

Who Affirms the Dissenters:  
Understanding the Experience of Those Who Say No to  
Becoming an Affirming Presbytery in the United Church of Canada

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## Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

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and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

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## Introduction

The Chignecto Presbytery of the United Church of Canada voted to become an Affirming Ministry through Affirm United in the Spring of 2016. Because this is a potentially divisive issue, Affirm United recommends all ministries vote by secret ballot. The motion passed by a significant margin of 40-3 and the Presbytery is now duly registered as an Affirming Ministry. It occurred to me later in conversation with a colleague that the court did not hear or discuss any opposing views to the motion but there were still three no votes, three spoiled ballots, and an unknown number of people who decided not to cast a ballot at all. There may be a formal majority view but the Presbytery is still divided.

A secret ballot lets people vote without revealing their position and there is no reason to think those three dissenting voices would be more comfortable raising a concern now that the majority has spoken. Where the secret ballot once protected LGBT people and their supporters, it now protects the dissenters and yet their dissent may have had nothing to do with LGBT rights. They may have been problematizing the label, worried about straining ecumenical relationships, or simply unwilling to pay the \$100/year membership fee.

LGBT people have been and continue to be marginalized and I recognize the justice issues they face. However, I do not always agree with the methods used to raise awareness of those justice issues and it can be difficult to effectively critique those methods because of those injustices. For example, I believe the Pride Parade fosters unhealthy sexual relationships along with the healthy ones. While I can applaud the Pride Parade for its active rejection of societal pressure to conform to someone else's standard for intimate relationships, the event risks reducing people to their preferred sexual expressions. It becomes an event where people "hook up" which is not what the United Church of Canada is teaching about intimate relationships of any configuration. Finally, I believe the unchecked celebration of everything sexual is exactly what Paul was writing to Corinth about.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001, 82-85. Winter says Paul is writing against the social convention in Corinth that "all things are permitted" when a person is "free". He notes that Plutarch's *Moralia* records, "intemperate intercourse follows a lawless meal" at Roman imperial banquets and "intemperate intercourse" is the activity I'm

I have come to this opinion by my personal experience of Pride Parades in Toronto.<sup>2</sup> I understand my concerns may well be unintended consequences and are personal opinions that are open to rebuttal. Because of the nature and severity of the justice issue, past conversations became heated and grew out of control. However, I cannot speak easily about any of this for risk of being labeled against LGBT people. My opinion of one quickly becomes conflated with the other.

To be clear, I would participate in a Pride Parade if asked, even though I disagree with it. This is a circumstance where the “pros” mitigate my “cons” and church participation may even help steer the event into what I feel are more healthy directions. A Pride Parade may be dramatic, but it is a time limited event where becoming an Affirming Ministry is a permanent decision with benefits and consequences that last for years. I voted in favour of becoming an Affirming Presbytery in two separate Presbyteries now but need to ask, how do we love and support the people who said “no” after the court decides “yes”? Especially when it is so difficult to talk about their concerns at all.

The Affirming process is not without risk and can be problematic for congregations and ministries. There is a significant difference between simply performing same gender marriages and hanging the rainbow flag on your church. When the question of becoming an Affirming Ministry is raised, it must be answered and some people have felt forced into it. It can be difficult for people to be a dissenting voice in a politically correct world.<sup>3</sup>

While I am not suggesting that the needs of the marginalized need to wait on those in power, the current trend suggests the tide has officially turned and the United Church of Canada is creating a new marginalized group. People who disagree with the move toward Affirming status, regardless of their reasons for doing so, risk being considered hateful or unjust toward the LGBT community. In our effort to join in

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problematizing. Paul is teaching a more nuanced understanding of freedom from sin by writing, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial.” (1 Cor 6:12)

<sup>2</sup> Joe Warmington’s 2009 article covering the Toronto Pride Parade discusses some of my concerns but uses more aggressive language than I would use myself: Joe Warmington, “Nothing but a ‘sex parade’,” *Toronto Sun*, June 25, 2009, Accessed January 20, 2009, [http://www.torontosun.com/news/columnists/joe\\_warmington/2009/06/25/9918496-sun.html](http://www.torontosun.com/news/columnists/joe_warmington/2009/06/25/9918496-sun.html)

<sup>3</sup> Mike Milne, “Raising the rainbow-coloured flag,” *Observer*, April, 2009, accessed January 15, 2017, [http://www.ucobserver.org/justice/2007/04/raising\\_the\\_rainbowcoloured\\_flag/](http://www.ucobserver.org/justice/2007/04/raising_the_rainbowcoloured_flag/).

solidarity with LGBT people we create a dichotomy of Affirming vs non-affirming and risk returning harm with harm.

This paper engages with four dissenting voices at the Presbytery level to hear their experience. Using a phenomenological methodology, a composite person called Dez is then built from those voices. This paper becomes a single voice that pieces the veil of the secret ballot and lets us wrestle with their concerns and their experience without unnecessarily exposing the participants. The good news, in brief, is Dez has weathered the experience very well through deep faith and commitment and the concerns raised have more to do with polity and Presbytery than LGBT rights. The bad news is harm did occur and it has not yet been addressed by the church.

## Literature Review

The literature that surrounds my research question can be divided loosely into three categories. First, dissenters have challenged the church repeatedly in the past and many have written about the idea of dissent and some of the more famous dissenters in history. Second, there is a body of research on conflict and conflict resolution that seeks to inform individuals and organizations so they can respond faithfully. And finally, there is discussion around the justice issues faced by the LGBT community and how churches are responding to those concerns. All of which inform the research question, but only in oblique ways.

Gerald Arbuckle suggests in *Refounding the Church* that the word dissent means “simply the proposing of alternatives”<sup>4</sup>. Whenever there are two or more opinions it can be said there is dissent within the group. While Matthew Bowman says, “dissent is inherently a churchly act”<sup>5</sup>, I would suggest the word is not inherently religious or spiritual and church just uses the word more often.

Dissent may not a specifically religious word but the church’s use of the word can come with additional meaning. Within his Roman Catholic understanding, Arbuckle says, “since the publication in 1990 of the Roman document *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, [dissent] connotes

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church: Dissent for Leadership* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Bowman, "Toward a theology of dissent: an ecclesiological interpretation." *Dialogue* 42, no. 3 (September 2009): 22, EBSCOhost, accessed July 15, 2016, ATLA0001738684.

disrespect for, and even repudiation of, the authoritative magisterium”.<sup>6</sup> Over time there have been several dissenters in the Roman Catholic Church. A more recent example is Fr. Charles Curran and his book, *Faithful Dissent*, where he was found to be in “clear dissent” on matters around contraception, marriage and homosexual acts.<sup>7</sup> This particular dissent was rather public and the pejorative language around Curran’s dissent is representative of this negative use of the word.

This history of dissent is much larger when considered over the life of the church. Richard Hogan chronicles a number of heresies by their original dissenters in *Dissent from the Creed: heresies past and present*.<sup>8</sup> Michael Frassetto has a similar book in *The Great Medieval heretics: five centuries of religious dissent*.<sup>9</sup> There are other acts of dissent against the church which remain in the public memory including Martin Luther and his 95 Thesis and the story of Martin Luther King Jr being removed from Sunday School for refuting the bodily resurrection of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> In these last two cases, the acts of dissent are spoken of with the more positive language of reform, implying the previous form was flawed and needed to be corrected. It seems that being in dissent is reserved for the people who are either in the minority position, or declared wrong by those in power. Bowman states, “For many Mormons, the word dissent functions, more or less, as a synecdoche for *apostasy*”<sup>11</sup> (italics in original) and I would argue the same for its use by other churches.

If the only thing facing the church was simple dissent in the form of disagreement, the nature of my research would be vastly different. When it comes to the question of LGBT rights there is not only dissent on what those rights are and how to obtain them but also conflict in the conversation. *The Manual 2016* speaks of conflict in loose terms, only defining procedures for those conflicts severe enough to need intervention. The Principals of Conflict Resolution suggest “whenever there is a conflict between people

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<sup>6</sup> Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Charles E. Curran, *Faithful Dissent* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1986), 200-201.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Frassetto, *The great medieval heretics: five centuries of religious dissent* (Huntington, Ind: Our Sunday Visitor, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Richard M. Hogan, *Dissent from the Creed: heresies past and present* (New York: BlueBridge, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “An Autobiography of Religious Development”, Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, Accessed January 15, 2017. [http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_501122\\_00/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_501122_00/).

<sup>11</sup> Bowman, “Toward a theology of dissent”, 22.

in the body of Christ, there is pain and anxiety on all sides” and therefore “conflicts must be resolved as quickly and as fairly as possible.”<sup>12</sup>

This position of the church is in stark contrast to people like Sam Portaro who writes, “Conflict is a necessary element of the created order by which all life is sustained.”<sup>13</sup> Portaro also notes, “conflict played an important role in the life of the first community of believers, challenging deep-seated assumptions and posing hard questions.”<sup>14</sup> Gentile Christians would still be practicing uniquely Jewish customs such as circumcision and Kosher without change driven by conflict. Likewise, Michael Kinnamon demonstrates in the article *Restoring Mainline Trust: Disagreeing in Love*, that “conflict can be instructive, not simply divisive.”<sup>15</sup> Adelle Banks even finds that, “Significant majorities of Americans say it is possible to disagree with their religion's teachings on abortion and homosexuality and still remain in good standing with their faith.”<sup>16</sup>

An important question becomes identifying the nature of a person’s dissent. I was surprised to discover how Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* enlightened this question. Orientalism refers specifically to the colonial dynamics between “the Orient” and “the Occident”.<sup>17</sup> The theory though translates well to any dynamic where there are two identifiable groups with the Occident receiving benefits from, and having significant authority over, the Orient. When considering the dilemma Fr. Curran faced with the Roman Catholic Church, the Church can be considered the Occident and the Academy considered the Orient to apply this theory. Likewise, the United Church was Occident to the LGBT Orient when authority through membership was used to direct their behaviour and elevate the relative purity of the heterosexual leadership.

In the 1980’s the United Church of Canada’s micromanagement of intimate relationships was challenged. There came to be a growing group of dissenters who lifted up the justice issues faced by LGBT

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<sup>12</sup> The United Church of Canada, *The Manual, 2016* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2016), 190.

<sup>13</sup> Sam Portaro, *Conflict and a Christian Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub, 1996), 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Kinnamon, "Restoring mainline trust: disagreeing in love." *The Christian Century* 109, no. 21 (July 1, 1992): 646, EBSCOhost, accessed July 15, 2016, ATLA0000852892.

<sup>16</sup> Adelle M. Banks, "Loyal but dissenting believers," *The Christian Century* 128, no. 14 (July 12, 2011): 14, EBSCOhost, accessed July 17, 2016, ATLA0001848329.

<sup>17</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 2.

people in particular and the church started to listen. There was a great deal of conflict and, as Oliver O'Donovan notes about his own experience, for a while there was "much dispute, no debate."<sup>18</sup> As part of the debate, Affirm United submitted a statement detailing the voice of gays and lesbians as they felt isolated from the conversation, even though it affected them directly.<sup>19</sup> AFFIRM also provided good case against delaying the decision so the harm to the majority who disapproved of LGBT relationships could be minimized.<sup>20</sup> The General Council of the United Church wrestled with the question and eventually decided that justice for LGBT people could not wait on the Occident any longer.

The end of the decision around sexuality and ordination is where my research begins. Only one year before this landmark decision, the Maritime Conference of the United Church of Canada released a pamphlet titled *Talking Back: How to be heard when you disagree with the decisions your church has made: How to dissent in the United Church of Canada*. At first I was excited because I thought I had an official church document that spoke of dissent in a positive light. Certainly, dissent is described as "disagreement with a proposal or resolution (as in a dissenting vote)" but it also suggests that dissent is reserved for "substantive issues" where a person's faith is at stake. It suggests that dissent can be faithful if it "respects the process" and "a conscious effort has been made to understand the meaning and implications of the position taken."<sup>21</sup> Where the document fails is that it immediately becomes legalistic and describes what a person can do to overturn a decision they otherwise must live with. The only other information is a list of "People to Let Off Steam With and Sources of Information."<sup>22</sup>

Based on this document and *The Manual 2016*, the position of the United Church is that conflict and dissent are undesirable where the first is to be rooted out (pastorally) and the second endured

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<sup>18</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, "Homosexuality in the Church: Can there be a fruitful theological debate?" in *The way forward?: Christian voices on homosexuality and the church*, ed. Timothy Bradshaw (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004), 20.

<sup>19</sup> AFFIRM, Gays and Lesbians of the United Church of Canada, *A statement on our ordained and commissioned ministry in our United Church of Canada* (Vancouver, BC: AFFIRM, Gays and Lesbians of the United Church of Canada, 1984), 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>21</sup> The United Church of Canada, Maritime Conference, *Talking Back: how to be heard when you disagree with the decisions your church has made: how to dissent in the United Church of Canada* (Sackville, NB: Maritime Conference Office, 1987), 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

(pastorally). There are any number of other books which suggest the same like Bob Phillips' *How to Deal With Annoying People*<sup>23</sup> and Mark Goulston's *Talking to Crazy: how to deal with the irrational and impossible people in your life*.<sup>24</sup> While in the heat of the conflict around LGBT rights, I can understand providing space for dissenters to vent is an appropriate pastoral response but the conflict around becoming an Affirming Ministry is very different.

When a ministry decides to become Affirming they are not correcting a justice issue. The United Church addressed the root justice issue of church teachings in 1988 on matters around sexuality, membership, ordination, and the corresponding ability of LGBT members of the church to form faithful and health-giving intimate relationships. Becoming an Affirming Ministry is a radical act of support for and solidarity with LGBT people who still face justice issues within society at large. I do not downplay the significance of solidarity. However, this is one of many ways to be in solidarity with LGBT people and there are negative consequences to consider as well.

Affirm United has gained significant authority in the church over the past 28 years and receives a benefit every time a ministry chooses to become Affirming in the form of membership fees and the power to direct polity to their advantage. Affirm United is becoming Occident to the Oriental conservative membership by pressuring those congregations to conform to a different understanding of sexual ethics to the benefit of Affirm United. If there is no justice issue at stake the church can take a more pastoral approach to the conflict without moving directly to resolution. The conflict could even be healthy where debate happens around the multiple ways a ministry stands in solidarity with the LGBT community.

All of this is completely dependant on why people are dissenting. If people want the church to ban homosexual relationships and force their own standard for sexuality to ease their personal discomfort, yes, there is still a justice issue present. If people are dissenting because they have a different theological view and cannot be supportive in this way, there is no justice issue present. If they simply disagree with being

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<sup>23</sup> Bob Phillips and Kimberly Alvn, *How to deal with annoying people* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Mark Goulston, *Talking to Crazy: how to deal with the irrational and impossible people in your life* (New York: American Management Association, 2015).

certified at something they are already embodying, there is no justice issue present. But, because there *was* a justice issue and *might be* a justice issue, there is conflict in the debate and “conflicts must be resolved as quickly and fairly as possible”<sup>25</sup>. This not only silences the debate but creates unhealthy conflict while limiting opportunities to pastorally support the dissenter.

All the while there is a significant gap in the literature. There is little information on how to care for dissenters beyond managing their dissent. It should be possible to minister to the dissenters without moving them toward conformity and losing their unique voice. They should not need to vent at the minister to maintain a healthy communal and spiritual life. Otherwise, their only remaining options are to enter the recently vacated closet or leave to the detriment of the diversity of the United Church of Canada.

## Operating Theology

“Getting a group to come to agreement or make a decision about a controversial topic is hard enough. Doing it in a religious setting can be terrifying.”<sup>26</sup>

This section requires a good working knowledge of the history, polity, and structure of the United Church of Canada. An introduction to the relevant material is found in Appendix A.

There was a great deal of debate around the theology of inclusion for LGBT people in the United Church leading up to our landmark decision in 1988. This body of work is important and was considered as part of this research. The primary focus of my research however is not the injustice LGBT people faced and continue to face in some settings. If the request is made to become an Affirming Ministry, then it is the view of those making the request that the justice issues already have been sufficiently addressed for this designation to be appropriate. The root of the justice issue was corrected in 1988 when sexual orientation and gender identity was removed as a bar to membership. What remains is the challenge of living into this

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<sup>25</sup> The United Church of Canada, *The Manual 2016*, 190.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew L. Skinner, *Intrusive God, disruptive gospel: encountering the divine in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), 107.

decision of General Council which is like the challenge Christians faced in Corinth<sup>27</sup> and Rome<sup>28</sup> when living into the decision of the Jerusalem Council detailed in Acts 15.

The account in Acts is about a specific conflict and is primarily about the entrance of the Gentiles into God's people. For the narrative in Acts to be applicable, the nature of the conflict being addressed in scripture needs to be understood so lessons can be applied to analogous situations.<sup>29</sup>

The specific concern in Acts is whether Gentiles need to follow Torah law, including circumcision and Kosher dietary restrictions. There is a group of Christian Jews who self-identity as Pharisees present and they advocate a traditional understanding of covenant. As devout Jews, they would have taught that without circumcision a person would be "cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."<sup>30</sup> While there is plenty of room in the law for proselytes, those converts to Judaism are still expected to "follow exactly the path that the LORD your God has commanded you."<sup>31</sup> That Gentiles would be accepted without conversion and adherence to the Torah was new.

These Pharisees are not cast in a terribly positive light but were likely concerned about the Gentiles access to the New Covenant in Christ. They approached the problem in their own legalistic way but their concern is legitimate none the less. Their view on the necessity of circumcision was successfully challenged by the experience of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas who all testify on behalf of Gentiles who clearly received the Spirit and are participating in New Covenant without circumcision. The Jewish Christians were not going to abandon their Jewish heritage though and would remain committed to the Torah. The question became, if the Gentiles are not going to be required to fully follow the Torah, what expectations make sense for the Gentile Christians?

James proposes a compromise that is accepted by the council. The full measure of the law will not be required but only those core elements of ritual purity, which are also somewhat more practical and

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<sup>27</sup> 1 Corinthians 8, NRSV.

<sup>28</sup> Romans 14, NRSV.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Goddard, *God, Gentiles and Gay Christians: Acts 15 and Change in the Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2001), 8.

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 17:14 NRSV.

<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 5:28-33, NRSV.

accessible. It has the advantage of setting a minimum standard that should enable observant Jewish Christians to be in community with otherwise ritually unclean Gentiles without forcing Gentiles to abandon their own tradition to follow someone else's.

Andrew Goddard does an excellent job describing four parallels between the Gentiles and the LGBT community in *God, Gentiles and Gay Christians*<sup>32</sup>:

- 1) Both have no say in that their identity comes to them as given.
- 2) Both have distinct cultures and ways of being which the church had to engage.
- 3) Both were viewed as different and separated from God by this distinction.
- 4) Both were pushed to the margins unless they conformed.

Of course, this is not a perfect analogy and there are differences between these groups but it is close enough for the model to apply. The church would no longer require that they give up their unique lifestyle and agree on a common ground that would become the basis of their shared heritage in Christ. They are still “different” but no longer deemed “separated from God”, which was a difficult assertion anyway since they were clearly not separated from God at all. In this way, they are no longer pushed to the margins but brought into full community with their other brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Gentiles received a letter and “they rejoiced at the exhortation”<sup>33</sup>. The LGBT community received word of the change in the polity of the church and were glad. A reading of Acts 15 can sound a bit like “and they lived happily ever after” but this was just the beginning and whether Gentile and Jew, or LGBT and straight, all had to live into that decision.

The Council came to a decision that seemed to be acceptable for the Gentile Christians but in truth, those Gentiles were not even part of the discussion. The United Church seemed to learn from this and there was an emphasis on hearing the LGBT voice before voting in 1988. What is clear in Paul's letters is that living into the decision around the inclusion of Gentiles was not going smoothly. There was conflict around

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<sup>32</sup> Goddard, *God, Gentiles and Gay Christians*, 14-15.

<sup>33</sup> Acts 15:31, NRSV.

how to live into the common ground they had forged between them as Jews and Gentiles each lived by their own cultural practices.

One of the core values that needed to be maintained was around food sacrificed to idols but this would prove to be difficult in a Roman context. Peter Gooch explores the context in Corinth around this problem in *Dangerous Food* and traces it to government supported worship which included food sacrificed to idols. Gooch notes, “After sacrifices had been offered to the God they were put to various uses.”<sup>34</sup> This use might be remuneration for a priest which he could then sell at market for currency. The food might be part of a shared meal a Christian was invited to, although not all the food would be sacrificial. The sharing of a meal was important for improving a person’s position and status and, because of government support for this activity, it was an important aspect of integration within the community at large. The problem was “It would be no simple matter to determine whether food served in these dining rooms was or was not idol-food.”<sup>35</sup> In order to hold to those few precepts that were given to them, some Christians avoided these meals, to their detriment, and some avoided meat altogether, just to be certain.

A conflict was growing because even though Christians understood idol worship was bad they also understood an idol was just a lump of wood or stone with no power. Some people refused meat altogether as an act of faith and commitment. Some only refused meat they were certain was sacrificed to an idol and some just didn’t worry about it at all since there was no power in the sacrifice anyway. There was a decision made by a council but there were still questions about what that looked like on the ground.

Paul offers a solution in his first letter to Corinth, but there is a much more practiced version in Romans 14. Paul acknowledges the position of those saying there is no power in idols and therefore no problem in meat sacrificed to them. These people put their trust in God and are therefore strong in faith. However, there are some who are either concerned about there being some power in the idol or in giving the perception that idol worship is acceptable. These people are less secure and are therefore weak in faith.

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<sup>34</sup> Peter D. Gooch, *Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8-10 in Its Context* (Waterloo Ontario: Wilfred University Press, 1993), 22.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

Suggesting one group is stronger than the other is provocative language designed to engage people in the conversation. Neither side would consider themselves weak but casting it in these terms put the onus on the strong to be supportive.<sup>36</sup> If strong means rejecting the power of idols and eating meat, the strong need to support people who abstain. It may be necessary for them to abstain from meat, at least at shared meals, so the weak can continue their practice in faith. Conversely, if strong means refraining from meat as an act of faith, those people need to remain supportive and non-judgemental of Christians who eat idol meat. Ultimately it is the work of both sides to strive for a community built on mutual support and trust in God rather than individual acts done in faith.

With Goddard's help, I have already established the parallel between the decision of the Jerusalem Council and the 1988 decision to remove sexual orientation as a consideration of fitness for ministry. There is now a parallel between the desire to become an Affirming Ministry and the conflict around food sacrificed to idols as people try to live into that decision. There are some people who say it is enough to be affirming and we don't need to be certified in that by a third-party. There are some people who say it is an important act of solidarity which helps to enact our commitment to be in community. The problem is both are right because these responses are not mutually exclusive. Regardless of who is strong or weak, it is the work of all to strive for a community built on mutual support and trust in God. This cannot happen if some voices are not being heard.

The common ground forged in 1988 was the desire for relationships that are "faithful, just, loving, responsible, health-giving, healing and sustaining of community and self."<sup>37</sup> Where the United Church did right by Acts 15 was in recognizing the presence of the Spirit in people different than those in power. Where the United Church did poorly by Acts 15 was in the wider acceptance of that common ground. In the years immediately after 1988, the conversation heavily favored the conservative congregations which is part of what prompted the Affirming Congregation Program in the first place. The conversation today favors the Affirming congregations in many parts of the United Church. The struggle remains in

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<sup>36</sup> Leander Keck, *Romans* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 338.

<sup>37</sup> The United Church of Canada, "*Ministry Membership and Human Sexuality.pdf*", 4.

maintaining effective dialogue and ministry that does not demand acceptance of one groups theological view over another.

## The Project

The challenge of dissent and affirmation is pastoral and communal in equal measure. How does the church minister to people on all sides of a conflict to ensure conflict is the healthy kind? To answer that question there needs to be a better understanding of the experience of people in this circumstance so their needs can be approached and met. To accomplish this the church needs dialogue where people have the freedom to offer and consider alternatives without fear of reprisal. Through awareness of the experience of these dissenters, the church will be better equipped to provide pastoral care and individual Christians will be better able to live in community with the sort of grace and respect that echoes the love of God.

My research question then becomes, what is the experience of dissenters after the decision is made to become an Affirming Presbytery within the United Church of Canada? The primary concern for this research is around the dissenter and their continued presence within the Presbytery and not the justice issues surrounding the LGBT community.

I sent invitations<sup>38</sup> by email to the secretaries of each Presbytery listed on Affirm United's website<sup>39</sup> which were then forwarded to the active Presbyters on their mailing list. The vote was by secret ballot so the only way to reach dissenters was to reach out to everyone. I interviewed four presbyters in Affirming Presbyteries across Canada to explore the phenomenon of being in dissent after the decision has taken place. To fit the case, the participant must still be an active Presbyter within that court. These four voices have been consolidated into a single voice called Dez to capture the common experience of my sample. I coded each interview and used a process of horizontalization to find keywords and themes. What follows is a description of the participants individually and the composite Dez so the reader can engage with a dissenting voice who may be part of their presbytery.

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<sup>38</sup> The text of the invitation is in Appendix E.

<sup>39</sup> Affirm United maintains a list of member ministries at <http://affirmunited.ause.ca/find-a-ministry/>

There are three limitations that need to be considered. First, with only four volunteer participants these results cannot be considered representative. Second, the issues presented are far more specific to the context of Presbytery than I originally expected and extra care must be taken before if considering another context. And finally, this project is about capturing the experience of my participants. I am making space for their voice but I am not promoting one position over another and I am not providing solutions to their pastoral or ministry needs.

## The Participants

### Ichabod

“I wasn’t so much offended, it was unfortunate that the issue was making such feelings...”

Ichabod voted no to the motion to become an Affirming Presbytery. He did so on theological grounds as he believes that God intended people to form intimate relationships between men and women and any deviation from that vision falls under sexual immorality as described in 1 Cor 6. Ichabod will happily discuss his own sin of greed and his desire for material things and treats homosexuality with the same logic. He doesn’t judge people for their sin as everyone sins at some point and in some way. However, where accepting LGBT people as members and clergy is only a small problem, becoming an Affirming Ministry is a big one. Ichabod’s theological concern is presented in Appendix B along with my own critique and some insights gained from engaging his perspective.

The feeling that Ichabod is referring to in the above quote is of tension. Ichabod was the only participant to pick a name because of the meaning attached to it. Ichabod is a reference to 1 Sam 4 and the naming of Phinehas’ son because “The glory has departed from Israel.”<sup>40</sup> He explained that the glory has gone out of the United Church as evidenced by the tension within her courts and not because we support gay marriage. Tension came up a lot in the interview as Ichabod’s way of indicating unhealthy levels of stress and conflict between people: disagreement is acceptable but tension is not.

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<sup>40</sup> 1 Sam 4:21.

Ichabod was the first person I interviewed and he raised some concerns that I had to explore to fully understand. This exploration is covered in Appendix A. His concerns were centered around the sense of an agenda and the legalistic approach used to accomplish it. The discussion around the decision was on how to accomplish the goal of becoming an Affirming Presbytery instead of asking if that reflects the Presbytery's response to the Gospel. There was also the sense that becoming an Affirming Presbytery was largely to promote Affirming Congregations: "If what was perceived as a higher court had made that decision then it would have a predictable influence upon the lower court over time." This is problematic because it is not Presbytery's role to influence congregations, in fact there is polity against that very activity. This raises the question of the appropriateness for a Presbytery or Conference to even be an Affirming Ministry.

Ichabod was also concerned that the church was creating a circumstance where a congregation that refuses a same gender marriage is committing a human rights offense. A minister in Canada can refuse to perform a same gender marriage under their personal religious freedom. A congregation, on the other hand, is not separate from their denomination and does not have "religious freedom". If General Council, Conference, and Presbytery all support same gender marriage, a Session might be in violation of human rights if they refuse. I checked his interpretation using the Ontario Human Rights Commission website<sup>41</sup> and the information presented can be interpreted this way. I believe this concern is overstated because the right of the Session to decide such things is part of our polity but I am not a lawyer. More importantly, this concern should be addressed to Ichabod's satisfaction, not mine.

Ichabod experienced these concerns in specific ways. He offered to be part of the task group so the dissenting voice could be engaged through him. Ichabod was accepted in the group but his voice was largely ignored as, "They only wanted to share information that was pro becoming an affirming presbytery." Ichabod spoke out during the debate and "felt this specific anger directed at [him]." Ichabod admitted that

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<sup>41</sup> Ontario Human Rights Commission, "Solemnization of marriage by religious officials", Accessed January 15, 2017, <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/part-ii-%E2%80%93-interpretation-and-application/solemnization-marriage-religious-officials>

this is not a new thing for him as this is not the only time he has been in dissent. He has since reconciled with this angry person but the fact the debate brought out such anger is why the glory has gone from the United Church.

Ichabod still feels the United Church of Canada is his home and has held key Presbytery positions in the past but has opted for “Self imposed discrimination [by] refusing to hold certain offices.” He is concerned about enforcing polity he disagrees with and doubts his ability to function in such an environment saying “it’s better if I sit on the sidelines.” The decision to become an Affirming Presbytery was not the only reason for Ichabod’s decision but it was the last.

The three words that summarize Ichabod’s experience of becoming an Affirming Presbytery: silenced, hated (however briefly), disempowered.

## William

“It’s easier to come out as gay in the United Church than it is to come out as a conservative Christian.”

William voted no to becoming an Affirming Presbytery on philosophical grounds. He simply did not feel that Presbytery needed to have this conversation and thought it was questionably appropriate for Presbytery to have it at all. William is the minister for a conservative congregation in an urban setting. He has found it increasingly difficult to operate in this progressively liberal environment. We did not get into the specifics of William’s theology as he did not volunteer it the way Ichabod did but it is not especially important to this conversation.

William’s concerns move around the theme of power and influence. His sense is that Affirm United is “the dominant voice”, “taking all the headlines”, with a lot of power and authority in the courts of the church. William feels that this energy and effort is misdirected and “it diminishes all the other people, all the other groups who need advocacy”. William is also engaged in cross-cultural ministries because of his congregation’s context and setting. His congregation has discovered that conversations with people from typically conservative parts of the world are quickly shut down because they “know about the United

Church and see it in a negative way.” That the actions of Presbytery are working against a congregation makes William feel becoming an Affirming Ministry has undermined Presbytery’s role. How can Presbytery fulfill their mandate to support a congregation that holds a position that is not just different, but contrary to their own? William feels they can’t “because no one is going to speak up for me. They can’t.”

William’s experience of this begins with frustration. The actions of his Presbytery are not simply unhelpful but are actively interfering with his ministry, a ministry that falls well within the bounds of polity and doctrine in the United Church of Canada. He feels that Presbytery cannot faithfully represent him or his congregation and has therefore withdrawn from Presbytery as much as possible. Like Ichabod, William used to do a lot of valuable work through Presbytery and the decision to become Affirming was not the only reason for reducing his activity in this court.

Three words that summarize William’s experience of becoming an Affirming Presbytery: disillusioned, withdrawn, apathetic.

## Bob

“As much as the church doesn’t want to admit it, we are empire... the Affirming process is part of empire.”

Bob abstained from the vote by spoiling his ballot for theological reasons. Bob is deeply supportive of LGBT people and is sensitive to the systemic oppression they have faced but doesn’t feel a vote followed by a designation is accomplishing the goal of acceptance and inclusion to the degree we should be aiming for. Bob used the language of the modern-day empire to highlight his concerns: the corporation.

Bob feels the church is currently operating with a corporate mindset where behaviour can be modified and directed using polity and procedure. The idea that by examining and updating the procedures of the church we can make the church more open and welcoming to LGBT people is proof of this mindset as much as the church’s use of polity to manage homosexuality before 1988. I’m reminded of a scene in the movie *Office Space* where the restaurant manager, Stan, tries to adjust Joanna’s attitude by having her

wear more “flair” so she will project happiness. The procedure doesn’t work and becomes the reason she quits.<sup>42</sup> For the church to change it needs to change first and then update its polity and procedures to match.

Corporations thrive on dichotomy where you start by defining your market and then distinguishing yourself from your competitors. They need “us” to be better than “them” and compete until they “win” a market share, or preferably the whole market. When an issue goes to a vote, there is inherently a set of winners and losers as the winning vote sets polity and the losers need to conform. This is the exact same dynamic that allowed for the oppression of LGBT people in the first place. Bob is concerned that all we are accomplishing is swapping out the people who are forced to conform.

Bob is also deeply aware that as LGBT people gain acceptance in society at large they identify less and less as an oppressed people. The methods used by the church to deconstruct the margins need the margins to exist to work. The first step then is to define the margin, put people in it, and then tear the margins down. If the goal is freeing LGBT people from the margins, why does the church use the language of the margins to accomplish it? Bob has a homosexual friend who resists the idea of being labelled at all and prefers to find healthy relationships without defining them. With this experience in mind, Bob feels it is important for church and clergy to respond to people as they are and not by the category they fit in.

Finally, Bob is concerned that the methods being used are going to have casualties. “You’re going to have casualties. And that’s not the way Jesus works! He would be ministering to the casualties...” Because the corporate mindset requires a winner and a loser, there will be someone who loses in the exchange where the idea of common ground in Acts 15 is about compromise so all the people around an issue can come out of the debate with what they need to form healthy relationships and spiritual lives.

Bob experiences this as deep concerned with the state of the church. He feels “we cannot survive at this corporate level” and believes the system cannot sustain itself and still follow the Gospel. The only logical conclusion for Bob is “the church has to fall as we know it.” Bob has no plans to abandon the church and does not expect that fall to happen any time soon. He also sees this coming apocalypse as the

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<sup>42</sup> Mike Judge, *Office Space*, (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation and Cubicle Inc., 1999), DVD.

revelation of what the church is meant to be and therefore a thing to look forward to with hope. He simply believes the tools of corporate empire cannot be used to build anything but corporate empire so a change to anything else will involve significant deconstruction before any reconstruction occurs.

Bob noted that he used to get upset about issues but all he did was get in trouble, cause a lot of stress for himself and the people around him, and not actually change anything for it. So, Bob doesn't do that anymore. This shift happened before the question of becoming an Affirming Ministry, but it was this exact dynamic in the courts of the church that prompted this change. Bob had to yell to be heard at all and was dismissed even then.

Bob feels part of why he was ignored is because he is not an ordained minister. Bob's actual category of ministry is irrelevant as he is duly appointed to his ministry. More over, he can hold a theological conversation just as thoroughly and deeply as any ordained minister I've met. The labels we have for ministry form an ecclesial corporate ladder people climb so the Affirming Ministry conversation for Bob is just another example of the corporate mindset used by the church.

Three words that summarize Bob's experience of becoming an Affirming Presbytery: disappointed, ignored, yet hopeful.

## Jasmine

“When a presbytery follows a dictated process to make a label I am cynical about it... I questioned how real it was.”

Jasmine abstained from the vote by refusing to cast a ballot for philosophical reasons. Jasmine led a congregation through the Affirming Congregation process and found it to be a wonderful, transformative experience for the members of the congregation, herself as the spiritual leader, and for the ministry of the congregation. In the interview, she used words like conversation, debate, engagement, opportunity, transformative, and change but all framed in the negative. These were the things Jasmine experienced when her congregation became Affirming but did not experience when her Presbytery became Affirming and therefore did not feel comfortable voting “yes”, but didn't want to vote “no” either.

Jasmine came to be concerned that Presbytery was doing the work to receive the designation rather than do the transformative work that the designation implies has happened. “It was a series of exercises [so] we would qualify for the title of an Affirming Presbytery.” Without the transformative piece, “it’s no more safe for the gay and lesbian people to go” to Presbytery or be in a congregation of that Presbytery. Jasmine wonders if Presbytery is even the right place for this conversation. “I really think, in the United Church of Canada, change happens from the congregation up” and change that is driven from the top down does not work well. Instead of moving the Presbytery into a place of greater welcoming and affirmation “it really enhanced this sense that presbytery dictates and congregations follow, whether they agree or not.”

Jasmine noted that “the Affirming issue was brought into an unhealthy system” and feels “becoming Affirming is a process of discernment” and an opportunity to debate theology. Instead of discernment and debate “it just devolved into factions” which points to an unhealthy Presbytery and not an issue with Affirming or the process used by Affirm United. The real problem was the belief Presbytery could tackle a question known to be heavy and divisive.

Jasmine became cynical during the process and chose to largely remove herself from the conversation. “I wasn’t in the leadership so I would voice it quietly on the side.” She did speak directly to the leadership but not as part of a conversation with the full court. Jasmine acknowledged she can be timid within the court of Presbytery and this is a growing edge for her. However, as we have seen from my three other participants who are in no way shy or timid, speaking up would not necessarily promote the desired change. I believe that Jasmine instinctively knew this and if her Presbytery was more receptive she may have been more willing to stick her neck out.

I suggest Jasmine is less timid than she thinks because her response was to work within her Presbytery to correct the underlying issues of factionism and poor relationships with congregations because of the inappropriate use of power and authority. She was the only participant to become more engaged instead of less engaged within Presbytery. While this is great, it is still important to remember that her voice was all but silenced during the conversation itself.

Three words that summarize Jasmine's experience of becoming an Affirming Presbytery: cynical, stuck, determined.

## Meeting Dez

Dez is a minister in the United Church of Canada. That automatically makes Dez a presbyter as all active clergy are members of their Presbytery. Dez is also willing and able to hold a theological debate around concerns before the church. This distinction is important as theological training is not a prerequisite to being a presbyter and some presbyters are lay people who have no training outside of their congregation's Bible studies. Dez's position as a pastor is also important as it offers a particular view within the church and comes with specific concerns.

Dez is one of those people whose age is hard to pin down. Dez is neither really old or really young but clearly has experience as a Christian and as a pastor. Dez has seen other issues come and go and may have even been part of the conversation in 1988. Dez has wrestled with sexual ethics in the church before and will probably have to do so again. Dez has a number concerns around Affirming Presbyteries, some of which are found in Appendix C, but doesn't seem that concerned about Affirming Congregations. Sometimes, Dez seemed excited about the Affirming process and the chance for debate and engagement from different perspectives. Then the debate starts and only one side is heard. People who are usually vibrant and active voices grow silent. Dez has an opinion that people don't want to hear and rather than risk fanning heat to hate he<sup>43</sup> leaves the conversation.

Dez has felt anger directed at him from some people but it seems to be one person at a time rather than something systemic within the Presbytery. More than anger, Dez has encountered casual indifference about his concerns. These problems are valid and some need to be addressed while others need to be at least responded to. This conversation is too loaded to have something set aside so casually. Dez thought this was the reason the Affirm process takes as long as it does, to look at these problems and address them.

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<sup>43</sup> Three of the four participants were male so I will be using male pronouns when necessary for readability. Swapping the gendered pronouns in this section should be just as readable.

Dez is completely committed to this church and to the Gospel but is becoming cynical, frustrated, and disappointed. The church has struggled with oppression and as an institution with power and authority it routinely becomes complicit. The church leaders before 1988 had disempowered LGBT people and now Dez is the one being disempowered and ignored. Dez can't speak about his concerns and now actively fends off becoming apathetic as being a minister, and being a Christian is about participating in the Body.

It's hard at times for Dez because the Affirming question seems to just drag up all the other problems in the Presbytery. Congregations already don't trust the court and hard questions break down into "us" vs "them" as if a court can simply vote their problems away. The worst part is all the procedures, policies, or tools available at Presbytery are designed to support this system where someone wins, someone else loses, and the Gospel ends up lost in the debate. It can be hard for Dez to respond to God's call in this environment. The thing that keeps Dez going is the congregation. That's where the Christian life happens as individuals and groups try to pay forward God's love, revealed in Jesus, known by the Spirit.

Dez's own theology could be supportive of LGBT people or be a traditional understanding of sexual immorality. The way Dez talks about it makes it less about him and more about the church's theology. The church has been at this a while, too long perhaps with other issues needing the church's attention as well. Personal theology aside, Dez remains hopeful for the future. Real change is possible and if there was a better debate, meaning one where Dez can speak and have the court engage his voice, the work of the church would be based on the larger vision of the Gospel instead of public positions on issues. Dez remains in the church because God is not done with it yet. There is always hope so Dez will stay the course with his congregation, determined to be ready when the Spirit moves.

Something people noted about Dez during the public presentation of this research was how close his story was to that of LGBT people before 1988. I used three words to describe my participants' experience. It is clear when reading the statement from Affirm in 1984 that many LGBT people felt *hated*, *disempowered*, *silenced*, and *ignored*. The failure of the church to support them because they were different left them *disillusioned*, *disappointed*, and *withdrawn*. Some of them pushed through the *cynicism* and *apathy* through sheer *hope* and *determination to change* a doctrinal position that pre-dates Christ.

The concerns that Dez faces may be similar to those of LGBT people but it is clearly less severe and Dez knows that. Dez's continued employment in the church that raised, trained, and ordained him may become difficult but he isn't going to be fired for his beliefs. Dez knows some people will call publicly call him an idiot for believing as he does but the church will happily defend him if needed and it will not end in physical violence. Dez mostly wishes the debate in the church was dismantling margins instead of simply moving them around. And most importantly, Dez is ready to engage when the church ready to live into both sides of the common ground forged almost 30 years ago.

## Summary and Conclusion

The justice issue faced by LGBT people in the United Church of Canada was first responded to in 1988 when General Council listened to their voice and engaged their perspective. This engagement with the oppressed was the true triumph of the church in my opinion and the root of why this is a celebrated moment in church history. If the church is to remain true to this success it needs to continue its engagement with the different voices in the church, preferably before they reach oppressed status.

The risk of oppression is evident in the need to conduct Affirming Ministry votes by secret ballot. Originally protecting people voting yes, in some settings a secret ballot now protects those who would vote no. For a vote to have meaning it must back a corresponding change within the group. If consensus cannot be found, any vote that is not unanimous risks ostracising the dissenters. There are ways to mitigate these concerns but they begin with hearing and engaging the opinions within the group. There is a group within the church that has not been heard as fully as they should be. This paper begins to give that group a voice through Dez, but Dez is only one person.

There is a growing group of people within the church who are being pushed aside because of their theological understanding of relationship, sexuality, and marriage. For the church to be truly inclusive and affirming it must care for and support people who are living in faithful dissent with the church. The church needs to provide pastoral care for those who are frustrated and cynical while feeling ignored. The church needs to help individuals and congregations learn how to live in a church where their voice is not the

majority, especially when only one generation ago their voice was the strong majority. And most importantly, the church needs to learn how to do that without requiring people to conform and without rolling back the progress gained for LGBT people.

There is much more potential in the conversation than has been realized by Presbyteries and many more voices to hear than this. By understanding the experience of Dez and responding in kind, the United Church of Canada can become truly affirming the way the church envisioned it in Acts 15. We can become the church that affirms Christians of every sexual orientation and *creed*. There is room in this church for both the “liberal” and the “conservative” if we learn to live into the common ground forged between all Christians: the Gospel made known through Christ, by the Spirit, as our connection to God and each other.

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## Appendix A – History and Polity

The Atlantic School of Theology is an ecumenical seminary and I cannot assume that the reader of this paper is familiar with either the United Church’s history around LGBT rights or how the United Church’s structure makes Affirming Ministries both necessary and problematic. Here is a brief summary of the polity and history necessary to understand the research results.

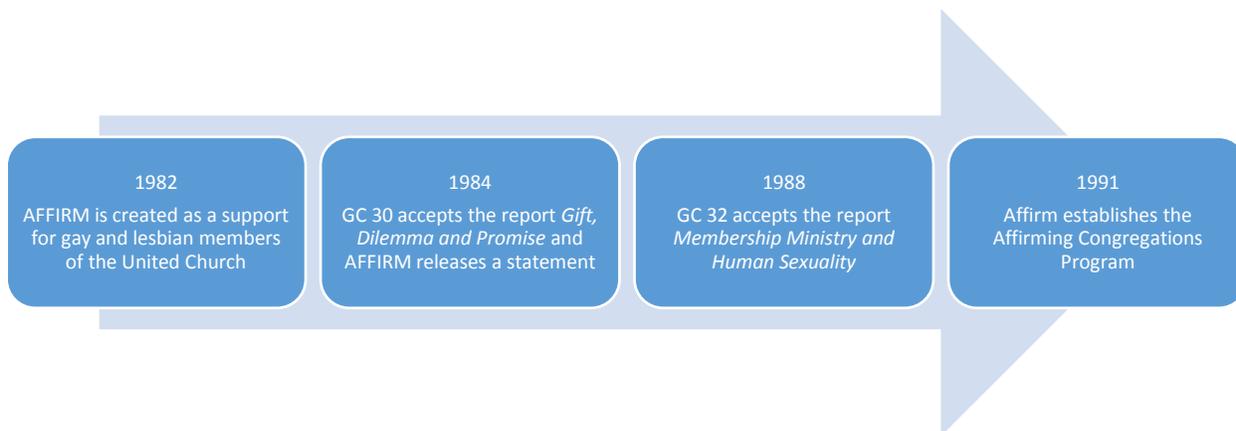


Figure 1 - Timeline for the Affirming Congregation Program

In 1982 AFFIRM is created to support gay and lesbian members of the church.<sup>44</sup> Homosexuality was gradually being accepted within society but gays and lesbians struggled in the church. General Council was also working on a report titled *Gift, Dilemma and Promise*<sup>45</sup> which discussed sexual ethics but did not deeply discuss sexual orientation. The 30<sup>th</sup> General Council accepted the report however I feel the church’s response fell short due to, in the report’s own language, “the traditional patriarchal structuring of society”<sup>46</sup> which today is called heteronormativity. *Gift, Dilemma and Promise* fell short of its own stated goals also: “WE AFFIRM that the intention of God for all persons is full equality in both our personal and social lives, including acceptance of our sexual differences and similarities.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> This and the following time line references come from Affirm, “Timeline on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The United Church of Canada – national highlights”, <http://affirmunited.ause.ca/wp-content/pdf/SexualOrientationandGenderIdentityUCC.pdf>

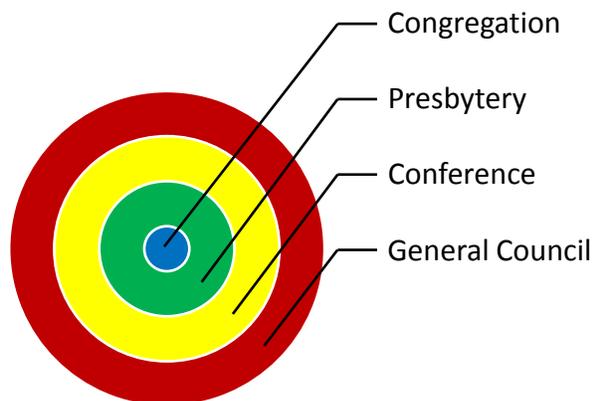
<sup>45</sup> United Church of Canada, “Gift Dilemma and Promise 1984G323.doc”, 1984, <http://commons.united-church.ca>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 4.

These shortcomings led to the report, *Membership Ministry and Human Sexuality* (MMHS) which was accepted by the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Council in 1988 in the decision “That all persons regardless of their sexual orientation: who profess faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to Him, are welcome to be or become full members of the United Church of Canada.”<sup>48</sup> There was a lot of conflict over that decision as some congregations supported it but others did not. Affirm United began the Affirming Congregations Program in 1991 as a way for individual congregations to openly declare their openness and support for lesbians and gays (in the language of the day).

The ability of a congregation to make such a stand is important because of how the church is structured. “The decision-making structures of the United Church are conciliar, meaning that each court has particular roles and authority.”<sup>49</sup> Courts are not “higher” or “lower” but each larger court contains the smaller courts with the individual congregation at the center. Each court is populated with clergy and lay people appointed first from a congregation.



General Council has the particular role of setting policy around membership, worship, doctrine, and government which is why the decision around sexual orientation and membership took place there. There are three hard limits to General Council’s power and authority though. One limit is “The General Council may not interfere with the freedom of worship that the negotiating churches had at the time of church union.”<sup>50</sup> What this means is General Council can say sexual orientation is not a bar to membership but they cannot direct congregations to change their policies on marriage, discipline of members, Christian education, or public worship which are all responsibilities of the Session or equivalent.<sup>51</sup> A Session cannot

<sup>48</sup> United Church of Canada, “Membership Ministry and Human Sexuality.pdf”, 1988, <http://commons.united-church.ca>, 4.

<sup>49</sup> United Church of Canada, “Statement on Ministry in the United Church of Canada (2012).pdf”, 2012, <http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/statement-on-ministry.pdf>, 3.

<sup>50</sup> United Church of Canada, *The Manual 2016*, 103.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

deny the membership of an LGBT person but how they receive, educate, and discipline such a member is a particular role of the Session and does not belong to any other part of the church.

This decision by General Council then does not guarantee a United Church congregation will be any more supportive of an LGBT person or perform a same gender marriage. The Affirming Congregation Program helps a congregation evaluate their processes and intentionally find and correct the hidden ways they are unsupportive of LGBT people. An Affirming Congregation is declaring they have done and are doing that work and are therefore an important part of the church's response to the decisions in 1988. An LGBT person can trust that an Affirming Congregation will be supportive of them and will correct any future bars to their inclusion to congregational life.

One of the common criticisms of the Affirming Presbytery found in this research was how little actually changed in the Presbytery after the process was completed. A Presbytery is intrinsically affirming because General Council makes decisions on doctrine and government and where a congregation has some flexibility in their application a Presbytery does not. Additionally, congregations decide the membership of a Presbytery. If a congregation appoints a gay lay person or hires a transgendered minister, then that person is a presbyter and there is no discussion to have. If a Presbytery is overtly or accidentally discriminating against LGBT presbyters, the problem needs to be addressed on those grounds irrespective of their Affirming status.

## Appendix B – A Theological Debate

Ichabod offered up a very interesting theological perspective that is worth engaging. I disagree with his position on a couple points but there is value to be found in the debate without first determining who is “right” and who is “wrong”. His position is based largely on the lists of sinful behaviour that Paul offers in his letters. One such list Ichabod mentioned is 1 Cor 6:9-10 and it seems to be a common reference point for other Conservative Christians as well. I will begin with the text and my best interpretation of Ichabod’s theological view.

“Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.”<sup>52</sup>

Ichabod notes that greed is on this list as well as “sodomites” which is also translated as homosexuality by some and sexual immorality by others. Ichabod will happily note that he suffers from greed and always wants more stuff. Sometimes he gives into greed and spends money on himself in a world where there is great need. This falls short of God’s intent for him, revealed in Jesus, by selling his possessions and serving those around him in need.

Paul notes in 1 Cor 11 that it is the action of God, through Jesus, by the Spirit, that makes a person sanctified and justified. People are simply not capable of this on their own and everyone falls short of God’s plan: Ichabod falls short when he buys something he doesn’t need, and LGBT people fall short when they form inappropriate relationships. This is a theology of temptation and original sin where everyone is tempted and fails in some way because we are all imperfect.

Because everyone is subject to original sin and falls short of God’s intent, Ichabod is understanding when people form same gender relationships or express their sexuality in ways he feels are inappropriate based on the scriptural tradition. The problem for Ichabod is less that people form those relationships than that the church says it is ok. Apply this logic to his person sin of greed, this is tantamount to the church

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<sup>52</sup> 1 Cor 6:9-10, NRSV.

saying it is permissible to buy a Hummer and build a huge house and live in it alone instead of giving to those in need. For the church to alter doctrine and polity so they are not oppressing a group based on their personal temptation is one thing. To teach that a sinful behaviour is not actually sinful is bad. To boldly advertise that teaching is a complete moral failure.

I did not respond to Ichabod's theology during the interview as our limited time together was for the specific purpose of hearing his story. I understand and appreciate where Ichabod is coming from. I also deeply appreciate the commentary on what happens when the church makes a statement. I offer this response now to continue the conversation.

Many of the sins Paul mentions are perversions of appropriate behaviour: sexual immorality is the perversion of eros love, being a drunkard (or gluttony) is the perversion of hunger, reveling is the perversion of joy, greed is the perversion of need. Ichabod's logic falls apart for me at the line where filling a need becomes greed. Using my own personal temptation of gluttony, I eat because my body needs food. When I eat more than I need, I do so to the detriment of my own health and the people I could be feeding. Some good questions that come out of this are, at what point should the church step in and correct the sinful behaviour? Is the church become complicit in my gluttony through their teachings and actions, coffee fellowship time for example? But the problematic question is, what food choices are good and which ones are just sin: where is the line?

The church acknowledges that sexual immorality is still a concern. The church is now teaching that same gender relationships and gender identity are not inherently immoral. Moreover, homosexuality is a relatively new word. Advances in biological and social sciences aside, I am not convinced the committed same gender relationships the church is celebrating today is what Paul is warning his community about. Paul is writing to specific communities in a specific cultural context where sexual immorality was a real and present concern. The "sodomites" in 1 Cor 6 is more likely reference to state sanctioned orgies rather than committed same gender relationships.

Ichabod is concerned that the church is teaching a sinful behaviour is not actually a sin and therefore misleading people in their spiritual life. James has heavy warnings for teachers because the effect of their

actions is multiplied. I deeply appreciate this insight and feel it is one that the church has occasionally forgotten as they engage this debate.

My concern is that Ichabod's definition of sexual immorality is too broad and restricts relationships that would otherwise be filled with God's love. The intent of the General Council in 1988 was to refine the church's definition of sexual immorality so it was not exclusive of same gender relationships. I don't have a complete understanding of what Ichabod considers sexually immoral, where the line is between eros love and sexual immorality. Without that understanding I cannot reasonably continue the conversation.

Out of this conversation, and the research in general, it is important for me to understand my own reaction to his theology. Using Acts 15 as my basis, I now treat his view as precise where I once considered it narrow. I understand that it is important for him and those he ministers to hold this understanding. It is important for the church to be supportive of Ichabod and William and their congregations as well as Bob and Jasmine and their congregations. Like the Gentiles and the Pharisees of old, it should be possible for both to follow Christ without one first converting the other.

Engaging Ichabod's view has allowed me to explore this problem from a new perspective and I am better for it. I have a deeper understanding of sin and how the pronouncements of the church impact individuals and communities in their attempts to follow Christ. I would not have been able to learn this without engaging the position of someone who holds a different position than I do. For that, and for Ichabod, I am deeply grateful.

## Appendix C – Discussion Points

The primary goal of this project was capturing the experience of people who did not vote yes to the decision to become an Affirming Presbytery. Each person raised concerns out of the decision and the process leading up to it that were minimized, ignored, or left unsaid. Those concerns are offered here as a short-list of potential discussion points. Engaging these discussion points is one way to lift up the voice of those who have been silenced. This list cannot be considered exhaustive with a sample size of four and might be better used to open conversation. Engaging with some of these concerns might invite others to offer their own.

1. What are the theological understandings present within the court?
  - a. Can the court use Acts 15 as the foundation for supporting individual theological positions around the common ground forged in 1988?
2. How does becoming an Affirming Ministry resemble empire?
  - a. Voting and polity are tools of power. This is especially true at Presbytery and Conference. Regardless of intention, how are those tools pressuring people who already fit within the doctrine of the church to adopt a different theological understanding?
  - b. Whether it is intended or not, there is a sense of agenda present in the process. Where does the process drift from presenting information toward advocating a view?
  - c. Does the process make assumptions that were valid in 1991 but are no longer valid in 2017? Does a court need to spend time exploring the conservative or traditional view to ensure an informed opinion before voting?
3. What is being accomplished with the designation, Affirming Ministry?
  - a. Who is being labelled and what does that label mean?
  - b. Is the meaning of the label being communicated effectively?
  - c. Are people being labelled in ways that ratify the margins instead of remove them?
  - d. What are the consequences of adopting the label? Can they be mitigated?

4. What power dynamics are connected to the question?
  - a. What authority does the court have and does the decision overstep those bounds? Specifically, is a Presbytery or Conference interfering inappropriately with congregations who have not adopted the label?
  - b. What are the consequences for the ministries supported by the court? Can they be mitigated?
  - c. How is the court going to support those who disagree with the decision? It is possible to pastorally transfer a member to a congregation that can support them. I problematize that solution in general but it is not even an option at the Presbytery or Conference level.
  
5. How do we ensure the process leads to meaningful transformation?
  - a. Who decides what transformation looks like?
  - b. How do people respectfully critique the process when meaningful transformation is not found?
  - c. How does the court ensure that meaningful transformation for one group does not come at the cost of another?

Some of these questions are framed in the negative and I have intentionally resisted the temptation to reframe them in the positive. The Affirming Process exists because LGBT members of the church still need support and care within the church and within society at large. To reframe everything in the positive minimizes the plight of a marginalized group. Support for LGBT people in some parts of the church has grown to the point that others within the church are now feeling marginalized. To reframe everything in the positive minimizes the hurt and concern of the group which held the common narrative only 28 years ago. To follow Christ is to brave the dark places and trust the Spirit to light the way.

## Appendix D – Informed Consent

Who Affirms the Dissenters?

Name of Principal Investigator(s) Brian Curtis

Atlantic School of Theology

660 Francklyn Street

Halifax, NS B3H 3B5

[506-521-4987; bmcurtis@gmail.com]

I am a student enrolled in the Master of Divinity at Atlantic School of Theology. As part of my course work under the supervision of Dr. Susan Willhauck, I am conducting a study on the experience of those who voted no to becoming an Affirming Presbytery

I will be interviewing people who are active Presbyters in an Affirming Presbytery who voted no to the motion to become Affirming. I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purposes of this work are to examine what ideas and experiences participants may have; to increase the body of knowledge on the topic of dissent and to explore how these themes might filter into the life of the church.

Your participation in this project is appreciated. I will ask you a series of questions on your experience and will audio tape your responses. If we communicate by phone I will plug my phone into a recording device. If we communicate by Skype I will record the conversation using the program. Either way, I will be using headphones to ensure privacy.

At the beginning of the interview you will select, or I will assign, a fake name to use during our conversation. The recordings and transcript will be held in a secure environment throughout this study and after the final project is completed, they will be held in a locked file (in Dr. Susan Willhauck's office) for one year, at which time they will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please read the following and indicate your willingness to be involved by giving your signature at the end.

I acknowledge that the research procedures outlined have been explained to me, and that I have been given a copy of this consent. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I know that I can contact the researcher at any time should I have further questions. I am aware that my participation in this study is purely voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time. I understand that the personal record relating to this study will be kept confidential. I know that the researcher will make every effort to keep all information obtained in this Study as confidential and anonymous as possible. Names and potentially revealing facts will be changed, thus affording me anonymity. To further protect individual identities, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored separately. Furthermore, the results of this study will be aggregated and no individual participant will be identified.

The following is a timeline for the storage and destruction of data:

1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent form from research participants, the researcher will:
  - a) Provide one copy for the participants.
  - b) Keep one copy which will be placed in an envelope separate from all other materials and stored in a secure location.
  - c) Provide one copy for my supervisor, Dr. Susan Willhauck, also placed in a separate envelope. The supervisor will store these in a locked file cabinet.
2. Audio files of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device or password protected computer. These devices will be kept locked and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent through the public Grad Project presentations and until deleted permanently from the device on Dec 9th, 2016.
3. Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document or pdf. The Word document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final Grad Project paper is due on Dec 9th, 2016.
4. The public Grad Project Presentations take place on Nov 29th 2016 and the final project paper is due Dec 9th, 2016. On that day I will delete recordings of interviews and bring all transcriptions and copies of Informed Consent to my supervisor by Dec 15th, 2016. The supervisor will store these documents in a locked file cabinet at AST for one year, at which time they will be shredded on Dec 9th, 2017.

If you have questions, please contact me, the principal researcher at 506-521-4987, or [bmcurtis@gmail.com](mailto:bmcurtis@gmail.com).

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology in keeping with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. If you have questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Alyda Faber, chair of the Research Ethics Board, at [afaber@astheology.ns.ca](mailto:afaber@astheology.ns.ca).

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.

## Appendix E – Invitation to Participate

Hello Presbyters of [Name] Presbytery,

On [date], [Name] Presbytery became an Affirming Ministry and joined Affirm United. You are one of only a few Presbyteries who have opted to be "formally" Affirming at this time. The decision to become Affirming can be heated and consensus at times all but impossible to reach. But now that the decision has been made, how do both sides of that question, those who voted 'yes', and those who voted 'no' or chose to abstain, continue to live, work, and worship together?

My name is Brian Curtis and I am a Master of Divinity student at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax. I am researching the experience of those who voted 'no' to becoming an Affirming Presbytery and are still active members of their Presbytery. There are many reasons a person might say no to a decision like this, and not all of them are related to sexuality. More importantly, conflict and stress do not simply vanish after the church makes a difficult decision, and becoming Affirming is no different. How does a ministry live into a decision like this? How do we support *everyone* during and after such a debate?

I am looking to interview Presbyters who voted no or intentionally abstained to the decision to become Affirming, for whatever reason, and are still active in their Presbytery. To that end, I am sending this invitation to every Presbytery listed on <http://affirmunited.ause.ca>. We can speak over the phone or through Skype and confidentiality will be maintained by assigning a false name to you, and to your Presbytery, throughout the analysis and during my presentation and report. This research will help the church foster useful dialogue where both sides of the debate have a voice and promote a space that is founded on mutual respect and support.

Thank you for considering this research effort. If you are interested in contributing I would love to hear your stories. Please contact me at 506-521-4987 or by confidential email at [bmc Curtis@gmail.com](mailto:bmc Curtis@gmail.com).

## Appendix F – Thank You Letter

Dear [Name],

I would like to thank you very much for your participation in my research on how people experience becoming an Affirming Presbytery. Know that what you contributed was of great value and is incredibly important for the continued growth of the church in the midst of such complicated, and often heated conversations.

The conversation around becoming affirming can put tension between relationships. I acknowledge the difficult nature of the conversation we had. If the church is to work through these challenges with respect and dignity, we need to hear the all the voices. By being open with me and sharing your story the church will be in a better able to live into that message from scripture: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

As I said during the interview, I did present my research on Nov 29th at the Atlantic School of Theology. The presentation will soon be available on YouTube through the school’s channel, although I do not have a release date at this point. The paper will also be published on the Atlantic School of Theology Library's database.

Your contribution to my research will help me understand what it is like to dissent to so heavy a question as this. As I continue my work, know that I will endeavor to speak to your experience faithfully and with the respect and grace it deserves.

Thank you again for your time and for sharing your story,

Brian Curtis

Principal Researcher