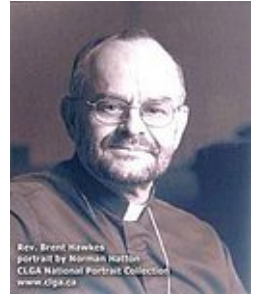




## Hawkes, Brent (b. 1950)

by Linda Rapp

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Brent Hawkes. Image provided by the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto.

The Reverend Doctor Brent Hawkes has been the Senior Pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto since 1977. In addition to ministering to the glbtq community there, he has worked with fervor and dedication to secure equal rights for all glbtq Canadians.

Brent Hawkes comes from a deeply religious home, but a highly atypical one: his mother was a devout Roman Catholic, and his father a firm adherent of the Pentecostal church. In order to favor neither religion, they decided to raise their son, who was born on June 2, 1950 in Bath, New Brunswick, as a Baptist.

When he was about nine years old, Hawkes felt a calling to the ministry and "played church" with his friends. Around the same time, however, he realized that he was gay and that therefore becoming a Baptist minister would be impossible were he to be honest about his sexuality.

As often was the case with children of his generation, who had few if any positive gay role-models while they were growing up, Hawkes felt a sense of isolation and of being the only person who was gay. Despite this, he neither felt shame about his sexual orientation nor lost his faith in God. "I felt that God was my best friend," he stated in a 2007 interview. "It was the church that was the problem."

Having given up hope of a career in the ministry, Hawkes decided to become a teacher. He enrolled at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1972 and a Bachelor of Education degree a year later.

Hawkes had been teaching high school in Nova Scotia for several years when an ad in *The Advocate* caught his eye. Seeing the symbol of the cross in a gay and lesbian publication filled him with a new hope that he might be able to express himself both as a gay man and a Christian. He wept with joy at the possibility and resolved to find out more about the denomination that had placed the advertisement, the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC).

Hawkes learned that there was an MCC congregation in Toronto. Founded in 1973 with only twelve people at the first service, the church was still small and lacked a building of its own, but as soon as he went there and joined the congregants in worship, he recalled, "I knew that I was home."

His dream of becoming a minister was once again something to which he might aspire. He moved to Toronto to pursue this goal.

Around the same time, Hawkes came out to his parents by writing them a letter that was very poorly received. His father told him that his mother would have committed suicide from shame had he not been there to prevent her, and both condemned his homosexuality as sinful. Eventually, however, they became accepting of their son's sexual orientation and supportive of him.

Hawkes became the pastor of the MCC church in Toronto in 1977 and guided its expansion both physically

and in its commitment to social justice for glbtq people. Under his leadership, the congregation grew, and in 1985 they were finally able to buy their own church building. Six years later they moved to another property consisting of a much larger church, a gym, and a hall.

Even the larger building cannot accommodate the throng that has turned out each year since 1990 for MCC Toronto's Christmas Eve service, which is held in a concert hall and has annually drawn thousands of people.

"The service is our gift to the gay and lesbian community," stated Hawke. "Many people in the gay community have lost their birth family through discrimination or distance, and it's hard to make up for that, but the Christmas Eve service gives them a family to be with and allows them to see the extended family that they're part of."

The ecumenical service also affords an opportunity for supportive families to celebrate the holiday in a way that affirms the faith of their glbtq relatives.

In addition, Hawkes conducts an annual inter-faith service as part of Toronto's Pride festival, held near the end of June.

As the pastor of MCC Toronto, Hawkes has overseen many initiatives in support of the glbtq community, including a care program for people with AIDS, the organization of a PFLAG chapter, and the formation of the Lesbian Gay Bi Youth Line, which offers confidential peer support to glbtq young people suffering from feelings of isolation, loneliness, and despair.

In order to serve his flock better, Hawkes also continued his studies. He earned two degrees from Trinity College, University of Toronto: a Master of Divinity in 1986 and a Doctor of Ministry in 2001.

Hawkes has taken public stances to protest discrimination against glbtq people. For example, in 1981 he went on a hunger strike after the infamous police raids of four bathhouses frequented by gay men. In the course of the action at the private clubs, police caused extensive damage by breaking doors, shattering windows, and ripping down artwork before arresting twenty men for keeping a common bawdy house and more than 250 others for having been found therein. Almost all of the men arrested in the bathhouse raids were eventually found not guilty, but not before enduring considerable indignity.

Hawkes continued his fast for 25 days, ending it only when the city council directed Daniel Hill, the adviser to the mayor's committee on community and race relations, "to look into the disagreements between the police and the gay community," an important step because the city of Toronto took official recognition of its large glbtq population.

In later years Hawkes continued his efforts to educate Toronto law enforcement personnel, lecturing at the Charles O. Bick Police College to make recruits aware of the issues and concerns of the glbtq community.

Among those who supported Hawkes during his fast was John Sproule, a computer programmer, who had recently joined the congregation. Their relationship deepened, and before the fast ended, they had become a couple.

Hawkes has been a highly visible advocate for glbtq rights, speaking at rallies and participating in demonstrations.

In 1994, for example, he was in the gallery of the Ontario legislature when the body defeated the government's same-sex benefits bill. He leapt to his feet, shouting, "This is an absolute outrage! Shame! Shame!" When some two hundred other gay and lesbian proponents of the bill joined the outcry, police

moved in aggressively to force them downstairs and out of the building. In the resulting fracas, several people were knocked down--Hawkes among them--but he took the lead in exhorting the group to leave in an orderly manner so that no one would be injured. He subsequently criticized the behavior of the police, saying, "Their attitude in terms of rushing the crowd on the stairs was totally inappropriate. If this wasn't such a gentle community, it could have started a riot."

After years of activism for equality, Hawkes ran for political office, standing for election to parliament as the New Democratic Party (NDP) candidate for the Toronto riding of St. George-St. David in 1995. In a hotly contested three-way election, he ran third but still lost by fewer than 1,000 votes.

Seeking equal rights for same-sex couples is a cause for which Hawkes has worked long and hard. He and MCC Toronto became an intervener in *Egan and Nesbit v. Canada*, a case in which longtime partners Jim Egan and Jack Nesbit sought the same spousal pension for Nesbit that members of opposite-sex couples receive under the Old Age Security Act. The case, first filed in 1988, dragged through the legal system until 1994, when the Supreme Court of Canada, in a puzzling decision, ruled 5-4 that the definition of "spouse" in the Old Age Security Act was indeed discriminatory under the federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but by the same margin denied Nesbit a pension.

Hawkes took on the issue of same-sex marriage in December 2000 by announcing plans to marry two couples--one gay and one lesbian--the following month. Provincial officials routinely refused to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples, but Hawkes cited a provision in the Ontario Marriage Act that offered an alternative procedure, the reading of banns. In this ancient Christian custom, the names of a couple desiring to wed are read at church services on three consecutive Sundays. If no one raises a valid objection to the union, the marriage is solemnized by a cleric.

Under Ontario law, upon receipt of documentation of the nuptials, the provincial Registrar General was to record the union and issue a marriage certificate.

On the day that the weddings were to take place, Erika Kubassek, a self-proclaimed "prophetess of the Lord" with a history of homophobic protest activities, disrupted the regular morning worship service by loudly reciting Bible verses that she claimed condemned homosexuality. When Hawkes asked her to stop, she shoved him, at which point a security guard intervened and removed her from the premises, still shouting and tossing pamphlets.

It was in this atmosphere that Hawkes presided at the double wedding of Elaine and Anne Vautour and of Kevin Bourassa and Joe Varnell on January 14, 2001.

The church was filled with family and friends of the couples, and more well-wishers gathered outside to show their support. Because of the earlier incident, Hawkes wore a bullet-proof vest under his clerical robes, and several dozen Toronto police officers were on hand in case of trouble, but only six protesters showed up before the ceremony. The demonstrators were not only outnumbered by the police but also by journalists, at least sixty of whom came to report on the marriages.

Ontario NDP leader Howard Hampton, who attended the weddings, called upon provincial officials to recognize the marriages, but, as anticipated, they would not.

MCC Toronto sued, asking the court to review the refusal of the registrar to issue marriage certificates to the two couples. Eight other couples who had been denied marriage licenses by the city of Toronto joined the case, which was heard in November 2001.

A favorable decision came down in July 2002, when a three-judge panel on the Ontario Superior Court

found that limiting marriage to opposite-sex couples was a violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Justice Harry LaForme wrote, "The exclusion of same-sex couples serves no pressing, nor even legitimate, government objectives . . . . The restriction against same-sex marriage is an offense to the dignity of lesbians and gays because it limits the range of relationship options available to them. The result is they are denied the autonomy to choose whether they wish to marry. This in turn conveys the ominous message that they are unworthy of marriage."

The couples were unable to get marriage licenses or certificates immediately, however, because Justice Heather Forster Smith suspended the ruling for two years to give the Parliament time to rewrite the legal definition of the word "marriage." Meanwhile, the government appealed the decision.

In June 2003, however, a three-judge panel on the Court of Appeal concurred with the lower court that preventing same-sex couples from marrying violated their equality rights under the Charter. Writing collectively, the justices criticized the government's case for restricting marriage to heterosexuals, calling their arguments full of stereotypes and "circular reasoning."

The justices further stated that "the couples are not seeking to abolish the institution of marriage. They are seeking access to it" and proceeded to give them that access by changing the phrase "one man and one woman" in the definition of "marriage" to "two persons." The change went into effect immediately.

A month after the ruling, Hawkes officiated at the marriage of MCC founder the Reverend Troy Perry and his partner of almost two decades, Phillip De Blieck. Since the couple lived in California, their union was not recognized in their homeland, but they welcomed the opportunity to wed. Perry also hoped that if same-sex American couples traveled to Ontario or British Columbia to marry, states might follow the lead of these progressive Canadian provinces. Unfortunately, his hope has not been realized except in the state of Massachusetts. However, since 2005, same-sex marriage has been legal throughout all of Canada.

Hawkes and Sproule obtained their own marriage license on Valentine's Day 2006 and were wed on March 7, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the day they fell in love. The entire congregation attended the ceremony and added to the festivities by making a three-tiered wedding cake and other handmade gifts. Many also wrote letters of congratulation.

"I have spoken to the couples whom I have married and they tell me how surprised they are about how transforming marriage is when the magic of the ceremony unfolds. But when you are surrounded by that much love and support, how can you not be transformed?" commented Hawkes after the wedding.

Hawkes has received numerous honors for his work for equality, including the city of Toronto's Award of Merit (1994), the United Nations Toronto Association's Global Citizen Award (1995), the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches' Human Rights Award (2001), the city of Toronto's Access, Equity & Human Rights Award (2003), and the International Court System's José Sarria Lifetime Achievement Award (2005).

In 2007 the Canadian Governor General bestowed upon Hawkes the country's highest civilian honor, naming him to the Order of Canada. Among those applauding the award were Toronto city councilors, including Kyle Rae, the only openly gay member of the group, who stated, "Given how the rest of the world is now recognizing Canada as an equity-seeking nation, the work that Brent has done is an example to be pursued by other nations. He has enriched all our lives."

Even as Hawkes accepted the honor for his achievements, he cautioned against complacency, saying, "We have got to ground the gains we've made because they could be taken away." He is particularly concerned about the threat posed by religious conservatives. To meet it, he has reached out to clergy of other denominations in order that they may present a united front, which he believes is urgently needed. "The

supportive religious community has to be mobilized because the opposition is religious," he stated.

Hawkes continues to demonstrate the resolve and the hope that he expressed at the 1995 Pride festival service: "Justice must be pursued, no matter what the cost. Have confidence in our collective strength. We can change the world."

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