

THE PROFIT'S VOICE

June 23, 2019

Pentecost 2

[Galatians 3:23-29](#)

[Luke 8:26-39](#)

(prayer)

It is a normal expectation that congregational ministers in the United Church of Canada dedicate some of their time to activities and duties with the wider church... typically with the Regional and/or General Councils meetings and work. Before 2019, when we had Presbyteries and Conferences as part of our structure, the amount of wider church meetings to attend was more than it is now... which is nice.

From a local church perspective, including this in the minister's job description is a recognition that we are part of a larger denomination - where we share resources, policies and a collective identity and influence: we are not merely independent *congregationalists*.

We are not alone.

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Now, some UCCan clergy are barely involved in the wider church (they avoid it), even though it is one of the ways, we (as clergy) give back to the denomination that trained us and nurtured us and continues to support us with policies and guidance and inspiration.

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Me personally: "I" have always served both my congregation and the wider church. I've been on presbytery finance committees, conference youth and young adult ministry groups; I've been a Presbytery chairperson and secretary and pastoral relations convenor; I've been on countless pastoral oversight visits (routine and crisis), joint needs assessment and search committees; once, I was even an adjudicator on a formal hearing panel; and I have been a General Council commissioner three times in the last 30 years.

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Currently, I do two regular pieces of wider church work as an extension of what I do with all y'all:

- I am on the Board of Regents of St. Andrew's Theological College in Saskatoon, and
- I am on the Northern Spirit Region Pastoral Relations Commission.

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- I guess that I have a third wider church role. Technically, I am still a GC commissioner, should there be a need to have a special meeting before GC44 meets in Calgary in 2021.

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Now, as a member of the region's pastoral relations commission, I get to read a lot of (what are called) *community of faith profiles*.

These are the documents that churches write up to describe themselves and their ministry.

The United Church has just established a new online database where each church can upload its current information, particularly its living faith story part of the profile.

But, the online profile is an essential part of defining what level of ministry is needed for a particular church and the leadership skills and experience they need as part of the process of looking for and finding a new minister.

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The PR committee that I serve on looks for honesty and realistic expectations in these profiles. We don't tell churches how to define who we are: other than to make sure that they are adhering to all of the relevant UCCan policies.

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Above all, we want to enable good minister-church relationships. So, community of faith profiles need to be accurate and authentic.

It makes no sense to say that the church needs a minister who can provide meaningful worship services for young families and children, if the practical reality is that no one really wants kids making noise in church.

And... don't tell prospective ministers that the church has lots of copies of More Voices if people are going to end up complaining until the entire hymn repertoire comes from the 1800s.

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As churches, we don't do ourselves, our communities, and those who might be seeking spirit in our midst, any favours if we can't be honest with ourselves about who we are and who we are willing to become.

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At last summer's General Council meeting in Oshawa, there was a special recognition of the 30th anniversary of the UCCan stating unequivocally that a person's sexual orientation was not a disqualifying factor in being a minister in the church.

Many of you may recall that, with that decision in 1988, the UCCan made the headlines as the first major North American Christian denomination to ordain openly gay ministers.

It was a decisive time within the church.

There were church splits.

There were fights over property.

Some ministers and members left the church.

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I was a student minister in Penticton in 1988/89 and I know *the issue* was an issue there.

I am sure that that decision impacted the life of the United Churches of Leduc County, including St. David's.

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I was your minister here 13 years ago when you decided at an annual meeting (after a good, all-opinions discussion) to respond to the changing marriage laws in Canada to amend the congregation's marriage policy to say that *St. David's is pleased to celebrate marriages for all couples who can obtain a legal marriage license in Alberta, provided that the couple recognizes the importance of the Christian faith and spirituality in their life and marriage.*

In other words, same sex couples were going to be treated the same as opposite sex couples as far as St. David's wedding policy was concerned.

It was not a unanimous vote, but by-in-large, people supported the results.

I'm not sure... but we may still be the only church in Leduc that will conduct religious same sex marriages.

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And, I was your minister here a few years later, when it was a complete and total non-issue when I asked permission of the church council to place rainbow flag stickers by our church doors.

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Since then, our inclusive intentions have been explicitly noted on our brochures and online platforms.

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I was inspired by a presentation I saw at General Council last summer on [IRIDESCE - The Living Apology Project](#) - a national UCCan project of story-sharing with all people affected by the church's 1988 decision. A moving [drama](#) was presented one evening at GC43. I heard very clearly that this topic is not a thing of the past.

It is not a resolved issue in the church or society.

It is a living justice issue.

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And so... I came home from GC43 determined to see whether there was an appetite at SDUC to take our welcome and inclusion one more step forward by considering formal Affirming status.

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As I mentioned during the announcements, I invite any interested people to come together today around one of tables in the coffee room after to continue to examine our capacity to be a welcoming and safe church for people of all gender identities and sexual orientations - including formal accreditation as an *Affirming Ministry* within the United Church of Canada.

As I noted... **my** assessment is that we have been a fairly welcoming and inclusive congregation for LGBTQ2+ people for quite a while -- in theory and in our outward presentation at least.

I set out to gauge the degree of the church's authenticity and honesty with an overt focus during the month of June.

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You can see that this year, I have been going all out for Pride Month - my tie and stole (gonna need a wash, I am wearing them so much); a new large and visible rainbow flag hanging by the west entrance.

I (and the group meeting after church and your church council) want **and need** to know how you feel about this, really.

So, let's be honest with ourselves about who we are and who we are willing to become.

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Today, in the gospel of Luke, we read about a time when Jesus and his disciples had sailed across the Sea of Galilee to the region of the [Decapolis](#) - a region of ten cities on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire (located east of Galilee on the other side of the Lake and the Jordan River).

The basic story that we heard is common to all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke).

It is the story of Jesus' encounter with a tragically tormented man. A modern psychiatrist would diagnose him with some form of mental illness that manifests itself in seizures and fits of violent outbursts. In the first century, his ailments were considered a result of demonic possession. This man's condition was so severe that he was presumed to be hosting of a host of demons.

The story goes that when Jesus healed the man, the legion of demons then infested a herd of pigs, who rushed down to the lake and were drowned.

The sight of the floating carcasses and the once-tormented man (now in control of his mind and body) was too much for the people of the town --- Jesus was no longer welcome.

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And yet... the impact of Jesus' actions would remain as the healed man *proclaimed throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.*

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Three weeks ago here in church, we [heard the story](#) of Paul and Silas locked up in a Philippian prison. They had been arrested because a consequence of their healing of a local slave girl was that she would no longer be a source of income for her master.

There may have been a similar concern, today, in Garasa. A consequence of Jesus' healing action was the loss of livestock. There is a *hint* in the text that Jesus was told to leave because of his negative impact on the local economy.

It is possible that in both the case from Acts (three weeks ago) and Luke (today) that the attitude was... *sure, it is fine and dandy that a couple of people are no longer tormented, but - in the bigger picture - it's bad for business.*

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"Lock 'em up. Lock 'em up."

"Get out of our town."

We don't want your kind around here."

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It is hard to embrace the words of a prophet (calling us to a deeper, more meaningful and faithful existence) when the income statement is our highest god.

When we have a "yeah, but" theology.

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What will we listen to?

The prophet's voice or the profit's voice.

(Point to sermon title on screen)

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When the apostle Paul set out on his task to share the good news of Jesus beyond the edges of Judaism (which was - until the days they died - Jesus' and Paul's foundational religious tradition), he [Paul] helped nurture new, diverse communities of faith. Even so, there were always those in those early churches who had trouble looking beyond the differences among them to appreciate what they have in common.

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In letters to both the Roman and Corinthian churches, Paul preached that, in spite of their variety, they are one in Christ... that God's spirit unites them... that they are like many parts of a single body.

In the Galatians correspondence (which we heard from today), Paul shares another version of this same message.

In Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

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I wonder if Paul highlights the distinctions of religious/national heritage, social status, and genre because those were particular sources of division within the church in Galatia. I doubt that Paul would have seen it as an exhaustive list. But, we can fairly assume that some people in the Galatian church were holding one or more of these highlighted characteristics as a privileged status compared

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to others.

In the wider culture of the time, men would have been assumed to have higher status than women -- and -- slaves, by definition and practice, would have been seen as subservient to others.

In the book of [Acts](#) and in other Pauline letters, we can see that there were some who saw the Jewish Christians as having a more authentic faith than the gentile members of the church. Some even insisted that gentile believers needed to be circumcised into the Jewish tradition to be a follower of Jesus.

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In the text today, Paul makes his view plain.

Yes, some of us are Jewish, some are not.

Some of us are free; some are slaves.

And, obviously, there are both women and men among us.

*But, no matter how important those distinctions might be in the world... in God's eyes... **were are one.***

And so, within the church at least, we need to ignore these differences too.

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As we listened to these scripture readings today, we heard how some people can be imprisoned by legalism, economics, and health.

And yet... none of those pressures quieted the work of God.

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In our context, it is fair to extrapolate the examples in Galatians and Luke to highlight those who our society **and church** might be prone to exclude because they might ruffle our feathers too much.

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The reason why issues of LGBTQ2+ inclusion are highlighted in June is because of an [event](#) that happened in the early morning hours on June 28, 1969 in Greenwich Village in downtown Manhattan, NYC.

At 1:20am, the doors of the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street burst open:

"Police! We're taking the place!"

(from Wikipedia) The raid did not go as planned. Standard procedure was to line up the patrons, check their identification, and have female police officers take customers dressed as women to the bathroom to verify their sex, upon which any men dressed as women would be arrested.

But, those dressed as women that night refused to go with the officers. Men in line began to refuse to produce their identification. The police decided to take everyone to the police station, after separating those cross-dressing in a room in the back of the bar. Maria Ritter, then known as male to her family, recalled, "My biggest fear was that I would get arrested. My second biggest fear was that my picture would be in a newspaper or on a television report in my mother's dress!" Both patrons and police recalled that a sense of discomfort spread very quickly, spurred by police who began to assault some of the lesbians by "feeling some of them up inappropriately" while frisking them. ... Those who were not arrested were released from the front door, but they did not leave quickly as usual. Instead, they stopped outside and a crowd began to grow and watch. Within minutes, between 100 and 150 people had congregated outside, some after they were released from inside the Stonewall, and some after noticing the police cars and the crowd. Although the police forcefully pushed or kicked some patrons out of the bar, some customers released by the police performed for the crowd by posing and saluting the police in an exaggerated fashion. The crowd's applause encouraged them further. ... The

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police tried to restrain some of the crowd, knocking a few people down, which incited bystanders even more. Some of those handcuffed in the wagon escaped when police left them unattended. The crowd tried to overturn the police wagon. ... The commotion attracted more people who learned what was happening. ... Beer cans were thrown and the police lashed out, dispersing some of the crowd who found a construction site nearby with stacks of bricks. Outnumbered by between 500 and 600 people, the police grabbed several people, who had been attracted to the revolt from a bar two doors away from the Stonewall. Multiple accounts of the riot assert that there was no pre-existing organization or apparent cause for the demonstration; what ensued was spontaneous. ... By 4:00 a.m., the streets had nearly been cleared.

But that was not the end.

What followed were several days of further demonstrations and violent protests.

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One year later, on June 28, 1970, an assembly, promoted as *Christopher Street Liberation Day*, was held.

Simultaneous Gay Pride marches were also held in Los Angeles and Chicago (the first Gay Pride marches in U.S. history). The next year, other Gay Pride marches took place in Boston, Dallas, Milwaukee, London, Paris, West Berlin, and Stockholm.

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For all those who are bothered by the word "Pride" because they assume it means *my group is better than your group*, remember this word was chosen as a counter term to a long history of being shamed.

"You should be ashamed."

"No. I'm going to be proud!"

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The various *pride* movements that came out of civil rights activities of the 1960s and 70s were (in fact) stubborn claims to **equality** in the midst of a society that openly proclaimed that you are lower than us because of your gender or your sexual orientation or the colour of your skin or your ancestral heritage, or...

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I had a great time at the Whyte Avenue Pride Parade last year (I had gladly chauffeured a carload of high schoolers, who quickly ran off on their own – 'cause who wants to hang out at Pride with the old guy).

I was looking forward showing my support again this year, and so I was disappointed that the big parade in Edmonton was cancelled for 2019.

Many other events were still happening all month, just no Whyte Avenue parade.

This cancellation was *not* due to anti-gay attitudes; those days are largely a thing of the past in our neck of the woods - although not completely: Ladner UC in BC has had been the victim of anti-gay vandalism twice this month. A friend and ministry colleague of mine wrote an op-ed in the [Toronto Star](#) this week on why pride is needed now more than ever. And there were protests at Toronto's pride parade yesterday. The same friend and people from his church stood beside one group of *religious* anti-gay protesters and loudly sang "Jesus Loves Me".

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Edmonton's 2019 pride parade was cancelled (in part) because of conflicts along the edges of

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(and within) the local pride movement. There is a currently-living struggle around how to include the most vulnerable and marginalized of the LGBTQ2+ community: particularly people of colour and refugees who have fled from far less progressively minded places.

As a cis-gendred, white, heterosexual male, I have way too much embedded privilege to criticize those who still feel excluded.

And so, I accept this year's pride parade cancellation as a reminder that this remains a living, dynamic issue that is far from resolved.

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Although, at quick glance, many modern "Pride" events may have the appearance of a celebration... on this 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, let us remember that Pride was (and still is) primarily a protest - highlighting the real need for equality and inclusion.

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As our scriptures remind us today, it may not always be comfortable -- or popular -- but it is always valuable for us to be challenged to examine who is looking to "profit" from continuing systems and attitudes of division.

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Let's not be afraid to ask...

Who is afraid of losing their privilege and power simply because others attain a measure of equality and inclusion?

And... are we going to stand for it?

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We were imprisoned and guarded, but faith has been revealed. We are all children of God: heirs to the promise.

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When I was at the Northern Spirit Region meeting at the end of May, I learned a new song. We sang it everyday as the theme music for that event: Shirley Erena Murray's [*For Everyone Born, A Place At The Table*](#).

I'll let her words conclude my message today.

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Solo: "[*For Everyone Born*](#)"

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#606VU "In Christ, There is No East or West"