

‘Letter in support of Mr. Steven Smyrl and Rev. Katherine Meyer.’

Dr Martin Luther King wrote a ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ in response to those Christians leaders who wrote to him asking him to wait, wait for a change, wait for acceptance and not to stir people up, not to break the law. Dr King in his letter said that there is a moral imperative to break unjust laws and take direct action to force the arrival of justice rather than wait for the slow-moving wheels of justice to catch up. Dr King penned the powerful phrase ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere’.

This letter has inspired many down through the ages and when one examines the state of American politics, the treatment of Black citizens today and the endemic racism evident even this far removed from the situation one cannot help but wonder at the bravery, the vision and the wisdom of the man.

The churchmen who wrote to Dr King advising prudence, patience, and obedience to the law, were not adversely affected by the laws of the day. They were not relegated to the back of the bus, they were not subject to suspicion or criticism simply because of the colour of their skin.

This is a situation that resonates with us in Amach Le Dia. We have been relegated, doubted, refused because we belong to, or are allies of the LGBTQI community. There has been much in the media recently about the situation in Sandymount Presbyterian Church Ireland, (PCI), Dublin. For anyone too caught up with Christmas to have caught this story, PCI dismissed a long serving elder Mr. Steven Smyrl. The reason? His relationship of 20 years with his now husband Mr Roy Stanley. PCI are now investigating the minister in Sandymount Rev. Dr. Katherine Meyer and are considering disciplinary actions against her.

There are a number of issues with the actions of PCI and I will only outline five of those here. But before I even begin to outline those issues it is important to acknowledge that a church, like an individual, has the right to arrive at an opinion and to enact that opinion within their church body. Therefore, my objections will be raised in light of Scripture and PCI documents. It is also important to acknowledge that there are those within the PCI who have spoken up against what is happening.

The first issue is hierarchy of sin. This very issue was raised by Patrick Mitchel in his blog back in 2018 when PCI voted during their General Assembly to deny those in a same-sex relationship full membership and deny their children.

In light of our understanding of scripture and the church’s understanding of a credible profession of faith, same-sex couples are not eligible for communicant membership, nor are they qualified to receive baptism for their children . . . We believe that their outward conduct and lifestyle is at variance with a life of obedience to Christ.

This elevates homosexuality above all other sins. There has been no other time in the history of PCI when they have identified a group of people or a particular action and marked it out as rendering people unsuitable for communicant membership. The singling out of same-sex relationships for exclusion from communicant membership smacks of homophobia; there has been no mention of addressing couples who live together, or couples who only attend church for baptism of a child. There are a number of times in the Second Testament where Paul helpfully provides lists of sins and there are many that make the list - greed, gluttony, and gossiping among them. In the time since the 2018 General Assembly, there have been no additions to those who are deemed ‘at variance with a life of obedience to Christ.’

Disappointingly, in 2007 PCI's own Report on Pastoral Guidelines identified this very issue;

*'When we condemn homosexual practice in isolation or single it out as somehow worse than other sexual practices outside of heterosexual marriage then we demonstrate homophobic attitudes.'*

What happened in PCI between 2007 and 2018 for such a departure from grace, pastoral concern and equitable treatment?

The second issue is related to the first and is that of selective discipline. The treatment of Mr. Smyrl and subsequently this investigation against Rev. Dr. Katherine Meyer has been pursued over a number of years, has faced appeals and has continued in the face of a global pandemic. Many might think that PCI could have found a better use of their time over the last number of years. But one must wonder, where is this diligence, this relentless pursuit of 'sin' for those guilty of gossiping, or those who fail to obey their parents, or those who take the Lord's name in vain? Is it wrong of me to presume that throughout the island of Ireland there have been more sinners over the last four years than these individuals? The Church must represent God and one cannot imagine that the man who when dying on a cross reassured the man beside him, 'Today you will be with me in paradise' would condone let alone encourage this treatment.

The third problem as I see it is the failure of PCI to consider the changes to how a number of other groups are treated, such as slaves, people of colour, women, those divorced. These have all at one time or another experienced injustice, restrictions, and the judgement of the church. Isn't it time that Church learned that 'Judge not, lest ye also be judged' was more than a suggestion or a cute bumper sticker? The Church should exemplify the radical inclusiveness of the young Rabbi it embraces as its leader.

The fourth issue is isolation. In launching an investigation into Rev. Dr. Katherine Meyer it would seem that PCI is striving to isolate the members of the LGBTQI community. The investigation seems to be a punishment for supporting Mr. Steven Smyrl, and perhaps I am reading too much into it, but it would seem to be seeking to set a precedent that would discourage future support for those of the LGBTQI community who would become subject to the ire of PCI.

The final issue I will discuss in this statement is pastoral care. There is an onus on anyone in a position of power or authority to ensure that those in their care are supported and cared for during times of difficulty. Now, there is of course a need to have a disciplinary process within any church and PCI are no different; however, the implementation of that process should be genuinely supportive and caring and should aim to protect and shield those involved. In an open letter Mr. Steven Smyrl has shared how he, himself and his health has been affected by these events. It does not seem to have been an edifying experience or one that has brought any glory to the PCI.

*In this context it is important to emphasise that the Church invites and welcomes all who wish to sit under the means of grace at public services and to have access to the pastoral care and counsel available within her fellowship. Like her Lord, she reaches out to all with love and compassion. This posture of grace and welcome should not in itself be confused with moral indifference or approval of any behaviour contrary to God's Word. It is rather the warmest of invitations to receive Christ Jesus as both Lord and Saviour in all of life.*

The above quote from the Doctrine Committee Report from 2018 suggests that PCI has love and compassion for all, but:

When we see one sin elevated above all others for consideration for communicant membership where is the love?

When we see one 'sin' singled out for selective discipline and no mention made of the myriad of others, where is the love?

When we see people who have been marginalized, medicalized, and mistreated, excluded by the church, where is the love?

The truth is that Irish society has progressed greatly in offering an equitable society to all, there are still steps to be taken particularly in relation to families, but we have come a long way from the time when homosexuality was still illegal. However, the mainstream churches have been slow to consider the position of their LGBTQI congregants, have been the source of much pain and suffering for those in the LGBTQI community, even now limiting their involvement and too often have been guilty of talking about but not with the LGBTQI community.

The Jesus who contravened societal and religious law to speak to the woman at the well.

The Jesus who acknowledged and accepted the administrations of the woman in Simon's house.

The Jesus who allowed the woman with the issue of blood to touch him without rebuke.

What would He say?

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Teagan MacAodhagáin'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Teagan' written in a larger, more prominent script than the surname.

Teagan MacAodhagáin,

Chairperson of Amach Le Dia.