

The Journeys of a Gay Christian
Pride Service Presentation by Larry Tayler¹
Trinity-St. Andrew's United Church, Brighton
Sunday, June 7, 2020

Thank you, Reverend Wanda and Betty Ann for inviting me to be part of your Pride activities. I am proud to be speaking to you as an openly gay man who is Christian. And my husband, Bill, is Christian. And my late husband was Christian. Now, some Christians believe you can't be both gay and Christian. Well, they're wrong. I feel sorry that their understanding of Christianity is so limiting. They really are missing the radically inclusive message of our faith. The lived experience of my life and the lives of countless others call out their homophobia.

And I like the word 'pride' to celebrate the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Two-Spirit, Intersex, Asexual, Plus communities. Not everyone likes the word pride in the context of sexual identity. However, I'm not using 'pride' in the vain sense of "what cometh before the fall," but in the generous, loving sense of a community's acknowledgement of itself. It's the same pride I feel for my grandchildren because they're such wonderful human beings.

Now, I'm calling this presentation "The Journeys of a Gay Christian" because there are two journeys I want to explore with you.

My first Christian journey begins in the United Church of Canada. The United Church is part of my family DNA – on both sides. For decades, my mother's family belonged to the Bloomfield United Church, while my father's family belonged to the Wellington United Church. Yes, friends, I am a true Prince Edward County boy, having been born and bred in the County 73 years ago. My paternal great-grandfather, the Reverend Dr. Melvin Tayler, was a minister in the Methodist Church of Canada for many years before church union in 1925, after which he became a United Church

¹ Contact information at the end.

minister. He had charges in the Eastern Townships, Montréal, and the Ottawa Valley. He even came out of retirement in 1927 to serve for a year at the Picton United Church when the previous minister left town suddenly with the pregnant church organist – but that's another story.

In my youth, I spent most Sunday mornings at the Wellington United Church – through years of 10 o'clock Sunday School classes, 11 o'clock church services, confirmation classes, White Gift Sundays, Christmas pageants, Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and countless dinners in the church basement featuring baked beans, scalloped potatoes, sliced ham, Jell-O salads, and dry brownies, all catered by the Women's Missionary Society. On December 31, 1966, my friend Sandy and I climbed the bell tower of the church and at midnight, we rang the bell 100 times to welcome Canada's centennial year. For me, those early and mostly positive experiences of church in general and the United Church in particular were formative and influential. My family's theology was simple – of course, there is a God; of course, you go to church; and, of course, you serve your community. For them, *that* was the real Trinity: Faith, Worship, Service.

While growing up on the family farm near Wellington, I also knew that I was attracted to men. I had no vocabulary for it, but I *knew*. My idol, after all, was the Lone Ranger in his tight pants, spending nights with Tonto out there on the lone prairie. Well, even as an eight-year-old, I had fantasies about how they kept warm during those chilly nights. Interestingly, I felt no shame about these fantasies. And nothing I heard from the pulpit of the Wellington United Church threatened me with hell-fire and damnation for having such thoughts. But I also knew that I had to keep everything to myself, which ironically fostered an active inner life that was highly satisfying – and still is. I grew up liking my own company, enjoying my fantasies, and feeling totally comfortable with having a rich inner life. I look back on the awareness of that inner life as the beginning of my spiritual awareness as well.

But the world's negativity towards homosexuality inevitably barged into my tiny, perfect fantasy life with violence and brutality. As a nine-year-old, for some reason I told a twelve-year-old on whom I had a crush that I *really* liked him. His response? He beat me up. I can still feel – and hear – his fist landing in my stomach and then my face. His friends joined in. That pain stays with me, as does his laughter and the laughter of his friends. It was not the only time I was beaten up. It seemed that as I got older, I had to keep relearning the lesson that I mustn't say anything about my real feelings for other boys. Honesty got me beaten up. Honesty hurt. I didn't know the word homosexual at that age, but I understood more about society's hatred of homosexuals from the schoolyard than I ever did from a United Church pulpit.

So those are the building blocks of my first Christian journey: growing up in the United Church, comfortable – perhaps too comfortable – with its traditions, and remaining essentially closeted.

In my late 20s, however, I found United Church services to be constricting. To be honest, I also found my life to be constricting, so I gradually drifted away from the church. I did, however, maintain an active interest in Christianity, the Bible, and spirituality. Looking back, I realize that I had already begun my second Christian journey. And this is the journey that led me to becoming a member of the Religious Society of Friends, aka, the Quakers, an affiliation I have maintained since the mid-1970s. A dear Belleville friend, herself a life-long Quaker, introduced me to Quakerism by saying, "I think this sounds like you." And indeed it did.

Some background for those who might be fuzzy about Quaker history: cast your mind back to mid-17th century England, during the English Civil War. It was a time of profound change throughout England and Europe. The Protestant Reformation had been brewing for over a century and the Age of Enlightenment was on the cusp of blossoming. Traditional understandings of authority were being challenged and people were reading the Bible in their own language, thanks to the printing press, rather

than having it read to them in Latin by a priest. And then, breathtakingly for the time, some of those readers began to interpret the Bible for themselves, much to the chagrin of the church establishment. In England, things got really out of hand when the House of Commons found King Charles I guilty of treason and beheaded him on January 30, 1649. When commoners can execute their monarchs, all manner of mayhem can ensue. From this revolutionary brew, several small religious sects arose, including the Religious Society of Friends, members of which were disdainfully referred to as 'quakers' because they sometimes shook while speaking during worship. Members of the Religious Society of Friends eagerly adopted the name. By the way, the group's official name comes from what Jesus said to his disciples in the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 15, verse 15, "I have called you friends." Quaker beliefs include the conviction that you don't need a priest or minister to interpret the Bible for you – you can do that for yourself, with divine guidance, because there is that of God in everyone. The way to resolve conflict is to appeal to that of God in others and settle disputes without violence, which is known as the Quaker Peace Testimony. Other basic tenets of Quakerism were simplicity, plain dress, the equality of men and women, and refusing to swear an oath. The worship services, known as meetings, were held in expectant silence, with people speaking only when they felt that God had given them something to say. Or, as one Quaker has put it, "Speak only if you can improve on the silence."

Although early Quakers were certainly Christian, over the centuries that has evolved. Contemporary Quakers espouse a wide variety of theological understandings, from Bible-based Christian literalists on one end of the spectrum to universalists and non-theists at the other end. Some conservative Quaker meetings even have ministers. There are also small but dynamic groups of Jewish Quakers, Muslim Quakers, and atheist Quakers, just to make life interesting.

If someone were to ask me to describe my form of Quakerism, I would say I am a progressive Christian who believes more in the importance of Jesus as an exemplar of human potential than in the theological complexities of

Christ. The human Jesus is the one who walks with me and talks with me. The supernatural Christ requires magic and suspension of my intellect. The human Jesus celebrates with me on the good days and weeps with me on the bad days. The supernatural Christ sets a high standard that I will never be able to attain. The human Jesus allows me to grow into the theology of my beloved Grandmother Tayler who would say to me when I was depressed, "You're perfect enough, Larry." That's the kind of Christian Quaker I strive to be.

Now, it's hard for me to separate my spirituality from my sexuality. As I explored Quaker spirituality in the 1970s and 1980s, I was also actively exploring my sexuality. It was a powerful combination in which I saw no contradictions. In fact it was at a Quaker lesbian and gay workshop in Pennsylvania in 1983 that I met Spencer, my first husband. It was an inspired match, and we shared our lives together in Toronto for the next 29 years. Both of us drew on our Quaker spirituality and our gay sexuality to live full, productive, engaged lives. During the AIDS crisis, we were politically active and involved in the Toronto gay community. One of our callings was to attend the funerals of gay men whose families refused to attend. For us, it was a form of witnessing. Too often, walking into the funeral homes involved running the gauntlet of so-called Christians yelling in our faces, "God hates fags." You can't unhear that sort of hatred. More positively, my most rewarding activity was serving as the Quaker representative on the AIDS Spiritual Network, a coalition of faith-based groups that nurtured the spiritual needs of people living with AIDS.

In the midst of the AIDS crisis, Spencer and I decided to marry, even though that wasn't a legal option at the time. The local Quaker community was not fully supportive of equal marriage then, although it certainly is now. Sadly, we even received hate mail – imagine that: Quaker hate mail – as we tried to have our relationship recognized as a marriage by our Quaker meeting. After many difficult, unproductive sessions among members of the meeting to discuss our request, we finally gave up and simply organized our own wedding ceremony. It was a glorious celebration that I recall with joy and

tears. From then on, we identified our relationship as a marriage and referred to each other as husbands.

During this process, we experienced generous support from many people, but we also encountered a significant amount of homophobia. Quite frankly, the process wore me down, and I cut back on active participation in my Quaker meeting. By the early 2000s, I stopped attending altogether. And that continues to this day. I fell out of the habit of attending Quaker meetings. So, alas, I am not a poster boy for Quakerism. However, I continue to identify myself as a Quaker, stay connected with the larger Quaker community, and attend occasional Quaker Gatherings. And I have a number of dear Quaker friends, many of whom were incredibly supportive during my first husband's illness and death in 2012. But most importantly, over the years, I have decided that there is more than one way to be a Quaker.

Which brings me to my fabulous second husband, Bill. He calls himself a "small 'q' Quaker". He has found sustenance from his Quaker connections over the years. And we share a passion for seeing life as a series of spiritual journeys. Quakerism provides us with an important vocabulary for experiencing these journeys. When we married, we had a Quaker service, even if it was held in the chapel of the Anglican Girls' school where I taught for twenty-four years.

And my journeys as a gay, Christian Quaker continue – in my reading and writing, in my photography, in my public speaking, in the workshops I facilitate, and in the life I strive to lead. I am blessed beyond measure and practise gratitude at each and every turn, especially in these days of uncertainty and isolation.

And I am grateful to Trinity-St. Andrew's for its outreach into the LGBTQQ2IA+ communities. You are making the world a safer, more welcoming place to live. Thank you.

And I thank you for your attention today and wish you the traditional Irish blessing, "May you have enough."

Thank you.

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