



REVEREND BRENT HAWKES AND FRIENDS OF SIMON WIESENTHAL CENTER FORGE CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP FOLLOWING FSWC COMMUNITY ALERT



Rev. Brent Hawkes meets with FSWC President & CEO Avi Benlolo

Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies (FSWC) is delighted to report on a very positive development following the response to the Community Alert issued by our office re the Toronto Gay Pride parade earlier this week. FSWC was pleased to meet with Reverend Brent Hawkes, a leader in the gay community, to clarify his position and is happy to print the following letter by the Reverend.

In a recent communication from this Center, it was said that I was leading efforts by the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgendered (LGBT) community to ensure that "Queers Against Israeli Apartheid" (Quaia) would again march in Toronto's annual Pride Parade. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Let me be clear: I am neither a member of Quaia nor have I ever been a supporter of Quaia. In the past I have carried both a rainbow flag and an Israeli flag in our Church's Pride Parade contingent. As a lifelong human rights activist, I am deeply aware of the shared experience of discrimination of the Jewish and LGBT communities. We were both targeted for persecution by the Nazis, and we continue to be victimized by hate crimes today. I know, because I had to wear a bullet proof vest when we first married two same sex couples. We have also been partners in the struggle for human rights, whether it was the pioneering LGBT rights work of Magnus Herschfeld or the modern support of Jewish community organizations in our court battles in the *Vriend* case and in the fight for equal marriage.

My core religious beliefs are based on love. Anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred run directly contrary to those core beliefs. Our Church, the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto, has time and again reached out to the Jewish community. Prominent Jewish leaders have spoken at our Church. We have offered programs as part of Holocaust Education Week for many years. When the Jewish community experienced a rash of anti-Semitic vandalism, we condemned those hate crimes and we hosted large signs promoting the United Jewish Appeal in front of our Church.

The annual Pride Parade is one of the LGBT community's most important institutions. It was in danger of collapsing last year, when a group of distinguished volunteers came together to form the Community Advisory Panel (CAP) under my leadership. In my role as Chair, I had to set aside my personal opinions and try to remain neutral. After nine months of intensive consultation with a wide range of groups including this Center, we issued a Report that you can read for yourself at www.communityadvisorypanel.ca.

CAP did not ignore the issue of Quaia's participation in the Parade. We addressed the Parade issue by identifying fair rules and a fair process that aim to put the accent back on LGBT issues and keep all hate messaging out of the Parade. Beginning this year, all marchers in the parade will have to focus their message primarily on the LGBT community and its issues. In addition, Pride Toronto has adopted a new



rule barring messages promoting "hatred, violence, degradation and negative stereotypes" -a rule based word for word on the City of Toronto's own Anti-Discrimination Policy.

And these new rules will have teeth. As of this year, anyone who believes that someone has promoted or will promote hatred in the parade will be able to complain to an experienced adjudicator, who will have the power to ban offending groups and individuals from the parade. Complaints will be permitted in advance of this year's Parade.

While I have never been a supporter of Quaia, I agreed with the Report's conclusion that it would have been wrong to create a special rule that applied to only one group. The same standards will apply to everyone. Hatred is wrong, no matter who is spreading it and no matter who is the target.

Anti-Semitism is wrong. However, unfounded accusations of anti-Semitism are also wrong. They may serve to demonize vulnerable groups and alienate friends of Israel.

We hope that the Jewish community and other supporters of Israel will trust that the objective of our rule is to curb hate speech, and respect our intentions. We hope that they will give our new enforcement system a chance to work.

We may disagree on the best way to solve the problems of discrimination, but let us always debate our differences in a fair and respectful manner. When we turn on each other, we both have a great deal to lose.

FSWC thanks all our members who are helping in the effort to remove discrimination from the parade through our letter writing campaign to the Mayor and City Councillors. We regret including Reverend Hawkes in a list of Quaia supporters and look forward to working collaboratively with him and other members of Toronto's gay community toward our shared goal of ensuring the 2011 Gay Pride parade is a joyous and inclusive celebration in which we all feel welcome.