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OttawaWatch 12: Grace Church and the Prentice factor

By Lloyd Mackey

This piece continued the discussion on same-sex marriage. From the perspective of a decade and a half later, when the legality of same sex marriage is long settled, examining the process of getting there can be both frustrating and enlightening. The injection of Jim Prentice and his Presbyterian pastor into the discussion demonstrated that much careful thought was happening in both the faith and political worlds in Canada, on this issue. Jim Prentice went on to become the premier of Alberta who subsequently suffered defeat by the NDP, for the most part, because he was not able to successfully forge unity within the province's conservative sector. He died, tragically, in a plane crash returning to Edmonton from a BC hunting trip in 2016.

We will get to Grace Church in a minute.

First, many eyes are on former prime minister Jean Chretien, this morning (Tuesday, February 8), as he testifies before the Gomery inquiry into the sponsorship scandal.

Some pundits are suggesting that the same sex marriage legislation is meant to deflect attention from the sponsorship issue. If that is the case, it would not be the first time the Liberal government was accused of using same-sex debate to draw attention from a money-type controversy.

In the spring of 2000, then Human Resources Development minister Jane Stewart was under fire for weeks over what was popularly-known as the “Billion Dollar Boondoggle”. It involved a seemingly unaccountable flow of money to charitable organizations across the country for grants which appeared to have little relationship to sound social development principles.

The debate was carried on the opposition side by Diane Ablonczy, who has developed a reputation as a highly-competent and persistent questioner. In any future Stephen Harper government, she could well carry the immigration portfolio – she exhibited her prowess once again last fall and is likely one of the big reasons why Judy Sgro is no longer immigration minister. As immigration critic, Ablonczy led the pressure on the “strippergate” scandal, which involved allegations that Sgro had given Asian exotic dancers preference in the immigration cue, in exchange for their help in her 2004 re-election campaign.

Be that as it may, in the midst of the 2000 “boondoggle” debate, it happened one afternoon that reporters could not get any further answers on the issue from Stewart. But their editors, pressing them to fill time and space, urged that they follow another bunny trail – that of benefits and rights for same-sex couples. Then justice minister Anne

McLellan accommodated the hungry scribes with some startling announcements on the same-sex issues. They had their story and, for the time being, Ablonczy's critiquing of Stewart was left in the dust.

There is a fair body of opinion among advocates around The Hill that McLellan's initiative was not accidental but was, instead, was a tactically sophisticated diversionary action. Likewise, a fair number of government-watchers see the same-sex issue as a way to divide the opposition and take the attention away from both the Gomery commission and "strippergate."

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All of which brings us to this past Sunday morning at Grace Presbyterian Church in Calgary.

I have been in the city for several days, doing interviews for my upcoming Stephen Harper book. Grace is an historic century-old and traditionally evangelical downtown congregation – what urban ministry specialists sometimes call an "old first in renewal." And it is just two blocks' brisk walk in the snow from my hotel.

One of Grace's members is Jim Prentice, MP for Calgary-North-Centre, a riding where the gay vote is a significant factor.

Prentice, it will be recalled, is a Calgary lawyer who ran strongly in the Progressive Conservative leadership race won by Peter MacKay on May 31, 2003. MacKay was the candidate promising – to everyone including David Orchard – that he would not merge the party with the Canadian Alliance. Prentice was much more merger-oriented. He lost the battle but, in a rather roundabout way, won the war.

Now, he has announced that, despite his strong faith-based belief that marriage is between a man and a woman, he will support the Liberals' same-sex marriage bill when it comes to a vote.

A couple of paragraphs in his statement are worth noting:

For me, the marriage question is one of individual liberty – of constitutional liberty.

Let's be clear. I have been married to the same woman for 21 years, reflecting my own personal definition of what marriage is. It is also the definition of my own church, the Presbyterian Church of Canada.

It is not, however, the personal definition of many of our fellow citizens who are homosexual and who have sought the protection of the Charter to obtain civil marriage licences from the government.

Fundamentally the question is this: what right do we as a society have to refuse gay Canadians something that the rest of us are entitled to – namely, a civil marriage license.

Later, he notes:

I have come to the conclusion that I will stand in defence of the constitutional right of homosexual couples to civil marriage, even though their definition of marriage is not my own. I will be equally vigilant in defending religious marriage and religious freedom, for it is equally clear that neither the Christian community nor the other communities of faith can be compelled to accept or perform same sex marriages. Religious freedom must stand sacrosanct and religious marriage must stand as the exclusive preserve of our communities of faith.

As it happened, the morning I attended Grace Church, its senior minister, Victor Kim, read a “pastor statement” from the pulpit. A couple of paragraphs from that statement, too, are worth noting:

Let me say that the doctrinal position of the Presbyterian Church in Canada on this matter is clear and unambiguous.

The statement on Human Sexuality adopted by the 120th General Assembly reaffirmed the biblical and traditional view that committed heterosexual union is so connected with creation in both its unitive and procreative dimensions that we must consider this as central to God’s intention for human sexuality. Accordingly, Scripture treats all other contexts for sexual intercourse as departures from God’s created order.

Our church also has affirmed that we, in our family structures and situations, are not monolithic in composition and that every person is to be treated with Christian love and pastoral care. The church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supportive community, a true church family where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported. We speak the truth, but we must speak it in love.

Prentice is emulating the approach of many Christian politicians – that of developing an informal accountability to the churches of which they are a part. John McKay, the Liberal parliamentary secretary to the minister of finance, does that with his home church, Spring Garden Baptist in the Willowdale section of Toronto.

Others, like Liberal Andy Savoy, Conservative Chuck Strahl and NDPer Bev Dejarlais, pull together a number of pastors in their riding, to provide advice on faith-related issues.

Prentice did the former, as is evidenced by Kim’s statement. In some ways, that takes a few more guts than the clergy advisory committee, because it more family-like and thus

likely to involve some strong emotional exchanges within the group. An interesting sidelight: Jim's wife, Karen, is an elder at Grace.

In talking with me after church, Prentice referred me to an opinion piece in that morning's *Calgary Herald*, penned by Jim Wallace, minister of the North American Baptist-affiliated South Calgary Community Church.

Prentice counts Wallace, as well as Kim, as a spiritual advisor. While allowing that he and Wallace differ in their positions on the same-sex marriage bill, he recommends serious study of Wallace's *Herald* piece.

Wallace particularly addresses the question in the Alberta context, arguing that his proposed approach could likely resolve the dilemma posed by the same-sex marriage bill. Here are some key paragraphs from his piece, entitled *This could resolve the marriage debate*:

After Parliament passes the same-sex marriage legislation, the province should withdraw from the marriage business. Stop issuing marriage licences. Stop authorizing clergy to perform marriages. All relationships in Alberta would be registered under the Adult Interdependent Relationships Act.

Clergy would be free to solemnize marriages in keeping with their beliefs and without government interference. The de facto result would be the separation of civil and religious marriage – true separation of church and state

Lest you think this is a radical proposition, you should talk to your clergy person. In my conversations with frontline clergy, I have found willing support for this solution. They may not be saying it publicly, but they are privately.

Prentice will take some heat on this issue. He is, in effect acting as did then-Alberta-premier Ernest Manning, six decades ago, on the matter of liberalizing liquor laws.

Manning, bowing to the will of the people, liberalized the liquor laws. At the same time, however, he expressed strongly, his own belief, that there was potential social harm in what the province was to embark upon.

Prentice has an older precedent, as well. Moses, seeing what Deuteronomy 24 describes as the "hardness of their hearts", liberalized his people's divorce laws. But, in so doing, he maintained leadership in enunciating the sanctity of marriage.

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