DON'T ASSUME YOUR CONGREGATIONS ARE ALL STRAIGHT

Councillor **Kristyn Wong-Tam** has represented Ward 27 in downtown Toronto since 2010. She came out as a lesbian in high school at the age of 16 and has been an activist for both LGBTQ and Asian Canadian community issues.

For most of my adult life, I have been a human rights activist. Often times, the language of inclusion does not include someone like myself — someone who is a member of the LGBTQ community and who has a very different way of expressing my own gender-identity. While we name anti-Semitism, we name the rise of and the need to fight Islamophobia, we name racism, we name anti-Black racism, what is often missing is naming and defeating homophobia, transphobia and misogyny in those circles. This is something we have to do together and not in side conversations. As communities advocating for equity and inclusion, we have to look at who we are leaving behind.

Pendant la majeure partie de ma vie d'adulte, j'ai milité pour les droits de la personne. Souvent, le langage de l'inclusion n'inclut pas quelqu'un comme moi — quelqu'un qui est membre de la communauté LGBTQ et qui a une façon très différente d'exprimer sa propre identité de genre. Nous parlons d'antisémitisme, de la lutte contre l'islamophobie, du racisme, du racisme anti-noir, mais ce qui manque souvent, c'est de parler et de vaincre l'homophobie, la transphobie et la misogynie dans ces cercles. C'est quelque chose que nous devons faire ensemble et non dans des conversations secondaires. En tant que communautés qui militent pour l'équité et l'inclusion, nous devons regarder qui nous laissons derrière nous.

You are probably wondering: what is a local Toronto City Councillor doing on a panel about religion and human rights with esteemed academics and thought-leaders?

For most of my adult life, I have been a human rights activist. I have worn and continue to wear my values and my heart on my sleeve. I hope I make the right decisions and gather momentum along the way. I know together we can make our city, our country and the world a more just and equitable place for all. I care deeply about our country and I believe that Toronto is a social miracle. Our diversity is our strength. While there is much work to be done in building a more equitable and inclusive Toronto, I believe in the strength of this city. I believe in the people that make Toronto great and work every day with communities who are making Toronto better for all our diverse residents.

I want to take us back to 2010 and to a public policy debate on an issue that greatly effects LGBTQ minorities, sexual minorities, and women. Premier Dalton McGuinty was inching forward ever so carefully, and perhaps with too much hesitation, on the introduction of the sex-education curriculum that was widely recognized by educators as well-documented and with years of research backing the introduction of this curriculum. Young people were not getting important information on sexual health. Education centered on physical health — how

to keep your body strong and healthy — but did not address critical issues of sexual education.

The Premier was not able to introduce new legislation, despite his dedication to reforming sex-education curriculum. He was known as 'Premier Dad' when it came to education. But Premier Dad could not introduce this new curriculum because of tremendous opposition from a very loud vocal minority — largely evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics — who led a number of protests and occupied the offices of Members of Provincial Parliament.

Five years later, it was Premier Kathleen Wynne who successfully introduced updated provincial sex-education curriculum. This achievement took tremendous courage. The same threats that derailed her predecessor's introduction of the legislation existed for Premier Wynne: She risked losing voters and making a legislative move that would threaten the voter support she had worked tirelessly to earn. What had been behind much of the protest and organized opposition was not only vocal minority religious groups, but organizations such as the Campaign Life Coalition, the Institute for Canadian Values, REAL Women of Canada, and My Child My Choice — many of which are anti-women organizations that do not support women's reproductive autonomous rights. There were rampant myths and misinformation surrounding the issue, including claims that the new curriculum would teach your children to learn how to masturbate. Opposition voices did not believe that high school students should have the chance to learn about or discuss in school, for example, what sexual violence could look like or what it means to give consent.

Of course we know that we need to have these conversations. They make for a healthier and safer population. They make for healthier relationships, especially as young people begin to explore their sexuality and sexual identity. Many thought-leaders and advocates on the issue were vocal in their support of Premier Wynne and her efforts to do the right thing. This support gave her the political courage to do just that. The debate could once again be reopened in 2018, as we enter a provincial election period.

This is just one example of where public policy runs into conflict with religious freedoms.

Another is in 2013 in Quebec. The Parti Quebecois government introduced the Charter of Quebec Values and it immediately became an affront to many people. It aimed to legitimize and formalize forms of racism towards people who wore expressions of their faith on their head or around their bodies. It was a conflict between public policy and a rabid embrace of secularism which translated into an impediment of someone's individual freedoms and rights.

In 2017, the Quebec Liberal government introduced Bill 62. It is an absurd bill, depriving public services to women who wear the niqab. This bill, like the Parti Quebecois' 2013 Charter, formalized hate. We know that many Muslim-identified women in Quebec are scared to exist in public space because of these policies. A women riding the public subway had her hijab torn off. Others are being denied housing. This kind of discrimination is becoming state-sanctioned.

I have a message to religious leaders: do not assume that your congregations are all straight. Often times, the language of inclusion does not include someone like myself — someone who is a member of the LGBTQ community and who has a very different way of expressing my own gender-identity. While we name anti-Semitism, we name the rise of and the need to fight Islamophobia, we name racism, we name anti-Black racism, what is often missing is naming and defeating homophobia, transphobia and misogyny in those circles. Sometimes they come about in sidebar conversations, but I am certainly not seeing these issues being addressed at the forefront of community meetings or rallies. This is something we have to do together and not in side conversations. As communities advocating for equity and inclusion, we have to look at who we are leaving behind. I notice that even in communities that are advocating to end war, end violence, and stop American imperialism, they are often selective in whose voices are brought to the forefront.

In 2016, an incredibly troubled young man in his 20s walked into a gay nightclub in Orlando and killed 49 people and wounded 58 in one of the largest acts of terror in America. The mass killings were designated a hate crime in Florida. The LGBTQ community responded not with hate — we cried of course, and mourned — but ultimately we responded with love. Our response is one rooted in our own humanity, because we do not believe that hate is an option. We can only respond with love.

I want to share two quick anecdotes before I conclude. In 2004, I was president of a human rights organization, the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter. With 27 chapters across the country, we advocated for human rights and equality. The CBC asked us to participate in a national debate on marriage equality. They asked if our organization, a Chinese-Canadian organization, would do an interview to speak out against equal marriage. We explained to the producer, perhaps obviously so, that we are a human rights organization and we would not be speaking out against marriage equality. They told us they had enough speakers in support of equal marriage and they we need an oppositional voice. "Are you sure you cannot do it?" asked the producer one last time.

After that incident, we created the Asian-Canadians For Equal Marriage campaign. We went to the Supreme Court of Canada, we unfurled a banner, and we protested in support of equal marriage — all this because we wanted to respond to the racialization of homophobia. There is an assumption

that racial minorities are more socially conservative. I think you've heard from our esteemed panelists that there is no such thing as a single monolithic voice in any particular community. Somehow our national news network tried so desperately to pigeonhole us and could not see it.

Recently I have become involved with the Burma Task Force in support of Rohingya Muslims in Burma/Mynamar and in Bangladesh. They are facing a humanitarian crisis. There were 1.1 million Rohingya Muslims in Burma. Over 50% have now been expelled from their country. Today, there are more people of Rohingya background living outside of Burma than in their own country. I have been working with many of them and have been vocal in advocating that this not a Muslim issue, but a Canadian issue. Every one of us must care. I offered to organize a day of solidarity where Canadian women would come out demanding a stop to systemic sanctioned rape of the Rohingyas. Can I bring out the LGBTQ community to show support? Maybe we could lead a day of protest and action on Bay Street, occupying and taking up the road in an attempt to raise the awareness. But as dire as this situation is, as desperate as everyone is to bring attention to the issue, there was still a hesitation from the lead organizers.

One final remark — and I want to say this because I see that my wife Farrah Khan has just walked through the door. She always tells me that God does not make mistakes. Our gender expression is not a mistake. Our sexual orientation is not a mistake. The fact that Farrah and I were married with Buddhist blessings, Muslim blessings, and the Jewish and Christian and Dutch Reform faith, is not a mistake.