

Salutation: (Chair, Members of the Board)

Thank you for granting us delegation status at this meeting.

I would invite those who are members of our delegation to raise their hands and be recognized.

My name is Wayne Irwin.

I am the minister of Centenary United Church, here in the City of Hamilton, having served in that capacity, here in the city for twelve years, and having served within The United Church of Canada as an ordained minister for forty years.

I represent a national faith community that is, by far, the largest Protestant church in Canada, and which is a truly Canadian church, coming into existence 83 years ago, in 1925, as the first example of evangelical churches in Canada, or anywhere else in the world, for that matter, coming together in a union of faith communities committed to fostering a spirit of unity among Christian churches and other faith communities across the world.

And being a national church that was birthed and raised and educated here in Canada, the United Church has the culture, and the polity and the interests of Canada and Canadians “in its bones.” It has been said that there are only two truly Canadian religious institutions - The United Church of Canada, and Hockey Night in Canada.

Consequently, it was The United Church of Canada that first ordained women in this country, before most of us here were born - in 1935, and not because of any political expediency, but because, having done its historical and theological homework, the United Church believed it to be indefensible to do otherwise. After all, given the Christian story that informs our church discussions and decisions, it was women who were given the honour of being the first persons to encounter the resurrected Christ.

It was also The United Church of Canada that was first among the Canadian church community to recognize in its policies that marriage breakdown was an unavoidable occurrence in the lives of some persons, and that it was a happening that did not deserve a response of ostracism within the church. This was also based on our foundational policy of taking the Bible seriously, and of responding to the teachings we value of the Apostle Paul, who declared that we are, all of us, counted worthy in God’s eyes, and not because of our beliefs or our behavior, but because of God’s prior love for us, made visible to us as an undeserved gift of grace. That was in the decade of the 1950's.

And it was The United Church of Canada that was again first among the Canadian church community to establish policy, relating to its selection of candidates for ordained ministry, to remove sexual orientation from its list of items that would cause a person to be disqualified. That was twenty years ago, in 1988.

Centenary Church, just three weeks ago, celebrated 140 years of ministry here in the core of the City of Hamilton, first as a Methodist Church, and since 1925 as a United Church. And about six years ago, Centenary undertook to become what is called “An Affirming Church.” This means that we took the decision to commit ourselves to publicly represent God’s welcome, acceptance and respect for all persons regardless of their sexual orientations or gender identities.

Centenary, thus, today, is a worshipping, pastoral, and prophetic Christian community in this city that celebrates the biblically and theologically grounded belief that every person is created in the image of God and is unconditionally loved by God.

We are Christians who are determined to walk in the way of Jesus, who was ultimately put to death because of his compassion for those who were ostracized by the religious of his day. We choose to walk in the way of Jesus, not in the way of those who criticized him. And we celebrate the Apostle Paul's solidarity in Christ that stood against the primary social divisions of his day. Said he, (Galatians 3:26-28) "[When you walk in the way of Christ] there is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ." Within a community that reflects the intentions of God, we believe that such distinctions no longer matter.

For that reason we of Centenary Church appear this evening to applaud you, The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, on your commitment to establish policies that include the principles of equity in accordance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Education Act. And we do so, urging you to include a caveat ensuring and empowering the enforcement of their commitments.

Thank you again, for this opportunity to speak.