

Editorial

THE ONGOING DISCUSSION ABOUT THE CHURCH AND SAME-GENDER MARRIAGES

There are a good many members of the United Church who look with detached amusement, if not with self-satisfaction, at the way our ecumenical partners are divided over the blessing of same-gender relationships in their churches. We have settled the matter and are moving on. There should be no more discussion about it.

But in our denomination there are solid and committed members for whom, personally, it hasn't been settled. They are troubled in conscience; they wish there could still be openings to talk about it. The Editorial Board of *Touchstone* has not been of one mind on the matter. And as it happens, two on the Board, Terry Anderson and Douglas Goodwin, have been members of the same congregation in Vancouver — University Hill United Church — where the issue of same-gender marriage has recently been debated, and decided upon.

Early in 2004, University Hill congregation began a series of discussions on marriage. It was initiated because the elders of the congregation were aware that there might at some point come a request for a same-gender wedding, and they wanted to have a full and free airing of issues related to an understanding of Christian marriage. In 2005 a member of the congregation announced that she and her female partner intended to be married, though she didn't ask for the wedding to take place at University Hill, knowing it was not the congregation's policy at the time to perform such ceremonies. The announcement, however, led to requests from within the congregation that it change its marriage policy. This prompted a very focused discussion: "Should we as a congregation bless in the name of

Jesus Christ the union of same-sex couples, declaring and sanctioning them as marriages in Christ?" Members were invited to present their positions in formal ways during a series of congregational gatherings that were held during Lent 2007. Both Terry and Doug, who were not only part of the congregation, but members of the Council of Elders, prepared papers. They took opposite stances on the question, with Terry opposed and Doug in favour.

The rules of our denomination require that marriage policy can be decided only by the Session, or its equivalent. It can seek advice from a congregational meeting, but only it can take the final decision. Thus eventually at University Hill a straw vote was held in the congregation, where a majority of 40 to 31 voted in favour of the question. On November 4, 2007, the Council of Elders took the crucial vote, and a majority of 7 to 4 voted in favour. Three elders immediately resigned, and the Chair, who had not voted, later also resigned. But most of those in the congregation who had voted No remained, and that was partly because of Alan Reynolds, a former minister of University Hill, who after retirement had stayed on as a very active member. He was one of those who voted No to the question. But believing the essentials of Christian faith were still affirmed at University Hill, he remained, and encouraged others to do the same.

In this issue, we are publishing the papers that Terry and Doug prepared for the University Hill deliberations, as well as the letter that Terry and his wife Daphne wrote to the congregation some time after the vote, indicating they felt in all conscience that they must withdraw their membership.

There aren't many examples around of Christians debating this matter with civility and respect, while searching the Scriptures and the Christian tradition for God's guidance. What follows indicates that it can happen.

— A.M.W.