

Presentation to the City of Regina Wellness Committee St. James United Church – Full Version

On Wednesday April 21 Laura Sundberg and Gisela Stuhm made a verbal presentation to the City of Regina Wellness Committee on behalf of the congregation. They had 5 minutes to speak. This is a longer version that was the basis from which the presentation was taken. This longer version gives more background information.

You are invited to contact your City Counsellor to express your views on Conversion Therapy. The City Council next meets Wednesday April 28 at 1:00 PM. The meeting can be viewed on MyAccess.ca

Introduction

Good morning everyone.

My name is Rev. Laura Sundberg – I am one of the Ministers at St. James United Church in Regina

My name is Gisela Stuhm. I am a member of St. James and also a member of the LGBTQ2Spirit+ community. I am now retired. During my career I provided behavioural support services for persons who were mentally challenged and for young offenders.

Overview

St James United Church asks the City of Regina to:

1. Support Bill C-6

The city of Regina Mayor & Council support Bill C-6 by writing a letter to the Federal Government. This is an important step to take. It will send a message that we all have the right to be who we are – not just those of us who are heterosexual or cisgender.

2. Introduce and pass a By-Law Prohibiting Conversion Therapy in Regina

A By-Law will send a message that there are legal consequences to psychologically harming LGBTQ2S+ lives

3. Offer Social Supports to Persons Harmed by Conversion Counselling

The City could make a grant program available to organizations to pay for therapists and support groups to support LGBTQ2S+ youth after experiencing the negative psychological consequences of counselling to change their orientation and gender identity.

Background – St James United Church and the United Church of Canada

St James United Church has been an Affirming Ministry of the United Church of Canada since 1999. Affirming ministries are LGBTQ2SIA+ positive ministries.

The mission of St. James United Church is to be an inclusive and affirming community that gathers to nurture faith, celebrate God's unconditional love, live out God's grace and justice, in and beyond St. James.

Through the past 22 years the congregation has moved from being on the margins of society, to now being within the mainstream of Canadian society. We applaud Bill C-6 for protecting the rights of LGBTQ2SIA+ children, youth and adults by putting Conversion Therapy in the Criminal Code where it belongs.

Even after 22 years we are still on a journey because homophobia and cisgenderism is deeply ingrained in the Christian tradition and in Western Society.

It is the belief of The United Church of Canada that our faith tradition affirms the dignity of all people, including people across the LGBTQ2SpiritIA+ spectrum. We believe that LGBTQIA+ and Two Spirit people are an expression of God's diverse creation and share with cisgender and heterosexual people an equal place in God's love. We recognize that members of the LGBTQ2SpiritIA+ communities continue to disproportionately experience marginalization, family estrangement, violence, and exclusion in a predominantly heterosexual and gender-binary culture. Knowing that our Christian tradition has been used to cause great harm, we commit to making amends, and to challenging these beliefs. (1)

Our proposal is part of an effort within the United Church of Canada to ban conversion therapy locally, provincially and nationally.

Living Skies Regional Council Meeting passed a Proposal on November 4, 2020 to ask congregations to promote a ban on Conversion Therapy. A copy of this Proposal is attached in Appendix 1.

A Letter written to the Province of Saskatchewan by the Living Skies Region of the United Church of Canada is in Appendix 2.

Here is the statement from the United Church of Canada website.

“The United Church of Canada affirms the value and dignity of all people and rejects any therapy or practice that labels LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit people as abnormal, broken, or otherwise not whole individuals. We strongly condemn the practice of conversion therapy or any efforts that attempt to change a person’s sexual or gender identity through treatment that is hostile to a person’s identity, unethical, spiritually and psychologically damaging, and not supported by evidence.” (2)

We, on behalf of St. James, applaud Bill C-6 for protecting the rights of LGBTQ2SpiritIA+ children, youth and adults. We also support recommendation from the Wellness Committee that the Mayor of the City of Regina write to the Federal Government on behalf of Regina City Council in support of Bill C-6 .

Why do Conversion Therapies Exist?

Conversion practices are rooted in the belief that being a LGBTQ-2Spirit + person is a disorder, a sin, or a disease that needs to be fixed, cured, healed or repaired. It implies that these lives are less desirable and less worth living than a heterosexual or cisgender person’s life. In this belief system all people are definitely not equal. Trying to change someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity does not work and it can do major psychological harm. (3)

What are Conversion Therapy Techniques?

Formal conversion therapy techniques are aversion therapy, behavioral conditioning, hypnosis, extreme fasting, sleep deprivation, “corrective rape”, celibacy, exorcism, spiritual prayer, gender coaching, isolation from family and peers, shunning, and more medical or drug induced treatments. These all actively

attempt to change, alter, deny or suppress a person's true sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. (4)

What Messaging is Feeding the Desire for Conversion Therapy?

What might parents be hearing that would make them want to send their children for counselling or Conversion Therapy? What are young adults hearing to make them want to change? Basically, parents do not want their children to be labeled as sinful and they fear that their children will go to hell. They also have a fear that their children will be ostracized and stigmatized and have violence perpetuated against them.

Children and youth who are LGBTQ2S+ who are not in supportive families are exposed to constant messages that they are "less than", sinful, evil. IT is not called conversion therapy, but spiritual teaching, or counseling - with the intent to change, repress or discourage LGBTQ+ peoples from being themselves in order to find acceptance. This, too, is a harmful practice.

In many traditions in the Christian faith being LGBTQ or 2Spirit+ is sinful because it is not seen as part of God's plan for humanity. People are to marry and have kids. Heterosexuality is the norm in that theological perspective. Any other way of being is a choice, and an act of rebellion against God. To rebel against God means going to hell in these traditions and being an outcast.

They might be part of a church that says "Love the sinner, hate the sin". But you cannot separate a person out from their sexual orientation and gender identity. A person's sexual orientation is not a choice. To see a person's sexual orientation as a sin is to see the person as "less than". Some of you may know what that is like. For those of you who are heterosexual and cisgender, can you imagine being on the receiving end of that kind of discrimination?

Churches that take the bible literally, or have little interest in context, translation error, alternative interpretations of text or nuances in translations are often the source of theologies that support conversion therapy practices.

There are no teachings of Jesus that specifically condemn being LGBTQ+or Two Spirit.

St. James United Church affirms the Wellness Committee's recommendation that The City of Regina Mayor & Council support Bill C-6 by writing a letter to the Federal Government. This is an important step to take. It will send a message that we all have the right to be who we are – not just those of us who are heterosexual or cisgender.

2. Pass a By-Law Against Conversion Therapy

The City also needs to be pro-active in passing a By-Law that bans Conversion Therapy practices in Regina. It takes time to move through the parliamentary process. Meanwhile people are being psychologically harmed.

A Personal Story -Gisela Stuhm

A by-law's intention is to protect people from physical, psychological and spiritual harm. I worked with aversive conditioning, punishment techniques and behavioural conditioning which fall under the umbrella of conversion therapy techniques/practices. This was with mentally challenged youth and adults and with young offenders at Ranch Erlo and Dales House. We stopped using these techniques in the 90's when we learned how degrading and demeaning they were. The negative side effects were harmful to the person and others.

A By-Law will send the message to LGBTQ2S+ persons that they are valued. It will be a source of hope for persons who are or have been on the receiving end of negative or psychologically damaging practices. It would send a clear message that City Council is pro-active and takes the needs of its LGBTQ2S+ citizens seriously.

A by-law and all laws always have to balance rights and responsibilities with protections and restrictions. We have drinking and driving laws, laws against child abuse and domestic abuse. Parents do not have the right to freely abuse their children. Our society has shifted its thinking on these issues through government legislation and it needs to shift its thinking on this issue too.

A City By-law would have clear guidelines about what is permitted and what is not under the umbrella of conversion practices.

Critics of Bill- C6 are using Transitioning and Children and Youth and Gender Dysphoria as examples of areas where parents may lose control of their desire for their children to remain “ as they are”. They are misinformed about the process for transitioning in Saskatchewan. They need to understand that there is a very rigorous process to be approved for gender transition treatment in Saskatchewan.

Opposition to a By-Law

Persons who are opposed to a by-law or Bill c-6 might say that a ban is prohibiting their freedom of religion” in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Or that their freedom of expression is being violated.

At the same time there are limits to our rights to do things and to what we say if they harm others. Conversion therapy at its core is harmful, and discriminatory on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. This discrimination is inconsistent with the values of the charter which protect the right to equality without discrimination on the bases of sex and sexual orientation. (5)

St. James United Church asks the City of Regina pass a By-Law that prohibits Conversion Therapy practices.

3. Offer Social Supports to Persons Harmed by Conversion Counselling

The City could make a grant program available to organizations to pay for therapists and support groups to support LGBTQ2S+ youth after experiencing the negative psychological consequences of counselling to change their orientation and gender identity.

St. James United Church asks the City of Regina to make grants available to LGBTQ2S+ organizations and other groups to support youth after experiencing the negative psychological consequences of counselling to change their orientation and gender identity.

Conclusion

We need to work together in this City for the common good.

We need to work together to protect children and youth. They need supports to help them sort out their sexual orientation, gender identities, attractions,

appropriate and safe relationships and life choices. They need positive supports, not negative techniques.

1.Support Bill C-6

The city of Regina Mayor & Council support Bill C-6 by writing a letter to the Federal Government. This is an important step to take. It will send a message that we all have the right to be who we are – not just those of us who are heterosexual or cisgender.

2. Introduce and pass a By-Law Prohibiting Conversion Therapy in Regina

A By-Law like the one in Saskatoon will send a message that there are legal consequences to psychologically harming LGBTQ2S+ lives

3. Offer Social Supports to Persons Harmed by Conversion Counselling

The City could make a grant program available to organizations to pay for therapists and support groups to support LGBTQ2S+ youth after experiencing the negative psychological consequences of counselling to change their orientation and gender identity.

Rev. Laura Sundberg and Gisela Stuhm
St. James United Church
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Sources

1. Letter from Living Skies Regional Executive to the Province of Saskatchewan
In Appendix 2
2. <https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/conversion-therapy>
3. Conversion Therapy in Canada p 10
4. Ibid
5. Conversion Therapy in Canada p 21

Appendix 1
Living Skies Regional Council Proposal
November 4, 2020

Status: Passed

PROPOSAL NO. 1

Title: BANNING CONVERSION THERAPY IN SASKATCHEWAN

Originating Body: Grosvenor Park United Church, Saskatoon

1. What is the issue?

☐ We believe in a God of unconditional love, Jesus who is love incarnate, who seeks to uplift those who are on the margins of society, and the Spirit who calls us to seek justice and reduce harm for those who are diverse with respect to gender, gender expression and sexual orientation.

☐ Conversion therapy gives a message that those who are not cisgender and/or heteronormative need to be “fixed”. Therapies which promote such erroneous ideas do not work, and increase the likelihood both of depression and suicidal ideation and attempts.

☐ Grosvenor Park United Church seeks to ban conversion therapy in the city of Saskatoon and in our Province, Saskatchewan.

2. Why is this important?

☐ This is a crucial issue given the high rates of suicide and depression amongst those in the two spirit, LGBTQQIA+1 communities. This rate doubles when families try to convince their loved ones to be cisgender and/or heteronormative. This rate triples when the loved one has both family pressure, and Conversion therapy including pressure from a religious community (priest/pastor etc).

3, How might Living Skies Regional Council respond to this issue?

☐ The Living Skies Regional Council was mandated in 2019 to begin the process of becoming an Affirming Region. The principles have to do with the nature of humanity, and sending a clear signal that the United Church of Canada in Living

Skies Regional council does not endorse any kind of “so called” therapies to change one’s gender expression, gender identity and/or sexual orientation. God loves us all. We are called to reach out with this message.

We ask the Living Skies Regional Council to also agree to submit a formal request to our provincial governments to ban conversion therapies within Saskatchewan.

We ask that individual communities of faith

1) are encouraged to understand why conversion therapies are so detrimental to the health and well-being of 1 Lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual our young folks; and

2) encouraged to write to the Province of Saskatchewan stating opposition to conversion therapies.

We ask that Living Skies Regional council encourage all Affirming and 2SGBTQIA+ supportive communities of faith to investigate local bylaws related to conversion therapy, and to become aware of the forms conversion therapy may take in their own communities.

Although we know that the federal government intends to take action regarding conversion therapies, it is crucial for the church as a national body to speak out publicly, intentionally, and explicitly as an accepting spiritual body for our two spirit and LGBTQIA+ members and friends, so that they feel heard, accepted and understood in the name of Jesus.

1 Lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual

Appendix 2

CALL FOR A PROVINCIAL BAN ON CONVERSION THERAPY

Apr 6, 2021 | LGBTQIA+ Affirming, News, Regional News

livingskiesrc.ca/call-for-a-provincial-ban-on-conversion-therapy/

From: Living Skies Regional Council of The United Church of Canada, Rev Tricia Gerhard, chairperson.

To: Hon Scott Moe, Premier; Hon Paul Merriman, Health Minister; Hon Gordon Wyant, Attorney General; Hon Everett Hindley, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions.

CC: Leader of the Opposition; Human Rights Critic

Dear Premier Moe, Minister Merriman, Minister Wyant, and Minister Hindley,

We write to you as representatives of The United Church of Canada within Living Skies Regional Council, which comprises 215 Communities of Faith and over 20 additional ministries or shared partnerships within the province of Saskatchewan.

Living Skies Regional Council of the United Church of Canada, acting on a motion to its membership that passed with over 95% approval in November 2020, calls upon the Government of Saskatchewan to:

- a) Enact legislation banning “conversion therapy” for people of all ages in Saskatchewan, thus making it illegal for individuals or entities to engage in the practice of conversion therapy or to refer an individual to practitioners of conversion or reparative therapy;
- b) Include conversion therapy and bans on it in the Saskatchewan Human Rights Code;
- c) Ban health coverage for conversion practices.
- d) Ensure that the Government of Saskatchewan does not provide grants or contracts to any entity that engages in or refers individuals to practitioners of conversion or reparative therapy.
- e) Make a public statement against conversion therapy.

OUR FAITH BELIEF

Living Skies Regional Council stands against the harmful practice of conversion or reparative therapy for LGBTQIA+ and Two Spirit persons in Canada. Such practices are hostile to a person’s identity, an affront to their dignity, and an assault on their well-being.

Many conversion therapy proponents use the Christian faith and specific interpretations of our scriptures to argue that only heterosexual and cisgender identities and expressions are acceptable to God and to the Christian tradition. We disagree.

It is the belief of The United Church of Canada that our faith tradition affirms the dignity of all people, including people across the LGBTQ2SIA+ spectrum. We believe that LGBTQIA+ and Two Spirit people are an expression of God's diverse creation, and share with cisgender and heterosexual people an equal place in God's love. We recognize that members of the LGBTQ2SIA+ communities continue to disproportionately experience marginalization, family estrangement, violence, and exclusion in a predominantly heterosexual and gender-binary culture. Knowing that our Christian tradition has been used to cause great harm, we commit to making amends, and to challenging these beliefs.

OUR VIEW ON CONVERSION THERAPY

Conversion therapy¹ seeks to change core elements of individuals by attempting to change, suppress, eliminate or deny their sexual orientation, and/or their gender identity or gender expression. The United Church of Canada, both nationally and regionally, does not support this dangerous and abusive practice.

There is no credible research to support the discredited and dangerous idea that anything can change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. Rather, what research does tell us is that these so-called change efforts frequently have devastating impacts on their survivors, including increased anxiety, depression, self hatred, compromised mental health, post traumatic stress disorder, suicide or suicidal thoughts, and many other negative and lifelong psychological, spiritual, and social impacts.

OUR CALL TO THE GOVERNMENT

We call on the government of Saskatchewan to do its part, within its powers and responsibilities, to ensure the equality and human rights of all communities and residents. The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code, 2018 (page 5) names sex, sexual orientation and gender identity as among the prohibited grounds of discrimination. Conversion therapy is a profoundly discriminatory act. It is seriously harmful to individuals and is opposed by the Canadian Psychological

Association, the World Health Organization, the American Psychiatric Association and others; and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child indicates that children should not be discriminated against based on what gender they identify with.

Provincial action in Saskatchewan to combat conversion therapy would follow in the footsteps of many other jurisdictions in Canada that have taken similar action. Conversion therapy bans at a provincial, territorial and municipal level are a common and important tool for ensuring the safety and freedom of LGBTQ2SIA+ communities.

Provinces and territories that already have, or are in the process of developing, their own legislation include the Yukon, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and PEI. In addition, we have seen communities across Canada take this issue up by introducing municipal bans through bylaws, policies, or declarations.

These include the communities of Vancouver, Wood Buffalo, St. Albert, Edmonton, Spruce Grove, Beaumont, Strathcona County, Rocky Mountain House, Calgary, Strathmore, Lethbridge, Saskatoon, Montreal, and Saint John. Canadians from coast to coast to coast are united in ending these abusive practices, and they have continued to show their support for leaders who have committed to doing so.

Therefore, Living Skies Regional Council and its members look forward to hearing the response of the Government of Saskatchewan to our call for a province-wide ban on conversion or reparative therapy. We thank you for your attention to this crucial matter, and would be honoured to be in further conversation with the government.

Sincerely,
The Executive of Living Skies Regional Council:

Rev. Tricia Gerhard, chairperson
Ron Brandow
Tim Ellis
Cam Fraser

Linda Gunningham
Brian Maitland
Yujene Oh
Rob Reed
Dave Whalley
Shannon McCarthy, Executive Minister