

Inclusive Ministries Service¹
April 21, 2024-4th Sunday of Easter

Rev. Joe Gaspar

The bible is a human document. A collection of myths, histories, poetry, prayers, proverbs, letters and more, written by imperfect people trying their best to be faithful in their particular historical circumstances. So, it reflects the attitudes and biases of the time. These attitudes and biases often reveal themselves in who gets a name and who doesn't. You've heard some of the nameless in scripture—women, the disabled, the poor, the foreigner. These labels often reveal who is simply in the background, not important enough to be named. The labels tell us who lacks power. Many times, though not always, these labels reveal the people who are just props for the Christian story. Foils for feelings of superiority or for our redemption narratives.

Laura MacGregor last week, speaking of her own experience of disability in church, said that too often we only see what we want to see in others. She spoke of how her son was labelled as the angelic suffering child and she as the Mother Teresa type selfless caregiver.

Laura and her son Matthew were props in other people's stories. Laura never felt she and her son were ever seen for who they were, never listened to. They were part of the background of church. As Laura said, we do that to protect ourselves from entering the pain of people's lives.

I say all this because I think the most important thing the Inclusive Ministries Committee does is bring into the foreground of church, the people who've always been in the background. Theirs and ours is the ministry of noticing, listening, naming, and acting. In our final scripture this morning John the gospel writer has the risen Jesus speak Mary's name. In turn, Mary, names Jesus, "Rabbouni", a term of endearment for a mentor or teacher, so more than a nameless category. This naming makes a relationship a possible because they see each other for who they truly are. Grief transforms into hope. A new beginning becomes possible. That's what Inclusive Ministries is all about, truly seeing each other so that pain can be transformed into hope and new beginnings can take root.

Liz Forde (prepared by Maedith Radlein and the Inclusive Ministries Committee)

Good morning! The Inclusive Ministries Committee is delighted to have been given the opportunity to share its story with you. We are Liz Forde, Nancy Dykstra,

¹ For today's service a collection of scripture snippets were shared. Each, except for the last, had a person in it who is not named but rather mentioned by category. These are the people that are part of the background of scripture. As such the scriptures were read from the background, except for the last one. The last one, in which people are named was read from the lectern. In order the scriptures were, Luke 17: 11-12, Mark 5: 25-26, Matthew 19: 14, Genesis 25: 5-6, John 4: 6-7, Acts 8: 26-27, Genesis 16: 6, Matthew 9: 27, Mark 12: 41-42, John 20: 15-16.

Adrienne Barrett Hofman, Kevin Smith & Maedith Radlein. We meet on the first Tuesday of the month at 7:00 p.m., usually virtually but sometimes in person. You have to check us out. What a blast! We laugh, we mourn, we think big, we aim to change the world. Join us, we've got a spot waiting for you. After all, we are Inclusive, and we really want you to help determine how our story continues. Allen Switzer was there at the beginning. He'll tell you how we started....

Allen Switzer

In 1988 the General Council of the United Church would vote on whether to allow Gay and Lesbian ministers to be in the pulpit. This decision would change the course of the United Church and Parkminster would be a participant. There was a congregational vote as to allow gay and lesbians in the pulpit, Parkminster voted, "no." This was the message Parkminster's delegate would take to General Council. This is where our story begins, Marion Mutton, our delegate, would attend General Council. Listening to delegates at the Council, Marion voted, 'yes', to having gay and lesbian ministers in the pulpit. She voted against Parkminster's congregants wishes. Quoting Marion's son Bruce, Marion would return home to some pretty angry friends. As time went on most of those who were angry softened and eventually came around to the same decision.

The vote at General Council for having Queer people in the pulpit passed. From this result a separate entity, Affirm United was born. This was to support 2SLGBTQ+ ministers, congregants, and allies of the United Church. Affirm United created a process for individual churches to take their congregants through the steps of becoming an Affirming congregation. In 2004 Parkminster started the Affirming process, with the creation of the Affirming Committee.

The Affirming process would be a long journey ending with a congregational vote in 2006. In 2003 the Ontario government passed a bill to allow same sex/gender couples to be married in the province. At the annual meeting 2004, Parkminster changed it's marriage policy, anyone that could be legally married in the Province of Ontario, Parkminster would marry them. 2005 in September, the rainbow banners first appeared at a worship service, the message was about, God, Noah, and the rainbow. In that same year, in November, the rainbow banners would reappear for the first same sex wedding in the sanctuary. During the ceremony the Brass Bell Chorus performed along with the voices from the Rainbow Chorus. Rev. Peter and Rev. Elizabeth Moffat officiated, Rev. Roz Vincent-Haven and Rev Tom Watson read scripture.

In 2006 the Affirming procedure seemed to be moving forward with incredible support. Council decided, when the vote was taken an expected result would be sixty-six plus one percent in favour of becoming Affirming. The vote would take place on Sunday, November 12th, 2006, after worship. During the procedure, the Affirming Committee read and discussed various books; encouraged to view a movie in the theatre, Brokeback Mountain (the gay movie at the time) and engage members of the congregation in

discussion what it meant to be Affirming. One fear was a pink bus would arrive at the front door and a bunch of strange people would step down, then step in.

In the spring of 2006, the Rainbow Chorus of Waterloo, Wellington was invited to sing at worship. At the same service four speakers from the congregation would tell their stories. The first speaker, a minister, and a member, well known to the congregation, suspected of being gay, but never officially came out until this very day. You will pass his photo in the narthex as you leave the sanctuary. The second speaker, a gay employee of Parkminster would tell his story while in high school being bullied by fellow students under the watchful eye of male teachers. The teachers did nothing. The third speaker, a queer man and Chair of Ministry & Personnel would state, “when a person comes out, you are always coming out.” The fourth speaker a mother, she and her husband were charter members at Parkminster, here from the beginning. Her 4 children would grow up in the church. She stated, when one’s child comes out, the parents have to also. Two of her sons are gay.

The fall of 2006, it was becoming apparent, the “no” side was finding their voice. This was not the easy journey as most people expected. On Sunday, November 12th the day of the vote, there was anxious anticipation. Worship ended. It was now time for Parkminster to determine it’s future, becoming Affirming or not. The Sanctuary was full, both sides either “yea or nay”, had encouraged their friends and family members to attend. The time came for the vote! The result was two thirds plus one for becoming Affirming. “Yes” to becoming an Affirming congregation was accepted by one vote. That meant one third of the congregation voted “no.”

Now Parkminster was “affirming” the Affirming committee was disbanded. In it’s place would be a new committee, Affirming Implementation Committee. This committee’s task was to register with Affirm United that Parkminster was now an Affirming congregation. A rainbow sticker was placed on the front door. The committee reached out to other Affirming congregations in the area, Harcourt in Guelph, and Westminster in Waterloo. In February 2007 the committee was dissolved, in it’s place would be a new committee, Inclusive Ministries.

When the Affirming Implementation Committee existed and then became Inclusive Ministries, both would be sub-committees under the umbrella of Community and World Service, now known as “Outreach.” It would be years later that council would grant Inclusive Ministries to be a stand-alone Committee.

Liz Forde (prepared by Maedith Radlein and the Inclusive Ministries Committee)

...And so it began, the journey into seeing, inviting, and embracing the divine in us all. We started attending Tri-Pride in 2008. Initially some congregants from Westminster was there with us. We had a table and an opportunity to talk to people making them aware of the welcome they would receive at our churches. We continue to be there every June and look forward to seeing you there sometime.

When Meg Grieve joined us as our interim minister in 2015, she challenged us to consider how we do church. Supporting with money and words is easy, being present and visible is more challenging. She encouraged us to fly the Pride flag to proclaim that this is a safe space, a space that welcomes all who may not be welcome in other places of worship. The Welcome Statement was written, Welcome to people of all ages, colours, abilities, gender identities and sexual orientations. Meg was a wise woman. Those two actions have brought numerous people to Parkminster.

The flag also brought hate. Information on the sign advertising a potluck in October 2017 brought hate graffiti to our front entrance. Luckily, a few weeks before, we'd received the gift of Joe & Heather who matched hate with love and used social media to share the incident. The response was overwhelming, graffiti became art and the potluck was our most successful yet - almost 70 people. The incident prompted many churches in the community to reach out. We saw in action what our new governance model had challenged us to create: a community of faith. From evil sometimes comes good. The graffiti led us into relationships and partnerships that still continue.

So, what do we do? We partner. The playgroup, originally an initiative of Outreach, is now run by Liz Forde, our chair. We again partnered with Outreach just before the COVID pandemic when, noticing that some of our elders were less able to participate actively, we had a series of game afternoons for gathering and fun. The Outreach-Inclusive Ministries partnership is ongoing.

We Invite People In. As we've drawn the circle wider, we've sponsored the Gay Men's Social Group, and the ACCKWA (Aids Committee of Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo & Area) Cooking Group. They currently meet here at Parkminster. In December 2017, we hosted World Aids Day in the gym. We have a Black Lives Matter statement on our website.

We Work Towards Reconciliation. We've embraced our commitment to Reconciliation by partnering with the Healing of the Seven Generations; supporting their school backpack drive, donating an outdoor sound system for their events, and providing gym space for them to sort toys for their Christmas Toy Drive.

We Educate. The Living into Right Relations sub-committee led by Nancy Dykstra publishes a monthly newsletter which shares opportunities for learning and participation. This initiative has been embraced by the larger community - people from various denominations and non-churchgoers alike. They are committed to righting historical wrongs and walking with Indigenous Nations on the path to Reconciliation. Members of this group delivered monthly lunches to Land Back on their site just outside of Caledonia for over 3 years. Pop-up discussions were led by Adrienne Barret Hoffman in 2021. These covered a variety of topics such as anti-racism, white privilege, anti-Asian racism & Land Back. In 2022, Adele

Halliday, The UCC's Anti-Racism Equity Lead for General Council, facilitated the pop-up on, How to Become an Anti-Racist Church.

Outreach and Inclusion belong to all of us, not just the committees with these names. Inclusive Ministries works to create community by reaching out to invite people in and make Parkminster a church without walls. We invite all ideas and approaches and are always looking for ways to draw the circle wider still. Our potlucks have become networking events. There are regulars from Guelph, London, Woodstock ... with an average attendance of 15-20. We have one in the spring and one in the fall. The spring event was a week ago on April 13. If we missed you, no problem! You can join us in the fall. Listen for the announcement! Ours is a never-ending story. Where we are today is not the end. How the story continues will depend on you and Parkminster's ongoing commitment to draw the circle wider, to see who isn't here, to represent the voices that are silenced, to live into our commitment to be a community of faith inspired to embrace our future. How do we make a difference in the world? Inclusion belongs to all of us; every individual, every committee. It must live in all our actions. Come! Share the journey. Thank you!

Rev. Joe Gaspar

Thank you Liz and Inclusive Committee members. As Allen mentioned this all started in 2006 during the ministry of Elizabeth and Peter Moffat. I'd like to conclude by referring to a sermon Peter delivered on May 7, 2006. At the time Parkminster was in the midst of discerning whether to become an affirming congregation that would be intentionally open to and welcoming of 2slgbtq+ people. Peter addressed the fear felt by some that such a stance would result in Parkminster being "labelled" by the community. Peter responded with this,

“...whatever ‘sign’ is used to identify ourselves, and whatever ‘label’ the community puts on us, I trust we will be able to celebrate such ‘labelling’ because we are proud to declare that we are a community of faith, whose nature is open, inclusive, tolerant, respectful, and welcoming of all, regardless of any ‘label’ ascribed to them.”

People back in the day were right, we have been labelled, as the church with the flag, now two flags. Peter was right, we've grown into that labelling, it's something we celebrate. What a blessing that labelling has been, to be a visible sign of God's love for those who have so often felt forgotten or worse, persecuted by the church. As Liz said, the ministry of the Inclusive Ministries Committee is a never-ending story, may it continue to be a blessing to our church and our community.