

## **A Reflection from the Calgary Rainbow Railroad Station**

Kelly Ernst - March 15, 2020

Peggy and Jennifer asked me to come today to talk about the plight of LGBTQ+ refugees, and how the Calgary Rainbow Railroad Station is helping.

One question I often get is “what brought me to wanting to help these perfect strangers.” After all, I know none of them, why would I help perfect strangers?

Given that we are celebrating PIE day today, I will try to be **Public** (standing in front of you), **Intentional** (by giving this address), and **Explicit** (by being transparent about YYC RR Station and answer this question for you).

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More than 30 years ago, I felt a calling to help people and started doing what I could to help others. Later, I got involved in helping to press for change to human rights laws in Alberta so that everyone could enjoy them equally.

As we gained equal rights here in Alberta, I also realized that this was not the case in other places around the world. This became very real when, in one role I held, 70% of the clients were LGBTQ+ refugees. Everyday, my office was filled with stories of terrible tragedy.

I have to tell you that stepping into the world of serving LGBTQ+ refugees is a Challenge – it is not easy. It stretches what you think, what you can accept, it challenges your view of the goodness of humanity, in how you feel people should and should not be treated; and it challenges your faith. But when you are called to help others, then you have to give up what you think the world should be and then wade into this uncomfortable challenge of hearing about the reality of people’s lives.

Eventually, I asked the refugees themselves, “how can we best help you, what do you need?” Then I listened, listened some more, and eventually their stories become clear. Another challenge – when you truly listen, then you can’t talk, you have to be silent.

I started with hearing stories, seeing pictures, and hearing evidence about brutal torture, gang violence, murders, rape, and violence. I was told how people could

not sleep at night or had night terrors, they showed me scars on their body, and there was crying... lots of crying.

When we hear of refugees in the news, it is most often people fleeing war. But there is another war going on in the world and it is a legal war against people how are considered to be different.

Across the world there are about 70 countries that continue to criminalize LGBTQ+, simply for being who they are and enact these laws.

- 8 countries actively use the death penalty or use non-state actors to evoke the sentence of death.
- The sentence of 14 years imprisonment or more for being gay is upheld by 14 states and 57 have some sort of jail term.
- Some countries use religions to help instill fear against their citizens.
- 19 states use Sharia laws to help persecute LGBTQ+ people.
- Some countries use gangs and vigilante groups to brutally enact laws in their countries.

We see the effects of this legal war in a very intimate way. It spreads when we don't counter it.

We know from our own statistics on over 200 people that:

- 9 of every 10 LGBTQ+ refugees and immigrants will have experienced extreme violence
- 2/3<sup>rd</sup> are fleeing at least one death threat, often from family
- Almost ½ if they return to their country of origin will be immediately imprisoned
- We know police brutality is common
- We know that vigilante violence is common
- We know that honour crimes are common

All this simply because someone falls on in love with someone else who has the same gender.

All they wanted was to live in peace and be free to love the person that they fell in love with.

Love and mutual respect are some of humanity's greatest ends and one of our greatest collective achievements. After all, isn't God's love is for everyone, no one is excluded.

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What I realized through listening was what really matters is not just that we think about and say we will love everyone, but rather that we try to live it every single day.

So, I pursued their wishes. One of the things that they asked was to set up a way to welcome refugees from around the world. One of the ways we are helping newcomers was to establish the Calgary Rainbow Railroad Station.

It is a partnership project among:

End of the Rainbow Foundation, Centre for Newcomers, **Calgary and Area Affirming Network of Faith Communities**, Rainbow Railroad and the Canadian Rainbow Coalition for Refuge.

Rainbow Railroad in TO likes the project because they get over 3000 requests and without local support in places like our city, they cannot complete their work.

Our mission is simple, "The project settles LGBTQ+ refugees from abroad here in Calgary."

We create support and networks for LGBTQ+ refugees, make sure they are settled, learn English, get a job, and in some cases help them through their immigration hearing where they have a 97% success rate.

What we do is unwind the impacts created by this terrible tragedy. It's about what happens when people don't respect others that they feel are most unlike themselves. It's what happens when we don't live up to the challenge of loving our neighbours as we would ourselves.

Today, we heard about words from John, Luke, and Matthew 22:39

– "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"

What a challenge! Love people that are maybe not like yourself.

Open your own heart to those around you.

It's not difficult, its really quite easy and it is what really matters. People just want to be accepted as they are and be loved – that's all we really want. It is a very simple message and easy to follow.

You are an affirming congregation you have created a safe respectful place for all in attendance.

Our next challenge is to create the safe places and invite newcomer / strangers into these places. Extend your hospitality by creating Groups of Support, raising funds for refugees to settle, or supporting them in other ways.

Let me end with another quote, "**We must open the doors and we must see to it they remain open, so that others can pass through.**"

That is my challenge for you today.

**The Calgary Rainbow Railroad Station is a project of the**

**End of the Rainbow Foundation**

**[www.endoftherainbow.ca](http://www.endoftherainbow.ca)**