

York Regional Council Members,

I want to start by thanking all of you as elected officials for your services in leading the people of York Region in these challenging and often divisive times. I am taking the time to write to you pertaining to the public crosswalk, which was permanently painted in rainbow colours on July 15th, 2020.

As someone who was born and raised in York Region, and as someone who continues to reside here as a professional and as a tax-payer, I am disappointed in the Council's decision to politicize public property used by a diverse population – many of whom disagree with the 2SLGBTQ+'s agenda of propagating certain perspectives and often aggressive stances to any who might offer alternative views.

As part of my profession, I have worked closely with York Pride organization members, members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, attended rainbow flag raising photo shoots, and have helped facilitate the York Pride events. I am no stranger to both the politics and the perspectives surrounding multiple sides of this issue.

As someone who volunteers in my community and someone who actively works to help those in vulnerable situations, I can appreciate the actions of any person or entity – public or otherwise – that are born out of a desire to help those of a subculture feel “supported”, as stated by the President of Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (Pflag) York Region – Tristan Coolman¹.

I have read over the Inclusion Charter of York Region, signed in 2018 by then Mayor of Aurora Geoffrey Dawe and Chief Administrative Officer Doug Nadorozny which states that its purpose is to “create an inclusive environment with equality for all who work, live and play here. Together our organizations share the vision of York Region as a welcoming and inclusive community where diversity is celebrated and where everyone can develop to their full potential, participate freely in society and live with respect, dignity and freedom from discrimination.”²

And yet, while I find the intentions of the Council to approve the crosswalk to be noble, I find its manifestation and execution of these intentions to be a step *away* – not a step *towards* – an inclusive community that seeks to promote such values.

Perhaps an explanation is in order.

There are many families, professionals, religious organizations, private corporations and more whom, over the years have felt the ever-constricting – both social and professional – consequences of exercising one's free speech and freedom of expression in regards to personal perspectives on the 2SLGBTQ+ movement.

Pastors, Preachers, Imams, Priests, and Rabbis have willfully omitted from speaking on parts of their holy books, lest their places of worship be targeted as homophobic, transphobic or bigoted and their leaders be socially crucified with their words hung above their now stigmatized communities. And while not all branches or denominations feel the same way about this controversial topic, it would be an interesting question to pose to those in charge of such vulnerable communities: are we moving towards or away from an environment where your congregational views are being included, celebrated, respected and are free from discrimination?

And I do not use that term lightly – indeed these are some of the *most* vulnerable communities. The Pew Research Centre – a highly reputable nonpartisan fact tank – released a study in 2017 that concluded that

¹ Queen, L. (2020) “‘Means the World’: Pflag pleased Aurora approves the rainbow crosswalk”, Aurora Banner, YorkRegion.com, July 16

² The Inclusion Charter for York Region. (2018) York.ca

Christians were harassed by governments or social groups in a total of 128 countries – more countries than any other religious group – and cited an increase in global restrictions on religion in general.³ Last year, they released a second report citing an increasing number of countries have high/very high levels of government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion.⁴ These findings were echoed by a an independent review conducted on behalf of the Foreign Secretary of the Foreign and Commonwealth Support for Persecuted Christians – also last year - which cited Christian persecution ‘at near genocide levels’ in many parts of the world.⁵ The Foreign Secretary pointed to ‘political correctness’ playing a part in these atrocities being ignored.⁶ Its unpopular. It does not fit a socially acceptable narrative.

And this religious discrimination is not something simply seen in remote corners of the world but rather felt right here in Canada as well. The most recent police data shows that hate crime towards those of religious groups in Canada are over 3.5x that any hate crime for reasons of sexual orientation. The year before it was over 4x.⁷ With the recent toppling of religious symbols in the GTA – specifically those of the Christian faith⁸ - I suspect the numbers will only be on the rise for the year 2020. I have also had the opportunity to speak with a rabbi who leads a Jewish community in York Region. He echoed similar concerns, citing an increase in anti-Semitic views/acts globally, with fears of it increasing in the Region.

What does a territorial domination of one of the Region’s most popular crosswalks say to those who already live with the daily anxiety of feeling their religious views are not accepted?

And then there are those – whether atheistic or agnostic or simply indifferent to religious faith altogether – who find themselves to be of a more socially conservative mindset (including some of those in the 2SLGBTQ+ community). Despite an overwhelming majority of seats won for the Ontario PC Party in 2018 (76 vs. 40 for NDP, 7 for Liberals), despite all 10 of the ridings that make up the Region - including Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill – voting *conservative*⁹, the Region failed to consider the voices of those who might disagree with such aforementioned controversial actions. Indeed I have close friends in the 2SLGBTQ+ community, who happen to have conservative mindset, and refuse to attend Pride Parades or flag-raising ceremonies, finding them to be nauseating and over-the-top expressions of an otherwise extremely private part of their lives.

Why rush into a decision that will certainly gain applause in the realm of political correctness by those who support a faction of the 2SLGBTQ+ agenda, but omit to include the voices of everyone else? And while I realize that \$10 000 came from an anonymous donor to help fund the crosswalk¹⁰, is that really the price that the Councillors decided was worth alienating large swaths of the tax-paying community?

³ Pew Research Center, April 11, 2017, “Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015, Reversing Downward Trend”

⁴ Pew Research Center, July 15, 2019, “A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World”

⁵ Bishop of Truro’s Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for the Persecuted Christians, April 21, 2019, “Interim Report”

⁶ “Christian persecution ‘at near genocide levels’”, May 3 2019, BBC News, bbc.com

⁷ Statistics Canada. [Table 35-10-0066-01 Police-reported hate crime, by type of motivation, Canada \(selected police services\)](#)

⁸ Aguilar, B. (2020) “Toronto parishioners devastated after statue of Virgin Mary decapitated”, Toronto News, CTVNews.ca

⁹ Ontario Votes 2018 Results, CBC News, newsinteractives.cbc.ca

¹⁰ Queen, L. (2020) “‘Means the World’: Pflag pleased Aurora approves the rainbow crosswalk”, Aurora Banner, YorkRegion.com, July 16

The rainbow crosswalk was vandalized two times within the first 24 hours of it being laid,¹¹ and while I denounce any vandalism and believe this to be an inappropriate response, I do think these actions may speak less about homophobia and instead capture a broader issue with the crosswalk – namely that it went in without any overt agreement from the community.

If we are to thrive as a Regional *community*, we need to first be treated as one. We need our local government to apply the Inclusion Charter not simply as an exercise in political correctness, but by using it as our guide to create an inclusive environment with equality *for all* who work, live and play here., where *everyone* can develop to their full potential and participate freely in society.

Thank you for taking the precious time out of your busy schedules to have read my letter of concern. While it is not something I am requesting, I am willing to sit down in person and discuss this topic further with any or all of the honourable councillors.

Kindest and warmest regards,

Joel P.

¹¹ “Charges laid after rainbow crosswalk vandalized in Aurora for second time in 24 hours”, August 22 2020, CP24 News, cp24.com