

Looking Back

by Reverend Dr. Brent Hawkes

After getting the approval of the Church's board we announced on June 11, 2000—human rights day—that we were going to start doing gay and lesbian weddings in 2001.

At that point, it felt like just another one of the human rights things the church had stood up in support of. Yeah, we knew we were being a bit of a rebel in doing this, but we never realized just how historic this would become.

Immediately we were on a rollercoaster. The way it worked is the minister reading the Banns acts as an agent of the government, ironically. That felt so great! So after each reading, I had to rule, I had to make the decision whether or not the objections—which I knew would be coming—were legal or not.

I had no idea what the objections were going to be, or how disruptive to the worship service it would be. Would we be harangued? So at the first reading I got up and said, "Today I publish the Banns of Marriage between Kevin Bourassa and Joe Varnell and Anne Vautour and Elaine Vautour. Does anyone know of any lawful reason why they shouldn't be married?" It was so emotional—I could feel my eyes welling up.

There was this electric moment and then when no one stood up—I even took one extra look around just to make sure—I said, "This is the first time of asking and we will proceed towards these marriages." There was huge applause! People stood up and hugged each

other, it was so exciting!

At the next reading when Ken Campbell, one of the anti-gay religious leaders in Canada, stood up to object I asked him what his objection was, to which he replied, "I object because the Bible is against it and historically in Canada it's always been between a man and a woman."

I responded by saying "I appreciate your concerns, but those are not legal objections." I made my ruling and there was no further debate. It felt so good to make the ruling that these were not legal objections. After that reading there was the same applause, but it felt like a bit of a violation. Here in the safety of our church we were faced with religious homophobia.

All along we were worried about death threats and that sort of thing. I had a bullet proof vest, gathering dust in my closet from the last time I had to wear it, ready to go if I needed it.

At the third Reading of the Banns the same objections came up, so I made the same ruling and concluded by stating, "This is the third and final reading of the Banns, the weddings will proceed January 14th." Well the place went nuts! The weddings were on!

Then the death threats came.

That night, before the ceremony, was the second time in my life I called my sister at home and said, "If anything happens tomorrow, tell Mom and Dad that I love them."

Sunday morning I put the old bullet proof

vest on and gave John, my partner, a hug. We knew it was going to be an historic and scary day. At 6am bodyguards picked me up because they didn't want me to drive to church on my own. I was rushed into the car and we took a different route than usual.

In the middle of our regular morning service a woman came up the aisle and started yelling and screaming and throwing pamphlets and I did something the bodyguards were furious about. I'm in church and I want to protect people from this, so I walked up to her and very non-threateningly put my hands out and told her she needed to calm down because it was a criminal offense to disrupt a church service and she would be charged. If she wanted to talk, we could talk, but this was not the way to do it. Well, she pushed me. Which was assault. I fell backwards and the bodyguards rushed over and grabbed her and took her out of the church and arrested her.

That incident just heightened the concern. If that was what could happen in a worship service, what was going to happen at the wedding? It was an unbelievable feeling, a funny combination of excitement and terror. But at the same time there was a real celebratory atmosphere, people were just so excited to be part of this and see it happening. This was not just about sexual rights, this was about celebrating our love. This is as basic as you can get into the acceptance and affirmation of gay and lesbian people being in a relationship.

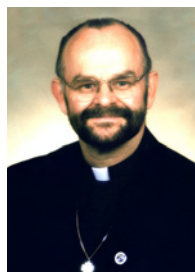
I remember walking in with my bodyguards

and as soon as I made my entrance the place went nuts. I was terrified I was going to flub it. Or forget something. Or sign the documents wrong. Or miss some really crucial legal thing. We knew we had 80 media outlets from around the world, 20 of which were TV crews. But I wanted it to be a dignified event and not a media circus and I wanted it to be about the couples getting married. I wanted it to be warm and personable, yet every time there was a little rustle from some corner there was worry as well. But it went smoothly and every moment was historic.

At the moment in the service where I sign the documents there's a tear-off, once I did that, that was the moment they were legally married and it was the first time in the history of the world of this being done. Someday gay marriages will be taken for granted and that's because of the historic moment that happened there that day.

And then I made the final pronouncement, "You are now husband and husband and you are wife and wife. I now present to you Kevin and Joe, Anne and Elaine, partners in life, duly married in the eyes of God and in accordance with the laws of our land."

Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes C.M. has been the Senior Pastor at the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto for almost 30 years and was recently honoured with the Order of Canada.



Next Issue

winterplay!

Manny tackles hosting Christmas in a small space.

Palais Royale recaptures the roaring 20's.

PFLAG, Supporting Our Youth and Family Service Association of Toronto – important members of our extended family.