



Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

600-177 Lombard Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 0W5, Canada

May 3, 2019

Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights / Comité permanent de la justice et des droits de la personne

Rev. Susan C. Johnson

National Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

Dear Honourable Committee Members:

Thank you for the invitation to appear before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights. I regret that I am not available to appear at the designated time and appreciate the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC).

Words have power; the power to incite hate and the power to inspire love. In the Christian tradition, God speaking creates all that exists.¹ Jesus becomes the Word made flesh and lives among us.² As worshippers of God and followers of Jesus, we take seriously an ongoing call to use words responsibly - to inspire love for neighbour, to promote the well-being of the community and society, and to help establish space where all people can experience dialogue in a safe and respectful environment.

A core area of focus at the ELCIC's National Office is centred around Reconciled Relationships. This means that we strive towards a vision of an inclusive church, work towards Indigenous justice and reconciliation, challenge racism and privilege, work with diverse allies, and strive for peace.

In 2015, I wrote a letter to members of our church to express my concern regarding the tone of national debate on the rights of Muslim women in Canada to choose to wear the niqab. In this message, I encouraged members of our church to respect the dignity of every human being and challenge intolerance.

“I am troubled by the recent tone of national debate regarding the right of Muslim women in Canada to choose to wear the niqab. At times the discourse, especially online, has been

¹ Genesis chapters 1 & 2.

² John chapter 1.

derogatory, prejudiced, and characterized by a suspicion or downright fear of the other in our midst. Such rhetoric has consequences.”

“Behind these heated debates—and these veils—are individual human beings whose human dignity and human rights must be respected and protected. For Christians, human rights are grounded in the dignity accorded each human being by virtue of having been made in the image and likeness of their Creator.”³

In January 2017, I called for prayers and solidarity following the attack that occurred during Sunday night prayers at a Quebec City mosque. I urged members of our church to, “reach out in a genuine expression of love for our neighbour as we stand in solidarity... and speak out against all forms of racism and violence against Muslims.”

The reality is that hateful words can lead to violent, even deadly, actions, including attacks on Jewish and Muslim persons. On social media and the internet, troubled people can find dark spaces to trade their prejudicial views and to embolden each other in hostile intentions. Finding ways to discourage, shut-down and prevent such spaces is a vital aspect of upholding human rights and of creating safe communities.

Another community that has been subjected to hateful words is the LGBTQ2SIA+ community. Last year, I was shocked to learn that sexual orientation conversion therapy is legal in much of Canada. In September 2018, I wrote to the members of our church affirming our commitment to upholding the dignity of all people and to standing with our LGBTQ2SIA+ siblings in Christ, both inside and outside of our church. I recommend that the Government of Canada enact legislation banning conversion therapy to minors in Canada and have conversion therapy included in the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code, to protect children from abuse.

We must take responsibility for the words we choose to use and the effect that they have on others. This is especially important for people who have a public profile, such as religious leaders and candidates for, and those who hold, public office.

The Committee’s study indicates the Canadian Human Rights Act does not include any mention of telecommunications and the internet since Section 13 of the Act was repealed. This seems to be a gap in the current legislation, given the extent to which online platforms are used to promote hate and discrimination. I recommend that language be added to Canadian Human Rights Act to clearly indicate radio, television, computers, the internet, social media, texting and any other

³ ELCIC Pastoral Letter from the National Bishop, October 9, 2015. www.elcic.ca/news.cfm?article=427

form of telecommunications are included in the prohibitions on the publication of discriminatory notices.⁴

What underlies many incidents of inciting hatred are assumptions that people with one status, identity or characteristic are superior to others. In seeking to address the underlying causes of inciting hatred, it is important to understand the concept of privilege and the underlying assumptions of superiority.

One manifestation of this superiority is the Doctrine of Discovery. This doctrine encourages patterns of domination and oppression of land and environment which continue today. The doctrine continues to inform national policies, regulations and laws thereby becoming a detriment to addressing urgent environmental challenges such as climate justice, responsible resource extraction and establishing sustainable lifestyles. In 2015, the ELCIC repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery.⁵ One piece of legislation that addresses these concerns is *Bill C-262: An Act to ensure that the laws of Canada are in harmony with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. This bill is at risk of being lost if an election is called before it comes to the Senate. Bill C-262 is an important piece of legislation to be adopted.

All too often, people of privilege claim “freedom of speech” while using words that are derogatory in tone and carry the effect of promoting discrimination. When crafting legislation and policies, we are commonly seeking a balance between individual freedom and the common good. As Canada legislates in order to promote using words to generate love rather than hate, the common good needs to be kept in mind.

The ELCIC affirms restorative justice approaches that consider crime as the breaking down of human relationships among victims, offenders and the larger community, rather than simply the breaking of laws against the state. The ELCIC supports initiatives that facilitate the righting of harms done, and foster the healing of relationships between offenders, victims and the larger community.⁶ The clear articulation that words promoting hate are unacceptable, along with a restorative justice approach, provides people of privilege and promoters of hate an opportunity to examine assumptions, change behaviour and reclaim responsibility for using words to promote the common good.

We are all responsible for the words we choose to use and the effect they have on others. In

⁴ Canadian Human Rights Act (R.S.C., 1985, c. H-6), Part I, Section 12.

⁵ ELCIC Resolution on the Doctrine of Discovery, 2015.

www.elcic.ca/Documents/documents/DoctrineofDiscoveryMotionFINAL.pdf

⁶ ELCIC Resolution on the Criminal Justice and Correctional Systems in Canada, 2015.

www.elcic.ca/Documents/documents/CriminalJusticeMotionFINAL.pdf

reflection, I would encourage the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Humans Rights to consider the following:

1. Amend the Canadian Human Rights Act to clearly indicate that radio, television, computers, the internet, social media, texting and any other form of telecommunications are included in the prohibitions on the publication of discriminatory notices.
2. Enact legislation to ban conversion therapy.
3. Encourage the adoption of Bill C-262.
4. Provide restorative justice measures with an eye to transforming attitudes and behaviours.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan C. Johnson", with a small cross symbol to the left of the first name.

Rev. Susan C. Johnson, National Bishop.

sjohnson@elcic.ca

204-984-9157