

**Address of the Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes
Senior Pastor, Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto
To the Divinity Convocation of Trinity College
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Chancellor Graham, Provost Orchard, Fellows and faculty of the College, graduates, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen... It is customary, on an occasion such as this, for a speaker to get up and thank a number of people. I have so many people to thank, that it will likely take up most of the time that I have been allotted to speak. But that's not such a bad thing. Meister Eckhart is reported to have said, if the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is "Thank you," it will be enough.

So... first of all, thank you to the University of Trinity College, for this honour, and for this opportunity to speak at this historic moment. And thank you to my husband John Sproule. I've been very blessed to have a partner who has stood by me for 30 years, through thick and thin, through protests and political fights, through hunger strikes, death threats, and bullet-proof vests, through two, and now three, degrees from Trinity. And I'm very fortunate to have a congregation who have been patient with me and who have been open to experimentation, in our quest to be a vibrant, inclusive, progressive church. So I'm also thankful to my church, the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto. And also, many thanks to David Bronskill, who was kind and generous enough to nominate me for this honour.

I'm also pleased to stand here today with my fellow honourees, John Hill and Stephen Otto, as they are awarded degrees to mark their exceptional service to the church and the community. And I'm honoured to stand here today with my fellow graduates, those of you who have completed years of study and now look forward to a new chapter in your lives and in the spiritual journey you accelerated when you first walked through the doors of this seminary.

I said earlier that this was an historic moment. It is certainly historic for me personally. I have received amazing honorary degrees from York and Mt. Allison Universities, and yet... this is a seminary. This is Trinity. This year is also the 25th anniversary of my M.Div., and the 10th anniversary of my D.Min.

I remember my first days at Trinity in the early 80s, coming into this very hall for lunch. I remember times when in some cases more "obviously" gay seminarians – my "gaydar" is pretty good – got up and left a table when I sat down at it, for fear of being associated with me, and possibly not being ordained. I especially want to thank the numerous second-career seminarians, most often middle aged and elderly women, who took me and John under their wing and made sure we were included. It is no surprise to me that the majority of welcoming voices were female voices. So to be here today to receive this degree is an incredible moment.

But I think it is an historic moment for Trinity, too, for having the courage to honour a gay Christian activist. Given the somewhat difficult debates in the Anglican Church of Canada concerning the rights of LGBT people to be ordained, and concerning same-sex marriage, it may be an historic moment for the church, too. Now is a unique opportunity to move closer to full and equal rights in the church for LGBT people. In recent months, we have seen the Obama administration in the US move away from "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." And as wrong as that policy was for the US military, in encouraging dishonesty, it's even more wrong for churches. This could also be an historic moment for us together, the LGBT community and the church – a moment of healing for the painful past we share.

I want to pay tribute to those within the Anglican Church, both gay and non-gay, who have worked hard towards helping the church to be more inclusive. I think of former primate, the late Ted Scott. I think of Holy Trinity Anglican church who first welcomed MCC in the 70s when it was hard to find churches who would let us worship in their space. I think of the members of that parish who opposed the archbishop of the time when he wanted to evict MCC. And today, I particularly think of people like the Rev. Jim Ferry, who paid the price for being honest about whom he loved, and who had to face a public trial, and who was removed from his parish. Today as we approach the 20th anniversary of that painful chapter, I thank Jim for being here today as my guest. And Jim, please know that *I* know that I would not be receiving this honour today, had you not stood firm in your love and your determination to move the church you love and serve towards being a more inclusive and just church.

There have been many others whose names won't be spoken today, and who will never receive this kind of an honour, but it's taken all of us doing our part to bring the church to this place. And it will take all of us continuing to do our work to move the church forward. Advances in human rights almost always come with a steep price. You of the Anglican Church know only too well the price paid for the ordination of women and the election of women as bishops.

And while there is a price that the church pays to do justice, let us also never forget the price that women and LGBT people have paid when the church sided with injustice; the price of exclusion, the price of silencing, the price of self-hatred. And that price is too great for anyone to be asked to bear simply because the church too often worships unity over justice. During the constitutional debates, Ed Broadbent coined the phrase, "the tyranny of unanimity." That's true of denominations, too. As challenging as this issue can be, love, courage, and a commitment to justice will eventually win the day.

And regarding that painful history – I know that some of you deeply regret past decisions that you participated in, and wish that you could undo some actions taken or words spoken. I just want to say, that it's never too late to right a wrong. And I know that part of what today is about, and what this honorary degree and this address are about, is another step in healing what has happened, and for that I'm grateful to be here to witness this moment. Trinity, you once again are leading the way forward for the church, and while I'm personally so touched by this honour, I am moved even more deeply by the message you're sending, and by the healing you're offering.

I want to be a gracious recipient today, however, there are two challenges I want to present to the broader church. The first is to hear the call of the prophet Micah, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Yes some parishes may leave the Anglican Church when you finally vote for full inclusion of LGBT people and equal marriage for gays and lesbians. But history will clearly say the movement for inclusion was the right one. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." History will be on your side, but the haunting questions are... "How long? And how much more pain, until that day comes?"

The second challenge comes with a bit of irony. The church at its best is a wonderful gift to society; teaching compassion, justice, service, generosity, and forgiveness; reconnecting people to God and to each other; and helping people through difficult times. The irony in North America is that the church is playing less and less a role in peoples lives. The church is less visible, and while most mainline denominations are cutting back their social justice staff, fundamentalist denominations are opening up offices in Ottawa. The moderate face of Christianity is being replaced by extremism.

We see churches being closed or amalgamated in urban areas, where at the same time, the population is growing. There is an epidemic of hopelessness, and in many segments of society, depression is the number one health concern. Where is the Good News? What happened to the inspiring, hopeful movement Jesus began?

Back when I graduated with my D.Min, my thesis focused on why some MCC churches are growing and what we can learn from that. You can also look to why some Anglican churches are growing? What are the factors at work, the patterns we see? It's not good enough for the church to hold on to some ancient form of purity, to old ways of doing things, while the public no longer relates to our language, our music, our liturgy. It's not good enough for the church to continue to answer questions no one is asking.

Graduates, you've studied enough church history to know that the church has faced such challenging times in the past. And now, once again, the church needs brave leaders who will cast aside the same-old same-old, and instead take risks, try new things, renew the church, recapture the call, and change the world. We need the church to build a vision that inspires commitment and sacrifice. The scriptures say "where there is no vision, the people perish." I say, "where there is no vision, the people go to another parish... or no parish at all."

Canada needs a vibrant, progressive, inclusive Anglican church. It shouldn't be just fundamentalist churches who have a passion for those outside the church. It shouldn't be just fundamentalist churches who view relevancy as a desirable characteristic for a church. It shouldn't be just fundamentalist churches that cover the airwaves and the internet with their exclusive message. It shouldn't be just fundamentalist churches who are reaching out and growing.

To dismiss what is going on in those churches is a tragic mistake for those who believe in an inclusive Gospel. I'm certainly not claiming to have the answers today, but here are some of the vital questions. Which churches are growing and why? What are folks outside the church saying? What kind of music is really touching people today? I personally experience regularly that many a great solo has saved a bad sermon! What are the questions people are really wrestling with? What does adult learning theory have to say about how churches communicate information? Where can people tell their story in the church and hear the stories of others?

Now in conclusion, thank you Trinity for this amazing honour, thank you for what it means on our journey to inclusion. May we all continue to work together for a more fully inclusive church and a truly vibrant church. The world needs it, and frankly, God demands it. Graduates and guests, my personal theology says – I'm not sure I learned this at Trinity – but my theology says that one day we will be held accountable for how we have managed not only this wonderful gift called life, but also how we have cared for the amazing gift of the Christian church entrusted to our care. May our work for inclusion and vibrancy bear fruit and leave a great legacy, and may God say to us, well done, good and faithful servants.

Congratulations graduates, and to those of you who have supported them on this journey! If I might close on a personal note... throughout history, and indeed throughout much of the world today, this honour would not have been possible – a seminary honouring a gay Christian activist! My people could not even have dreamed of this. And tonight, I get to live that dream. Thank you, Trinity.