received information from each of the theological colleges concerning courses and activities that address the harm done to those who identify as LGBTQI and the church's process of repentance for this harm. It was encouraging to hear about what is being provided currently, particularly in courses related to pastoral care and theology. It is important that the colleges continue to review all courses, as well as worship and community-building activities, to ensure that they are reflective of communities of learning and preparation for ministry that welcomes and includes all.

A long-time PCC member shared that their minister became very defensive and angry when questioned about why the congregation was never offered the opportunity to discuss church doctrine on sexuality. The member's concerns were simply dismissed.

One time a girl told me that I was going to get cancer if I was gay because her pastor had preached that past Sunday that, 'If you are gay and you succumbed to your temptations, you will get cancer and die'.

I think there has to be a lot of education. I think everybody needs to be educated about LGBTQI issues, about homophobia, transphobia, about being a welcoming church.

Recommendation No. RCL-019

That theological colleges continue to examine and update their courses, worship and community-building activities to ensure that they reflect the church's commitment that harm does not continue and that LGBTQI people are fully included in the life of the church.

The Body of Christ

Those who met a stranger on the road to Emmaus only recognized the risen Christ when they gave thanks to God and broke bread together. They were truly "companions"*; those who shared bread together and recognized in that act the presence of the One who overcame fear and death. The encounter in the stories told with those who have been so deeply harmed and excluded by the church calls us to a new experience of communion. We are invited by the One who is Love to a new and transformed communion in the Body of Christ. Paul's description of the Body of Christ in the First Letter to the Corinthians states that, "when one member suffers, all suffer together with it". We can no longer say that we are not aware of the harm the church has perpetrated. Corinthians also states, "If one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it." The church lives in hope that in our words and in our actions, we can truly honour and welcome one another and rejoice together in all the diversity and beauty that is the Body of Christ.

* 'Companion' comes from 'panis', the Latin word for bread. Originally, the word was used to describe someone with whom you shared a meal.

Recommendation No. RCL-020

That this report and its recommendations together with the supporting resources be commended to congregations, the Life and Mission Agency and the courts of the church to assist in the process of reconciliation.

Recommendation No. RCL-021

That thanks be extended to all those who have served, but are currently not members of the Special Committee re: LGBTQI and whose contributions have been invaluable to this work including the Rev. Dr. Timothy Archibald, the Rev. Joseph Bae, Ms. Bassma Younan; and chaplains the Rev. Linda Patton-Cowie and the Rev. William Elliott.

Recommendation No. RCL-022

That the gratitude of the General Assembly be extended to all those who have served as deputized listeners.

Recommendation No. RCL-023

That the Special Listening Committee re LGBTQI be dismissed.