taking a stand

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allan Boesak is Extraordinary Professor in the Faculty of Religion and Theology at Pretoria University. He studied theology at the Theological Seminary of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and was ordained in 1968. In 1970 he started advanced studies at the Theological University at Kampen in the Netherlands, and was conferred a Doctor’s degree in Theology in June 1976.

His involvement in public life and South Africa’s freedom struggle began in 1976 when he returned to South Africa a week after the Soweto uprisings to become chaplain to students and minister in Cape Town.

In 1983 he called for the formation of the United Democratic Front which would grow into the largest, nonviolent, non-racial anti-apartheid formation in the history of the struggle. A fervent believer in direct, nonviolent action, he became its most visible leader at home and abroad. He worked with President Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Rev Frank Chikane and an array of world leaders to end apartheid.

Allan served the church in various ecumenical positions, including as Moderator of his church, Senior Vice President of the South African Council of Churches, and President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). Under his leadership the WARC declared apartheid a sin and a heresy, and suspended the two white Dutch Reformed churches in South Africa for their moral and theological justification of the apartheid system.

Over the years, Allan became a world renowned liberation theologian and a coveted speaker at world events.

He has received thirteen honorary Doctor’s degrees and more than twenty awards, among those the Robert Kennedy Human Rights Award, the King Hérasia Bravery Award from the Xhosa Royal House, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Peace Award. He was recently inducted into the Martin Luther King, Jr. International Board of Preachers at Morehouse College, the only African to have that honour.


This paper was presented at Breaking Through the Backlash: Transformative Encounters Between LGBTI People and Churches in Africa, a gathering convened by the Other Foundation in partnership with Durban’s Diakonia Council of Churches and the Durban Lesbian and Gay Centre in Durban, South Africa in June 2019. You can find out more about the convening at www.theotherfoundation.org.
At its 2008 General Synod the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa considered a report on the church’s stand on the question of sexual orientation and nonconformity.

That was a moment, in my view, in which this church, who had declared apartheid, its biblical and theological justification a heresy and led the eccumenical movement in doing the same, who in formulating in 1982, and adopting in 1986 the Belhar Confession as a new standard of faith, faced its greatest challenge since confronting apartheid. Central to the Confession are our unity in Christ, the reconciliation wrought by Christ, and the justice demanded by God. These three things.

I was the convener of that task team and presenter of the report at the synod. It was one of those utterly shattering, fundamentally life-changing experiences. After a hostile, and theologically disturbingly crude, debate, the synod rejected the report, its contents, its conclusions and its recommendations calling for justice for LGBTQI persons and referred the report for reconsideration. Even though the words, “another, more anti-gay report” were deleted from the amended version of the original proposal, the intention could not have been clearer.

What was striking and shocking, even though hardly unknown in debates on this matter it seems, was the stridently hostile tone of the debate, the blatant homophobic language that dominated the discussion all through the afternoon. Speakers who took the floor did not even attempt to disguise their contempt. Some spoke openly of LGBTQI persons as “animals”, “not created by God”; of bestiality and of LGBTQI persons in one breath, all of which being as a “scandal” and “stain” upon the church.

It was an experience that had left me shaken and disoriented: how could the same “animals”, “not created by God”; of bestiality and of LGBTQI persons in one breath, all of which being as a “scandal” and “stain” upon the church.

How could the church that took such a strong stand against apartheid display such blatant hatred and hypocrisy (and) deny for God’s LGBTQI children the solidarity we craved for ourselves?

Was there no awareness of our Reformed tradition that is so deeply rooted in justice, in the belief that every wound of injustice inflicted upon any of God’s children is a wound inflicted upon Godself? John Calvin, the father of the Reformed tradition insists that “Scripture helps us in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider what [human beings] merit of themselves but look upon the image of God in all [of us], to which we owe honour and love… by virtue of the fact that God forbids you to despise your own flesh.” Striking in Calvin is the degree to which he begins from the claims of the Other, and that claim is grounded in the fact that we are kinfolk, each of us unique in our “iconicity” which in turn is grounded in our imaging of God.

What called forth the most ire by far, however, was the fact that the report interpreted the Belhar Confession in a way that called for solidarity with, embrace, and inclusion of LGBTQI persons, in the same way that the Confession calls for justice and dignity for people of colour in a racist dispensation. Probably the best known words of the Belhar Confession are the words that echo in the church’s conviction that “the church should stand where God stands”: namely with the wronged, the poor, the destitute and powerless against the powerful, and against any form of injustice and oppression. The report took the view that these categories included those despised, rejected and marginalised as a result of their sexual orientation.

That synod was, in more than one way, one of the most devastating experiences of my life. So when this conference speaks of a “backlash” I think I know exactly what you mean.

But this raises serious questions for the church in South Africa as a whole, that church that stood so prophetically against the vicious inhumanity of apartheid during the struggle for freedom. Should we expect from those who, in their own struggles against racial oppression, leaned so heavily on the exodus metaphor as inspirational in the struggle, take that paradigm one step further? In other words, will those who stood so firmly on Exodus 3:7, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry, and I have come down to deliver them” now as wholeheartedly embrace Ex.23:9: “Know the heart of an alien, [meaning the Other] for you were aliens in the land of Egypt”? Will they understand that all outsiders, like those of a different skin colour in a racist dispensation, probably the best known words of the Belhar Confession are the words that echoed in the church’s conviction that “the church should stand where God stands”, namely with the wronged, the poor, the destitute and powerless against the powerful, and against any form of injustice and oppression. The report took the view that these categories included those despised, rejected and marginalised as a result of their sexual orientation.

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These matters are at the heart of our Christian witness and the integrity of our faith in Jesus of Nazareth, and acting as if they are not just shows how far we are from the Kingdom of God.

The church should stand where God stands: with the wronged, the poor, the destitute and powerless against any form of injustice and oppression.

LGBTQI persons are not outsiders “by nature” as if God willed it so, but are made into outsiders by our sinful attitudes.
Moreover, these questions are raised within a context of great urgency and against the background of growing homophobia or more properly put, bigotry, and an exacerbating climate of murderous violence aimed at LGBTQI persons in Africa in general, but increasingly in South Africa as well.

Uganda now holds perhaps the dubious distinction of being the most openly anti-LGBTQI country on the African continent, with its legislation severely criminalizing same-sex relationships. Kampala's Rolling Stone newspaper has captured the attention of the world with its “exposure” of especially gay men and its banner headline call to “Hang Them!” Giles Mukambe, the publisher, says: “Whatever happens to gays is a result of their own misdeeds.” Meanwhile, at least one gay person has already been brutally beaten to death in Kampala. In South Africa, LGBTQI persons are victims of all kinds of abuse and violence, including murder and so-called “corrective rape” by gangs of thugs, especially of lesbian women, a perverse kind of “therapy” to make her change her “deviant” ways now that she knows what “real” sex with “real” men is like. This is on the increase despite South Africa’s constitutional protection of the rights of LGBTQI persons, including their right to marriage. For us this constitutes an immediate crisis, since it is, for God’s LGBTQI children, literally a matter of life and death.

Behind the fierce Ugandan legislation is born-again parliamentarian David Mahati, backed by the powerful and influential, but shadowy US right wing Christian group, “The Family”, organisers of the “National Prayer Breakfasts”, an event that no US president since Eisenhower has dared miss. Mahati believes he is chosen by God to “deliver humanity from this calamity.”

When then President Zuma appointed that rabid homophobe, journalist Jon Qwelane as South Africa’s ambassador to Uganda of all places, there was huge public outrage. And rightly so. It made me proud. But what made me inexpressibly sad was that my church, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, did not join that chorus of righteous outrage. We could not, dared not, because just the year before we had shown ourselves just as rabidly homophobic, filled with just as much hatred, drenched with just as much hypocrisy and bigotry as the designated ambassador and the man who appointed him.

Our hateful rejection of those God had the temerity to make in God’s image, but not in ours, shows how far we are from the Kingdom of God.
The joy of belonging to the community of believers is not to be denied any member of the body of Christ.

Just the other day, the Kenyan Supreme Court reconfirmed a colonial-era law brought there by the British, not confirmed as an authentic African tradition rooted in the wisdom of Ubuntu, that legitimates discrimination and criminalisation of non-consensual sexual orientation, love, and sex-style. In the forefront of the battle for this shameful outcome were the Christian churches. This stance for Kenyan churches to get more funding from the number one homophobe, misogynist and war-monger in the world in the White House, but it surely closes the windows of heaven through which pour the blessings of a compassionate, justice-loving God, just as it closes the possibilities of joy within the Christian community for the LGBTQI children of God who looked in vain to the church for the embrace of love and community they so richly deserve.

The joy of belonging to Christ and to the community of believers, of knowing one’s rootedness in the love of Christ and the love of the family of Jesus; the joy of sharing that community in its fulness and the sharing of the fulness of one’s own humanbairness within that community and in the world: that joy is not to be denied any member of the body of Christ. That sense of belonging in Christ, and as a consequence with each other, is unspeakable and unthrowable by any human law or ideology, by cultural or personal prejudices.

It is within this context also that Belhar calls upon us to remember that “we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another since we are, as followers of Jesus, obligated. As true as this is of our racial relations, it is true of our other human relationships as well, especially in the church. We dare not deny this joy to LGBTQI Christians and limit this obligation to only those who share our sexual orientation. And having testified to itself the church testifies to the world by setting an example to the world in these and all other matters.

But listen to the language Belhar uses here. Belhar not only advocates “embrace” as an act of love and justice, it also disputes against an understanding of “diversity” that is abused for reasons of negativity and rejection, as in apartheid and homophobia, instead of a diversity that celebrates the Other and diversity of God. The diversity that the Confession rejects is the diversity that seeks to find a negative “otherness” that comes with enmity, rejection of persons other than heterosexual or the degrading of women as if their “true faith in Jesus Christ” is not enough, but is in reality subjected to some form of human approval, something extra, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.” (Col. 3:11) On the contrary, it is our calling, gift and obligation to live together as reconciled community. There is nothing that falls outside of this call and gift; nothing makes us “despair of reconciliation” because we cannot despair of the work of Christ.

This goes indeed far beyond the issue of race. This addresses quite profoundly the historical and actual contexts of oppression, rejection and exploitation of LGBTQI persons. Churches often take resolutions “embracing” LGBTQI members. Embrace is not the glorification of our ability to be “tolerant” as long as our cultural domination remains intact and normative.

The foundation of the Other’s existence is not the difference of skin colour, gender, culture, or sexual orientation for that matter. This is rooted in the African tradition that the universe is being created in the image of God, sharing humanity in all its fulness with us. We dignify both the divergence and the togetherness with our respect and love of our common creatureliness as image bearers of God. The diversity that Belhar celebrates is the dignity of personhood and being part of the greater human community. This is what the church celebrates and embraces. And this embrace is not the glorification of our ability to be “tolerant” as long as our cultural domination remains intact and normative. It is the celebration of the inclusiveness of the embrace of God.

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The lack of unfettered compassionate inclusivity is a deliberate rejection of the renewal in Christ in which “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.” (Col. 3:11) On the contrary, it is our calling, gift and obligation to live together as reconciled community. There is nothing that falls outside of this call and gift; nothing makes us “despair of reconciliation” because we cannot despair of the work of Christ.

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The injustices and suffering inflicted upon LGBTQI persons are not just personal; it is systemic and structural.

In the struggle against apartheid, the church took a strong and immovable stance against racism with as central tenet the belief of the church that all human beings are created in the image of God.

But our understanding of these matters deepened since the early 1970s. We came to understand, in contrast to earlier times, that with regard to racism, we could no longer speak of it simply in individual, personal, that is to say, attitudinal terms. We understood racism in its historical, structural, systemic dimensions and manifestations as well. Racism, we discovered, is all the more devastating when it is linked with power and powerlessness. Dealing with racism means dealing with power relations, with domination, subjection, and exploitation.

This same maturity of insight is called for in the matter of sexual justice. The injustices and suffering inflicted upon LGBTQI persons are not just personal, a matter of attitudes; it is severely systemic and structural. Here, too, power relations are at play. Heteronormativity rests in heterosexual power reflected in every area of society and all walks of life. This insight is even more important since it is the once-powerless who are in positions of power over LGBTQI persons in South Africa today. It might be the power of the state, the power of structures in the church, the power of societal institutions such as the courts, the media, or the sheer power of cultural prejudice and sanction. It is for this reason that the Constitution of South Africa regards discrimination against homosexual persons a criminal act, as is the recognition, honouring and protection of their rights considered a civil, legal and political responsibility. I would argue that in its call upon the concept of Ubuntu the Constitution makes it also a moral responsibility. The Constitution means to protect the powerless against the powerful, an obligation Belhar claims as God’s demand for the church.

The church began to speak of racism as “sin” because it denies, as we have stated before, the creaturality, and hence the humanbeingness of others. It denies the truth that all human beings are created in the image of God, people whose humanity is confirmed and made sacred by the incarnation of God through Jesus Christ. In doing this, Calvin insists, we are acting with “the greatest inhumanity.” We are human in the likeness of God, which means not a physical likeness, but our unique, dynamic relation to God and hence to one another. God, writes John Calvin, sees in us the marks and features of God’s own countenance, so “whenever God contemplates [God’s] own face, [God] both rightly loves it and holds it in honour…” Dare we argue that this is true only of heterosexual persons? And if God holds their humanity in honour, how dare we dishonour it? Our humanity is confirmed...
All the arguments that were valid in the struggle against racism are applicable to the situation of LGBTQI persons.

by and in the humanity of the other; our own humanness is affirmed by our recognition of the humanness of the other, and therefore our existence is incomplete without that human recognition and reflection and our God-given capacity for intimate, caring and loving relationships. Cultural, racial, ethnic, language, sexual or any other difference cannot invalidate that basic truth that constitutes human life together. In Jesus Christ, these truths become utterly compelling.

We called racism a form of idolatry in which the one dominant group assumes, on the basis of pigmentation and the mythical belief in a social construct called “race”, for itself a status higher than the other, and through political, cultural, military and economic power, as well as socio-economic and psychological structuring, seeks to play God in the lives of others. While culture and white power demand from blacks a “correction” of their “deviant” (that is, black) humanity that is in fact God-given: to be celebrated, not denigrated, to be embraced, not discriminated against; to be dignified with love, not vilified by ignorance and abuse. The same is true for LGBTQI humanity.

And so we called apartheid racism a pseudo-gospel and a heresy because it claimed to have salvific power, made demands in the name of the gospel the gospel itself does not make, instituted conditions for and a threshold to membership of and full acceptance in the church other than faith in Jesus Christ alone, claimed to know better than God the way of salvation. We rejected the apartheid pseudo-gospel because it claimed that the most important thing about a person is not that they are human beings created in the image of God the Liberator with inalienable rights, but their racial identity and pigmentation. It meant that racial identity determines, with an overwhelming intensity, everything in a person’s life. This pseudo-gospel was perhaps welling to admit that God created us all, but added a “but...” That “but” was the beginning of the heresy, the human hubris and arrogance that dared to question the completeness, rightness and gloriousness of God’s creation. That view, we further determined, has all sorts of bitter consequences. Because it demeanishes the Other, reduces them to the caricature human beings, not God, created, they are stripped of their human dignity, of the freedom of being, choice and options.

Dislodged from the image of God, they are not fit to be considered in terms of pain or humiliation, dreams or aspirations, human degradation or human fulfilment and human rights. They become, in sinful, racist minds, the completed and completely distorted “other”, the product of the perverted, racially-obsessed imagination of the dominant group, the object of scorn.

All the above mentioned arguments that were, and still are, unquestioningly valid in the struggle against racism and the racialized mind-set, are applicable to the situation of LGBTQI persons. This same process of thinking and action can be detected in homophobic bigotry.

In the Belhar Confession, the whole of Article Four, which deals with God as “the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth”, speaks to the situation of LGBTQI persons and women.

The situation of the LGBTQI person is in its deepest reality a situation of injustice. Their search for the recognition and protection of their humanity is a search for justice. In their woundlessness, their vulnerability to the denial of their rights, the anomaly of many in society and the church, and the rejection of their true and full humanity, LGBTQI persons have an inalienable right to call upon the God, to quote Belhar, “who in a special way led God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.” Their suffering is no less than the suffering of the widows and the orphans and it is in regard to their right to justice that God “wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right.”

Before God, there is no hierarchy of oppression and injustice. The injustice done to LGBTQI persons is no less an abomination than the injustices done to the black poor and powerless. With God, justice is indivisible, as love is indivisible, as God is indivisible. Therefore, with regards to gays, lesbians, bi-sexual, transgender, queer, and intersexual persons, as it is with the oppression and marginalization women, the challenge is the same: in their struggle for the recognition of their rights to full humanity, the church also must learn “to stand where God stands”, to witness and strive against “any form of injustice”, so that also for those members of the body of Christ “justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

As the church seeks to follow Christ in the struggle for justice for the poor and the discriminated against, so the church must follow Christ in this matter. This not only means that the church ought to support, uphold and implement those rights afforded to LGBTQI persons in the Constitution of South Africa, the church ought to seek to actively safeguard and promote those rights within its own structures, its preaching and living, its worship and witness. Rejecting, as Belhar enjoins us, “any ideology which legitimates any forms of injustice...” means by the same token, or better still, by the same conviction, rejection of any form of oppression of women, or any form of bigotry, blatant or subtle.

Churches, like my own does, often take resolutions that speak of “embracing” LGBTQI members. Those sentiments may not always intend to be hypocritical, but they are purposely vague and therefore meaningless. A fig leaf behind which we often hide our fears and our discomfort with the LGBTQII Other and as a result, with God. We must not confuse
We must be alert to those things which create the climate for the inhuman treatment of LGBTQI persons.

But there is also the tyranny of cultural chauvinism, homophobic prejudices and societal perceptions, in many cases driven by the media and propagated by churches, which exert enormous pressure over against what we know to be the call of the Gospel. There are frightening reasons why so many LGBTQI Christians suppress their identity and even allow themselves to be forced into heterosexual marriages in order to hide their sexual orientation, causing untold suffering to themselves, their spouses, their families and in the end, the church. This is not a church reflecting the love Christ demands, the respect and dignity LGBTQI persons deserve or a testimony to the glory of God. For all these reasons we must reject with brothers and sisters in Botswana for the stance the Supreme Court there has taken, as we mourn the fact that this seems to have happened without open advocacy of the church.

Allow me to quote the whole of Article Three of the Belhar Confession, reading it not as a statement of faith about racial injustice, but as it is intended, a testimony against all forms of injustice, prejudices and exclusivity, and affirmation of the fundamental truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the indispensibility of God’s home for any human situation:

**“We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ: That the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells; That God’s life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconcilability and hatred, bitterness and enmity; That God’s life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world … That any teaching which attempts to legitimate such enforced separation by appeal to the Gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, self-righteousness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the Gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.”**

In my view, the above considerations cannot but bring the church to accept and embrace LGBTQI persons in the fullest sense of the word. That means that the church accepts:

1. That LGBTQI persons, on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ as personal Saviour and Lord of their life and of the church, are without any reservation full members of the church. The confession states, “We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the church is called to confess and do all those things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence. Jesus is Lord.” I argue that it is wrong to restrict this sentence to “governmental powers and authorities” only, even though this statement remains only too painfully true as we indicated at the start. Most African states criminalise homosexuality, and most recently according to news reports, the Gambian president Yahya Jammeh warned that “all homosexual persons should leave the country within twenty-four hours” otherwise “their heads would be chopped off”. Since President Yahya Jammeh threatened that his country’s laws would be made stricter “than those in Iran”, many gay persons have been arrested and otherwise persecuted. “All homosexuals, drug dealers, thieves and other criminals” have to leave the country, says the president. In Zimbabwe former president Mugabe described LGBTQI persons as “dogs” and “rip”, “not worthy of human consideration.”

More sophisticated perhaps, but with the same deadly, dehumanising, soul-destroying logic, is the late US Supreme Court Justice Antonin’s Scalia’s judgement in his dissent from the Supreme Court’s overturning of a Texas sodomy law, his lips dripping with disdain and contempt:

State laws against bigamy, same-sex marriage, adult incest, prostitution, masturbation, adultery, fornication, bestiality are ..., called into question by today’s decision.

One cannot escape the conclusion: non-heterosexuality by itself is devoid of all humanity – it is the inevitable slippery slope towards bestiality. The church in South Africa cannot act as though our Constitution respects the human rights of LGBTQI persons, this deplorable situation elsewhere is not our concern.

We must be alert to those things, subtle and not so subtle, which create the climate and provide a pretext for the inhuman treatment of LGBTQI persons, from journalistic self-righteousness, political posturing and verbal abuse to micro-aggressions, violent attacks, “corrective rape” and murder. In South Africa the horrific violence visited upon women because they are women, is just as regularly visited upon LGBTQI persons because they are what they are. Often this violence is seen as “sport”, or treated as a joke, entertainment for macho men. If possible, this trivialisation of violence is even worse than the violent deed itself.

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1. That LGBTQI persons, on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ as personal Saviour and Lord of their life and of the church, are without any reservation full members of the church of Jesus Christ.

2. That LGBTQI persons deserve justice in the same way the church claims justice for the destitute and the wronged, both before and under the law, in civil society and in the church, and the church commits itself to actively pursue that justice in all areas of life.
It is time to take away the suffering and the pain. It is time to take away the rejection and revilement.

3. That our commitment and calling to unity and reconciliation require that LGBTQI persons, as confessing members of the church, have access to all the offices of the church, including the office of minister of the Word.

4. This access should, both in the interests of justice and pastoral concern, not be prejudiced by demands for celibacy if the relationship is one of love, respect and genuine commitment. Should the criteria for heterosexual married persons apply, the church must then take a decision on support for, and the blessing of and officiating at same-sex marriages as allowed by the Constitution.

In our work with families of LGBTQI persons, we have discovered, inasmuch as those who are themselves not of non-conformative sexual orientation can, just how deep are the pain and estrangement felt by LGBTQI persons, just how horrifying for some of them is the prospect of being ‘discovered’ and ‘exposed’, just how devastating is the humiliation they experience in the ways they are being discriminated against and talked about, just how destructive is the helplessness felt by the daily injustices done to them, and just how devastating the rejection and alienation they experience from the church and Christians. Most of all we have felt their total disorientation in the myriad ways church and society have questioned, undermined and denied their childhood of God. We have also felt the painful disillusionment of parents and family members, and with all of them, the loneliness no child of God need ever feel while there is such a thing as ‘church’.

I cannot tell you how much I admire and appreciate the work of the Other Foundation, the Diakonia Council of Churches, the Durban Lesbian and Gay Centre, and all the organisations in this country and on the African continent who work for this vital cause. Thank you for your work and your testimony.

It is time for us to come together. It is time to take away the suffering and the pain. It is time to take away the rejection and the revilement. To take away what we have brought upon ourselves and the church by shaming LGBTQI persons and leaving them to fight their battles all on their own. It is time to break through the backlash! It is time to embrace our common belonging to Christ, our common membership of Christ’s church, to celebrate our binding as human beings created in the image of God, and rejoice in our shared future as loved ones of a just, compassionate loving God.

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