

FIRST THINGS FIRST

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, REGINA

March 2018

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

Last month you may have noticed an invitation to Presbyterians to participate in discussions about human sexuality at a meeting of the Presbytery of Assiniboia that was held at First Church on February 10. I agreed to facilitate the meeting during which we examined and responded to several documents sent out by the General Assembly (2017) for study and report by the whole church. Thanks to those from our own congregation who participated in this portion of the meeting. It was a good and respectful discussion, even though there was a significant diversity of perspective and of biblical interpretation among those present.

These discussions are not new. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has been talking (on and off) about human sexuality for almost 30 years. During that time, a few key reports have been written and adopted by the General Assembly, including the 1994 Report on Human Sexuality and the 2003 Report of the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation. You can find these (and many other documents on the subject) on the PCC's website at www.presbyterian.ca/sexuality/.

In the years following 2003 there was a pause in discussions of sexuality in the church, but around 2014 a movement within the denomination began to declare that "It is time" for us to discuss again and make some new decisions regarding sexuality. Numerous overtures (proposals) to the General Assembly in 2015 requested that the church revisit the topic, with many calling for: full inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in the church; the blessing of same-sex marriages; and the ordination of LGBTQ people who may be in same-sex relationships. At the same time, a similar number of overtures asked the General Assembly to reaffirm the church's current position as expressed in the 1994 Report on Human Sexuality.

Every General Assembly since then has devoted significant time and attention to these matters. Both the Church Doctrine Committee and the Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries) have been studying, reporting, as well as encouraging discussion at all levels of the denomination – synods, presbyteries and sessions. Last year, a discussion guide titled "Body, Mind, and Soul" was circulated and used as a resource for local discussions, and this year our task has been to study several reports from Church Doctrine and the Life and Mission Agency, and to report our feedback to those committees.

These reports are extensive, including detailed interpretation of biblical texts from more than one perspective. If you haven't already done so, I encourage you to read and consider these reports. (Hard copies are available in the Narthex, otherwise these reports may be accessed at www.presbyterian.ca/sexuality/) Members of the Session of First Church have read them, and we've had them as a topic of discussion at several Session meetings over the last few months.

One of the reports from the Church Doctrine Committee, titled "*Where from Here? An Exploration of Possible Ways Forward for The Presbyterian Church in Canada on Questions of Human Sexuality*", invites consideration of what God may be calling the church to do at this time. Many Presbyterians believe it is time for a change in policy regarding same-sex marriage, while many others want to affirm a traditional understanding of marriage. There is, of course, worry about the unity of the church as we try to move forward. Will either a decision to change, or a refusal to do so, result in a division in the denomination? Is there a possible middle way?

Perhaps in an attempt to get a "read" on what people are thinking across the national church, "*Where from Here?*" asks us to consider three

possible options for moving forward. It acknowledges that these are likely not the only options and that any of them could be amended, but it nonetheless invites us to consider these options and respond. Here they are:

Option A: that what the church has previously taught on questions of human sexuality is faithful to the teachings of scripture and to the theological heritage that is ours in the Reformed tradition. It entails a re-affirmation by the General Assembly of what the church has historically taught on these questions. Following this path would include a process of listening and confession for homophobic actions and attitudes, as well as imply hospitality toward those who identify as LGBTQ – all are loved in Christ and welcomed in the church. But this option would not involve any practice of blessing same sex relationships, or of providing for the marriage of same sex couples. Ordination as a minister or an elder would be possible only for those who are single or celibate, or for those who are married (where marriage is an opposite-sex relationship).

Option B: that what the church has previously taught on questions of human sexuality does not attend to the overall “arc of scripture” towards the welcoming and the inclusion of all people within the Christian community – and especially those whose identity does not fit within a traditional heterosexual framework. Following this path entails a redefinition of marriage in relation to our subordinate standards (Living Faith and the Westminster Confession), as a relationship between two persons rather than between a man and a woman. Here, there is also a change with respect to ordination since ordination would be possible for those who are single or married regardless of whether the marriage is same sex or opposite-sex in nature. This option would also allow a freedom of conscience and action for those who disagree with such a change in church teaching – meaning, among other things, that ministers would not be compelled to solemnize same sex marriages.

Option C: that newer biblical and theological reflections on marriage and human sexuality do not present a compelling case, and that the church’s teachings should not change. However,

this option recognizes that the church is divided on these questions and it creates space for those who can no longer accept the church’s traditional teaching on human sexuality. Following this path entails the creation of a new liturgy for the “blessing” of same sex relationships -- which is not a marriage ceremony – but it allows sessions to use this liturgy, and ministers to preside in this liturgy should they wish to do so. Within this option, it is also imagined that ordination as a minister or an elder would become possible for those in same sex relationships, assuming they had received the blessing provided for within the new liturgy.

You may be interested to know that in the Presbytery of Assiniboia’s recent discussion, Options A & B were supported by a similar number of people, with Option C being supported only by a few. In discussions at First Church’s Session, the majority of elders supported Option B. Personally, I support Option B, and I believe that it is time for our church to change our policy and fully welcome and include all people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. I am praying that God will help us to move forward together, respecting different perspectives, but not at the expense of our LGBTQ members who have been suffering from exclusion, or at least marginalisation, for far too long.

At our meeting on Wednesday, March 7th, the Session asked me to write about this topic for this issue of the newsletter, and specifically that I share a letter from the Moderator of The Presbyterian Church in Canada to the people of the denomination. It is a letter of repentance for the ways the church has harmed and excluded members of the LGBTQ community over the years. The 2017 General Assembly instructed the Moderator to write this letter, acknowledging that regardless of our opinions about same-sex marriage or our biblical interpretations with regard to sexuality, one thing that the church agrees about is that we need to repent of our homophobia. The Session and I commend the Moderator’s letter to you for your reflection and response. As we continue these discussions, let us pray for God’s wisdom and compassion to guide us.

A Prayer as the Church Discerns the Mind of Christ on the Matter of Sexuality

In the law and your prophets, O God, you have revealed your will and desire for justice. And in the life and ministry of Christ, we see your love and grace incarnate. Open our hearts and minds by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as we pray as your church “to be guided into truth knowing that such truth may disturb and judge us”¹ but always trusting that in your truth we may find freedom and in your will find peace; “for with you is the fountain of life and in your light we see light”² through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Rev. Amanda Currie

MODERATOR’S LETTER OF REPENTANCE

February 12, 2018

To The Presbyterian Church in Canada and all those harmed by homophobia and hypocrisy by and within the church:

The 2017 General Assembly asked the moderator to write a letter of repentance to the LGBTQI community. Although, in 1994, the General Assembly received The Human Sexuality Report that called on The Presbyterian Church in Canada to repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy, the church to this point has not acted on that call and publicly repented. However, the 2017 General Assembly established a listening committee, the Rainbow Communion, to create a safe space for LGBTQI persons and others to tell of their experiences in the church, and to report back to Assembly no later than 2020. This letter of repentance is an interim response between the call of the 1994 document and the work of the Rainbow Communion.

God calls the church to be a welcoming community where we welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us. In our hypocrisy the church offers welcome to heterosexual people but often shuns people who do not identify as heterosexual. In this homophobic environment, the church is often an unsafe place for people to

name their sexual identity and orientation. For the church and our congregations failing to be safe and welcoming places, we are sorry, and we repent.

In this homophobic environment we are all harmed. Families have felt and still feel the church’s expectations to condemn and reject children, siblings and parents who do not look, act or speak in ways congruent with the restrictive gender definitions of the church and society. Friends feel pressure to break off connections. For the ways our congregations judge and exclude others based on restrictive gender definitions, we are sorry, and we repent.

No one should ever be harmed for naming their sexual identity. We live in a culture and a world where LGBTQI persons are bullied, brutalized and sometimes killed. Moreover, bullying and violence occurs in congregations or in the community with the support of church members. Presbyteries and sessions fail to hold church members and church leaders accountable for their hateful acts. For our failure to protect those attacked and brutalized, we are sorry, and we repent.

For our ongoing failure to hold people accountable for abuse and hatred, we are sorry, and we repent. Even when congregations and church members do not participate in emotional and physical bullying, the church’s silence condones such action when it fails to speak against the violence. By not speaking clearly and in a public way, the church is “part of the evil of the world, of its violence, neglect, and injustice.”¹ 1 Living Faith 2.5.6 Moreover, church members wanting to speak, fear that if they speak they will be ridiculed and bullied themselves. For our silence and silencing others, we are sorry, and we repent.

The church by its actions and inaction, speaking and silence, creates hurt, fear and distrust among LGBTQI persons who are part of the church. Deaf to the cries of hurt, fear, and distrust, the church dismisses the pain experienced by LGBTQI persons. For our unwillingness to recognize the hurt and fear our actions and attitudes have caused, we are sorry, and we repent.

Bullying, hatred and silence, have led to emotional and physical pain and personal struggle, which sometimes have led people to attempt or commit suicide. The church has not offered and continues to fail to offer care to those who face this struggle and pain. For our failure to offer tender care to the hurting, we are sorry, and we repent.

Irrational fear in the church has created a climate where there is often more interest in condemning what is considered sin than in listening to the struggles and stories of human beings. The church is often quick to speak and slow to listen. Further, the church is quick to name and condemn certain sexual practices, while at times being slow to name and confront sexual abuse and marital unfaithfulness. For our hypocrisy, we are sorry, and we repent. For offering judgment and condemnation rather than gospel hope, we are sorry, and we repent.

The church too often puts more emphasis on a person's sexual identity than on their identity in Christ. When the church ignores the gifts present within the body of Christ, it fails to appreciate all that God has for the church and fails to see God's glory revealed in all people. For our unwillingness to affirm the spiritual gifts present in all the people of the church, we are sorry, and we repent.

By God's grace, led by the Holy Spirit, and seeking to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ we repent and desire to go in a new way and to be a welcoming church centered in the Triune God of grace who draws us into community. As such a community, we will seek, as individuals and congregations, to welcome all, as Jesus Christ has welcomed us. We will reach out, rejoice together in fellowship, and seek holiness as we worship, pray, sing, eat and listen together for God's Word speaking to the whole church. We commit ourselves to pray with one another, weep with one another, and rejoice with one another.

This letter of repentance is neither the beginning nor the end; it is but a part of a longer conversation. This conversation is being taken up in part by the Rainbow Communion, a committee with the important mandate of creating a safe space where experiences of LGBTQI people will be told and heard.

Those who wish to respond to this Letter of Repentance can do so by sending their e-mail response to repentance@presbyterian.ca.

In Christ,

The Rev. Peter Bush Moderator of the 2017 (143rd) General Assembly
The Presbyterian Church in Canada

PRACTISING PRAYER

Over the last few weeks, Rev. Amanda offered a few opportunities to learn about Spiritual Disciplines and Practices of Prayer. Even if you were not able to attend the Tuesday evening sessions, you may want to try out some of the prayer practices that were introduced. There are "Prayer Stations" set up around the sanctuary (in the side chapels and along the side walls). These will remain up until Easter, and you are invited to check them out, try the various prayer forms, and take home the hand-outs for any of the practices you may want to keep doing. Feel free to make use of the sanctuary for prayer before or after Sunday worship or during the week. Call the church office (306-522-9571) or Amanda's cell (306-580-8095) to make sure that someone is at the church to let you in when you drop by to pray.

Rev. Amanda Currie

MEET OUR NEW YOUTH LEADER

On Sunday, February 25, we welcomed and commissioned our new Youth Leader, Jordan Sim.

My name is Jordan Sim and I was born in Regina but grew up in Saskatoon. My journey of faith and becoming a Christian has been a difficult one. My foundation of faith has always been there. However, after becoming involved with the wrong crowd, I let myself down a slippery slope completely lacking in spiritual accountability and discipline. I sought comfort in the chaos I had built for myself.

I moved to Regina to start anew. I cleared my mind and started to experience human interactions and nature in a new light. I dug deep into my mind and soul, questioning my faith and who I am. An opportunity to be a counsellor at

Camp Christopher this past summer, where I went as a young teen, was seized. I faced many trials head first, which have only strengthened my relationship and belief in God.

I work for Northern Strands here in Regina where I manufacture wire rope and chain assemblies for hoisting and rigging purposes among other tasks. I love to be outside playing sports and working with my hands. I love animals and cooking and my favourite colour is blue.



BOARD OF MANAGERS

The annual Congregational Meeting will be held on Sunday, April 15 following worship. Lunch will be provided. Annual reports will be available on Sunday, April 8 so that you will have a week to read through them prior to the meeting.

MISSION & OUTREACH

Easter in Memoriam: Plant a Tree in Palestine

Keep hope alive for farmers in Palestine by planting an olive tree. Olive trees are the basic source of livelihood and nutrition across the Mediterranean basin. They are also an ancient symbol of peace. Palestinian farmers have seen their mature trees uprooted, burned and destroyed, depriving them of their income and their traditional way of life. Many of the trees are hundreds and even thousands of years old. You can help the East Jerusalem YMCA and YWCA of Palestine reach their goal of replanting 8000 new olive trees each year, replenishing the orchards of affected farmers.

Healing and Reconciliation Sunday May 6:

The Rev. Dr. Margaret Mullin, Presbyterian minister and Executive Director of Winnipeg Inner City Missions (WICM), will be our guest preacher. Dr. Mullin is of Ojibway and Irish/Scottish ancestry. Learn about WICM's work in building safe and healthy community in Winnipeg and hear her perspectives on integrating Christian and Indigenous spiritual teachings.

Indigenous Spirituality Study - April 30, May 7, May 14.

Blair Stonechild, Professor of Indigenous Studies at First Nations University of Canada will lead this study program. Many will remember the talk he gave at a lunch event after a worship service last May. Following that event, a strong interest was expressed in learning more about Indigenous spirituality. Dr. Stonechild is pleased to return and share his knowledge with us.

The study series will take place on Monday evenings with times to be finalized soon. It is open to the general public, so please invite your friends along. Come to one session, or all three for an insightful evening of learning and discussion. This series is offered as a contribution to "healing and reconciliation" in our city.

Mary Jesse
M&O Convener

WORSHIP COMMITTEE

We are now well into the season of Lent which means that Easter will soon be here. The Worship Committee along with Rev. Amanda Currie have several plans for your time at worship.

Our annual Maundy Thursday potluck supper, followed by a communion service in remembrance of the Last Supper, will be held on Thursday, March 29, beginning at 6pm. Please plan to attend and bring your favourite casserole, salad or vegetable dish for the evening meal.

Our Good Friday service will be held the following morning at 10:30 am with special music arranged by choir director Bill Sgrazzutti and our minister, the Rev. Amanda Currie.

The Easter Sunday service marking the celebration of Christ's Resurrection will begin at 10:30am on April 1. Please invite your families and friends to join us. You will also have the opportunity to place flowers in the sanctuary Easter Sunday in memory for a loved one. See the Sunday Bulletin for more information.

On April 8 the Rev Henry Friesen, who will lead us in worship.

Greeters are needed for April, May and June. If you can be of assistance, please let Wendy Prior know. Scripture readers for May and June are also needed. See Marianne Woods if you would like to be a lector.

Joyce McKersie
Worship Committee Member

PRAYER SHAWLS

The next Prayer Shawl Gathering will be Friday, March 23rd at 2:30 pm at Wintergreene Estates. (4950 Pasqua Street) Bring whatever you are knitting or crocheting and join others for coffee, conversation, and prayer.

FUNDSCRIP

Our congregation lives with a financial deficit. Participating in FundScrip is one way you can help to provide additional revenue. When you buy a gift card, you pay the face value and the church gets back the percentage listed. We had great orders in November and December as people planned for Christmas, however using gift cards for regular purchases of gas and groceries has a tremendous impact throughout the year. Our order last week was only \$1,000 which means we paid the full cost of shipping and that really eats into our profits.

Special promotions for March include Amazon.ca (2.5%) and Stokes (8%). If you haven't ordered before, drop by the table in the gymnasium and talk to us - it's easy! The next order Sunday will be March 18. Since April 1 is Easter Sunday this year, we will not be selling FundScrip that day, or taking any orders. The order Sundays in April will be the 2nd and 5th Sundays - April 8 and April 22, respectively. Please visit the FundScrip table following worship either to purchase cards that we have on hand or to place an order.

YOU OUGHTTA BE IN PICTURES!



Session has decided that it is time for a new congregational Photo Directory. Our last one was done in 2011 – and a few of us may have changed slightly since then! Artistic Impressions – a company from Calgary – will be here from April 26 to April 28 to take our photos. Signup sheets will be up soon so that you can choose the times most convenient for you and your family to come and have your photos taken. We are looking for a great turn out so that our directory can be as complete as possible. Mark the dates on your calendar.

VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL

This photo is from VBS 2016 at First Church. Wonderful memories of a fabulous week! We'll be confirming the dates for this summer's Vacation Bible School very soon. Parents/families, if you haven't already let us know about your children's availability this summer, please talk to Jo Szostak or Bette Kelly right away!



CANADA YOUTH

A BIG THANK YOU to everyone who supported our Canada Youth fundraiser dinner on Sunday February 24 at the Da India Curry House. We raised \$1,160 while having great food, fellowship and fun! Please check out the photos of the event that are displayed in this issue of *First Things First* and in the gym.

CY2018 is coming July 2 - 7! There are three tracks designed for young people. The Youth Track is for high-schoolers who have completed Grade 9. The Discipleship Track is for young adults (age 19-25), and the Youth Ministry track is for youth leaders age 18+. Our congregation has set aside funding to pay registration fees for interested youth. The Synod of Saskatchewan pays most of the travel costs.

This year there will also be an adult track called NEXT offered July 5-7. The focus of this track is on "congregational resiliency" or helping your congregation move ahead in these challenging times.

For more information visit the website: <http://presbyterian.ca/canada-youth-2018>. Please talk with Rev. Amanda if you are interested in attending.

PICTURES FROM OUR FUNDRAISER



MARCH EVENTS

11	10:30 AM	Worship Service & Sunday School
	11:45 AM	Meet the new Youth Leader
13	9:00 AM	Adult Walk
	10:00 AM*	Bible Study (* this week only)
	noon	Freedom 55'ers
15	9:00 AM	Adult Walk
	9:20 AM	Riverbend
	7:00 PM	Choir
17	9:30 AM	Presbytery @ Whitewood
18	10:30 AM	Worship Service & Sunday School
20	9:00 AM	Adult Walk
	10:30 AM	Bible Study
	noon	Freedom 55'ers
21	7:00 PM	Board of Managers
22	9:00 AM	Adult Walk
	9:20 AM	Riverbend
	7:00 PM	Choir
23	2:30 PM	Prayer Shawl Gathering (at Wintergreene)
25	10:30 AM	Palm Sunday Worship & Sunday School
27	9:00 AM	Adult Walk
	10:30 AM	Bible Study
	noon	Freedom 55'ers
29	6:00 PM	Maundy Thursday Potluck and Worship
	7:30 PM	Choir
30	10:30 AM	Good Friday Worship
April 1	10:30 AM	Easter Sunday Worship