

Same-Sex Marriage - Our Story First Baptist Church, Halifax, NS Canada

Background

It was in the fall of 2003 that the topic of same-sex marriage first hit the agenda of our Diaconate. Many informal conversations had taken place in both the Church and community because the federal government of Canada was proposing to legalize same-sex marriage, but this would be the first time on a formal agenda.

Our Chair at the time, Marilyn Peers, remembers:

I recall a collective moment of hesitation. We had never discussed same sex marriage before this comment came up nor did we know each other's views. But we did realize in that moment, that to say 'Yes' or 'No' would be a matter for the whole church to decide. We also knew that we in the Diaconate would be the ones to give leadership to our congregation.

There was great controversy over this legislation in our country. Politicians were expressing their views, church leaders were speaking out with their concerns, and social activists were talking at rallies. The Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches (our denomination) adopted several resolutions opposing the "homosexual lifestyle" and the government's entrenchment of the term "sexual orientation" in the Federal Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code of Canada. Resolutions also affirmed the "Christian view of marriage" and urged Convention churches to speak to representatives at all levels of government, to affirm the distinctive nature of heterosexual marriage and to seek to protect it and uphold it in law and in public policy.

Our Diaconate made a crucial first decision - to invite the congregation to join the Deacons and Ministers in an educational series that would help prepare us for taking a position as a Church. Our watchword was "to seek the mind of Christ" and our commitment was to take all the time necessary for careful study, open and safe conversations and prayer. Because we really did not know how people in the pews would react, or even where each of us as individuals stood, just announcing decision to tackle the issue filled us with anxiety!

We also were aware that choosing to make a congregational decision meant that we were not automatically accepting our Convention's firmly held position as our own. This would lead to several years of conflict with our denomination, and our eventual withdrawal from membership in the Convention.

Believing that our views on same sex marriage would be influenced by our views on homosexuality, we planned to focus our four part series on perspectives on same sex *relationships*, leaving the topic of marriage for a later time.

In her February 2004 annual report to the Church, Marilyn Peers wrote:

"It is not our intent at this point, that the congregation "have a vote" or "take a stand", but rather prepare ourselves through presentations, conversations and prayers for informed decisions in the future. We recognize that our membership includes gay and lesbian Christians and that we will have differing opinions and beliefs on this matter. By increasing our knowledge of the issues, respecting one another's viewpoints and developing greater understanding, we will seek" the mind of Christ" together so that we can go forward with confidence, courage and faith."

Process

In April 2004, we began a four part series entitled *Perspectives on Same Sex Relationships*. We had secured the services of a retired education specialist to guide our conversations by setting the “ground rules” and leading each session. This allowed our Ministers and Deacons to participate more fully in the discussion and created an atmosphere of genuine searching.

The room was set with tables for four, enough for sixty participants (eventually attendance reached closer to eighty). Participants chose where and with whom to sit. The leader asked all participants to follow specific protocols at their tables: conversations were to be respectful, participants would speak honestly from their own perspectives about the topic at hand and anything shared in confidence would be held in the confidence of the table group. Participants were encouraged to make their tables “safe places” for people to share their views even when they disagreed.

The first session was led by a respected family physician who spoke on what is known and not known about sexual orientation. Her informative talk was enlightening and questions were answered with tact and genuine caring. It was clear from her presentation, though, that “biology” by itself was not going to provide definitive answers to our many questions.

At the second session five gay and lesbian members from the community were our guests. Each in turn shared their experiences of being gay in the church and in the community. Their stories were not easy to hear and revealed appalling treatment by a wide variety of Churches. Particularly poignant was a young man’s story. He had grown up in a Baptist Church, participated in all the youth programs, became a church musician and then was rejected (fired) by the very Church that had nurtured him all his life! We were moved by the courage of each participant to tell their personal stories as persons of faith living in the love of Christ. Growing enthusiasm for each new session was evident and guests in the first two presentations asked to return and join the remaining series.

The third session was led by a constitutional lawyer, well known as an articulate and passionate speaker. With clarity and an engaging directness, she helped us understand the proposed federal legislation and the basis for decisions already being made in some provinces that allowed civil marriage for same sex couples, consistent with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. People were challenged by her questions: Why are churches the most likely organizations to seek exemptions from human rights legislation? Why do followers of Jesus want the legal right to exclude and discriminate?

At the last session our topic was *Reflecting Biblically and Theologically on Same Sex Marriage*. The pastor and the session lay leader presented their views, offering perspectives from “both sides” of the pulpit. Various interpretations of Biblical passages were reviewed, the thoughts of scholars shared, and questions posed as to how our faith helps us to make ethical decisions in church and society. Both speakers left room for people to make up their own minds, but each took the risk of placing their own views before the group. Neither believed that a biblically based faith categorically ruled out same sex marriage, nor that homosexuality was inherently sinful.

In reflecting on the entire series, Marilyn Peers reported:

For many of us, this road less travelled has been a highlight in our spiritual growth. The presence of God was clearly felt among us and as sessions went on, we felt more and more blessed by our experience in seeking the mind of Christ together in this way. Our detailed two page questionnaire to participants at the last session revealed that we had learned a great deal more than we had previously known; that we had identified even more future learnings for ourselves; and that we were already thinking of ways in which

we could make our church more welcoming. The questionnaire picked up a significant shift in attitude by all participants.

Following the spring 2004 sessions there were many opportunities for continued informal discussions, and the topic was a regular agenda item for the Deacons and Ministers. In September 2004, same sex marriage became legal in Nova Scotia and in the summer of 2005 the federal government passed a new Civil Marriage Act making same sex civil marriage legal across Canada while assuring religious bodies that no clergy would be forced to officiate at a same sex marriage. This moved the issue to the “front burner” for both First Baptist Church and the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches.

In the fall of 2005, the Convention Council declared that any accredited clergy who officiated at a same sex wedding would immediately be removed from the list they submitted to the provincial governments for authorization to do marriages. They also declared that such clergy were likely to lose their accreditation. Although the Council did not have the constitutional authority to make such declarations, it was clear what path the Convention was intending to take when it next met in August 2006.

In April 2006 the Deacons of First Baptist Church called a special meeting of the congregation to ask if they felt ready to make a decision regarding same sex marriage, or if more time, or information, or meetings were required. Nearly one hundred members attended and a profound discussion took place. Views were shared, stories were told, tears were shed and people were affirmed no matter which view they expressed. Over and over again we heard people speak about wanting to do the loving thing even if they could not figure out all the theology. Seniors in their eighties and nineties led the way with their affirmation of love for all God’s people.

At the end of the meeting the congregation declared its readiness for a vote to be taken after proper notice and the circulation of a resolution. The Deacons took the leadership as the pastor was by then “out of the picture” on sabbatical in England. Based on the discussion they had heard, they decided that the resolution would not deal with same sex marriage alone, but that it would set a policy of non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation for all aspects of Church life, including membership, leadership, ministry and marriage. When the resolution was presented to a meeting of the congregation in June 2006, it passed by a 93% vote!

Aftermath and Fallout

In the months that immediately followed the vote, members reported a tremendous sense of empowerment and joy. “A burden has been lifted” was a common refrain as the choice to include began to take root, grow and develop. Though we were saddened to see three of our families decide to worship elsewhere, we were thankful that this happened without bitterness or anger.

Meanwhile, the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches continued on a different path. In August 2006, the Convention voted to amend its Regulations on the Ministry to prohibit accredited clergy from officiating at same sex marriage on penalty of a charge of professional misconduct and withdrawal of credentials. The Convention also went through a process of incorporation that led to the adoption in August 2009 of a new General Operating By-law giving Convention even more authority over local congregations. Through all the discussions on balancing “interdependence” and “local church autonomy” the issue of homosexuality and same sex marriage was an undercurrent. It had become the new test for orthodoxy and fellowship. In February 2010, after many failed attempts to find a way to work with Convention leadership, First Baptist Church voted overwhelmingly not to remain in the Convention. We could not freely respond to the call of Christ to welcome and affirm GLBTQ persons while under Convention auspices.

Over the last six years First Baptist has gradually grown more fully into the meaning of the decision we made in 2006. The congregation has embraced a new outreach to GLBTQ youth in our city through cooperation with the Youth Project, a non-profit charitable organization dedicated to providing support and services to youth around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity (www.youthproject.ns.ca/). We have provided financial support for camps and for province-wide gatherings of high school youth seeking to combat bullying based on gender orientation through the formation of gay/straight alliances. Gradually, gay and lesbian couples have begun to trust us and to become part of our church life, this in spite of the continuing negative messages coming from other Baptist bodies here and elsewhere.

In September 2011 Rev. John Boyd officiated at the marriage of two men in First Baptist Church. He wrote about the experience in a letter to Convention in which he surrendered his accreditation:

It was one of the most meaningful acts of ministry I have ever experienced, filled with joy and gratitude as we celebrated the gift of love God had given to them. In every way, my role in this ceremony was the same as that for any other marriage ceremony, and consistent with my ordination vows. The marriage took place after months of preparation during which I had the opportunity to personally explore matters of faith and relationship with the couple. The couple completed a marriage preparation course as mandated by our congregation. During the ceremony I led the liturgy: offered prayers, read scripture, preached a sermon and witnessed the offering of their vows. As with all offerings in the context of worship, I led the congregation in prayers of thanksgiving and blessing. In my role as an agent of the province of Nova Scotia, I signed the appropriate documents. The reception that followed was an experience I will never forget. Many people came to me in tears expressing their profound joy and surprise in being able to experience the love and acceptance of God in a Baptist Church. I am not exaggerating in saying that my departure from the reception was impeded by a long line of people who rushed to the door to shake hands, tell me their stories and weep on my shoulder. I was deeply honoured to be able to read a grace written by the father of one of the men, a Baptist minister who had died only a few days before the ceremony. It was filled with a father's love, acceptance and hope. I firmly believe that I was serving Christ and bearing faithful witness to his love for all people in this service.

Today First Baptist Church Halifax continues to be a member of the Halifax Region United Baptist Association and the Canadian Association for Baptist Freedoms (formerly the Atlantic Baptist Fellowship) and has forged strong ties with two American bodies, the Alliance of Baptists and the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. Our ministers are accredited by the CABF, which has recently been received as a member denomination of the Canadian Council of Churches. Our decision to be a fully welcoming and affirming congregation has closed some doors but opened many others, and we are grateful to God for leading us more deeply into the joy of following Jesus.

(Article provided by Marilyn Peers, retired Deacon, and Rev. John E. Boyd, Senior Minister of First Baptist Church Halifax)