

Linda Yates: “Ministry, in-love”

One summer, reveling in the new status of Affirming, the Session of St. John’s United Church in Halifax suggested a theological event for Pride Week exploring sexuality in the Bible and Christian tradition. The Session expected about a dozen or so people. We kept adding more chairs until we realized that the gymnasium was almost full. The Halifax GLBTQ community was hungry for this friendly encounter. Most attendees were delighted. A couple of men waited until everyone had left, then challenged me. “You seem so open-minded, but we think you would not do polyamorous marriages.” I did not know if I would ever marry a group of people, I responded. I would need to think about it. Nothing causes a United Church of Canada minister more anxiety than the suggestion of being closed-minded.

I decided that polyamorous groups should not be joined in holy matrimony. Research is scant, but it does seem to indicate that such unions do not seem to last. It is difficult for any one couple to spend enough time, energy, money and prayer to maintain their relationship in a state of deepening and evolving love. Multiply this effort by the number of people in any group and it simply becomes impossible. In other words, it all comes down to math. Any deep, lifelong love requires some empathetic suffering. Light attachment and the possibility of bouncing from one person, when things get difficult, to another who may not be so troublesome, can occur. In a society with an ever-decreasing attention span and commitment-avoidance, it probably comes as no surprise that polyamory is now becoming a thing. To preside in a ceremony while a group of lovers make lifelong marriage vows, then invoking the blessing of the Divine upon what seems a doomed enterprise, would be, at best, “deeply shallow” (to quote Ricky Gervais in *The Extras*).

The main theological questions in all covenanted relationships are a) to whom do you commit and b) what are you willing to commit? Underlying these questions is an even deeper, gloriously terrifying question: are you in love with the One who is in love with you? Since the United Church is increasingly unsure who “the One” is, it is difficult to have a coherent conversation about answering call. No wonder we struggle with trying to find language, systems of accountability and relational ordering. Faced with the confusing, angst-ridden prospect of collectively delving into deep commitment and attachment to the One who is in love with us, it becomes easier to develop a polyamorous relationship with systems and processes. In an attempt to belie this attachment and commitment to systems and processes, a multiplicity of new “diverse” ones that are less accountable, less rigorous and more prone to idiosyncratic implementation, are laid over the traditional ones. We see this with the Core Competencies agenda. Yet, systems of accountability and processes are needed.

We are running out of ministers and new ones are hard to find. Shrinking congregations are increasingly unable to pay their staff. Job security will be

precarious as the new reforms approved by General Council 42 mean that firing ministers will be easier. In order to recruit new people, either the long and expensive educational process has to be jettisoned, or the pay needs to be increased in order to compensate for the expensive education and the precarious work security.

Four societal trends have converged to shatter the image of ministers into shards of role recognition: 1) anti-religious discourse, 2) the rise of the new atheisms, 3) the increasing availability of online degrees, diplomas and ordinations (sometimes all in a matter of weeks) and 4) the empowerment of familiar lay people. When well-loved neighbourhood “Sally,” who has an online degree and ordination from *haveordinationwillnottravel.com* fills in when the minister leaves, the congregation is only too happy to pay her a small honorarium, forever. The new Core Competencies criteria seek to address this. The United Church feels it is best to order such people, rather than fight them and their congregations.

Presbyterians ordain elders. The laying of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit seals a covenanted relationship with the One who has called forth a person for ministry, whether that is to eldership or paid, accountable ministry. This is a Reformed understanding of ordination. God calls in love and people answer in love. Then they are ordered. The third option in the “One Order” document orients us closer to this theological position. Those who are called and who complete the requisite education and training are all able to make the covenanted commitment and thereby be ordained. The troublesome parts of the document concern requirements for this education and training.

In a world in which capacity for discernment and critical analysis is diminishing, the church has never needed it more. In the coming decade questions around Artificial Intelligence (AI), genetic manipulation and metadata-mined manipulation of the masses will stretch our understanding of what it means to be human. Economies are being disrupted even as Creation itself is morphing. All of these issues will be manifest in every single person’s home, affecting every aspect of their lives. If the Bible is any guide, the One who is in love with humanity will ask Communities of Faith, “Human, what now is human?” Will the church’s paid-accountable leaders have the capacity to help Faith Communities begin to answer? Universities are tasked with teaching critical thought. To completely side-step them in an educational process is to risk, in this crux-time, the removal from the church of a body of local community spiritual leaders who understand scientific method, evidence-based decision-making and complex philosophical discourse.

Like law, medicine, social work and psychology, ministry brings paid accountable professionals into contact with people at the most vulnerable moments of their lives. Ministers have even more responsibility because they move in the realm of spirituality, bringing intentionally provocative meaning-of-life questions to liminal, life-changing contexts. Although these other disciplines also seek to become flexible and deliver professional, contextualized training to marginalized persons

and communities, the accrediting associations still require university level courses. They understand what is at stake. How much more is at stake for those covenanting with the One who is in love with humanity?

The proposed educational systems belie a movement that is dangerously close to falling in love with new, lightly attached processes because current preparation for the covenant can be, well, hard. Yet, the One who is in love with humanity continues to call. The harvest is still plentiful and the workers are still few (Matthew 9:35-38; Luke 10:1-3). Let us collectively ensure the few can answer in-love and in competence.

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