

The transgendered, like the rest of us, are loved by God

By DAVID SHEARMAN

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Donald Trump says Jenna Talackova, a transgendered model, can compete in his Miss Universe beauty pageant. And he didn't bluff and bluster or argue the point.

I suspect Mr. Trump realized that he couldn't win on this one. After all, he's a marketing genius and this public discussion got him lots of free publicity, especially when the Miss Universe pageant is being held in Toronto in May.

But Jenna Talackova has raised the profile and role of transgendered people in our society. It's a question that churches are looking at as well.

The United Church of Canada has at least three ministers that I know who are openly transgendered. They are as fully qualified as anyone in ministry is and bring their own gifts and talents to the church. They are pastors, preachers, administrators and for me, colleagues.

Surprised? Don't be.

If we think that this is something new, then we are deceiving ourselves. My first encounter with someone who was transgendered was very early in my ministry, decades ago, in the rural Maritimes.

A couple in a congregation I served had just been told that their daughter, then in her late teens, felt that she was a man.

Their daughter went for counselling. The parents talked to their doctor and counsellors. But in the end, the daughter chose to travel to Toronto, to enter the transition process and to become male. This was all done in a medically supervised way through what was then the Clark Institute.

One of the first steps which had to be taken in the transition process was to build a new gender identity.

In time I received a letter from the now transitioning woman requesting a new Certificate of Baptism in a new name and as a male. There was a supporting letter from her doctor.

I didn't quite know what to do, so I called my church superior, The Rev. Dr. Henry Tye, executive secretary of the United Church's Maritime Conference.

Henry was known as a quiet, thoughtful man who knew a lot about church process.

He called me back after a few days with this advice: "Have the Session (the gathering of church elders) of the church pass a motion amending the original baptismal record. Annotate the record to point to the session minutes and the amendment. Consider it as an error in the original minutes, which you are now correcting."

The Session meeting was, to put it politely, interesting. Most of the elders were farmers and retired railway workers. Some were civil servants. There were a couple of teachers too.

All had known the woman making the requests since she had been born. This was quite beyond their experience. And mine.

Finally, after about half an hour of civil discussion, one of the elders, a highly respected man who was a former MLA and provincial cabinet minister, said "I don't claim to understand it all, but I think it's a reasonable request. I move the amendment to the baptism records."

I think he spoke for all of us.

It was quickly seconded and approved and we went on to other business.

A few months later, Jim came home to see his parents. He eventually underwent gender reassignment surgery and has lived for decades as a man.

He moved home a few years ago and the church offered him a job as caretaker while he went back to school.

Jenna Talackova shouldn't be seen as unique or special. She's just asking for justice and fairness.

In Canada, it doesn't matter what your gender is at birth. While most people don't change gender in their lifetime, a small number do. And they go through very, very difficult experiences; I know that because I know some of their journeys personally.

We have transgendered people in our community. They deserve our respect, civility and the same opportunity as anyone else. They are loved by God, just like all of us. So with apologies to composer Bill Staines,

All God's critters got a place in the choir

Some sing low, some sing higher Some sing out loud on the telephone wire

And some just clap their hands, or paws

Or anything they got. Can I get an "Amen?"

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