

Homophobia in the hallways: LGBTQ people at risk in Catholic schools

21 January 2019, by Tonya D. Callaghan



Catholic pronouncements about LGBTQ people can be summarized as, "It's OK to be gay—Just don't act on it," a position some Catholics reject. Credit: Shutterstock

Recently, [a Calgary woman filed two human rights complaints with the Alberta Human Rights Commission. The employee, Barb Hamilton, says she was pushed out the Calgary Catholic School District \(CCSD\) because of her sexuality](#) and was refused employment on the grounds of marital status, religious belief and sexual orientation.

Hamilton [says she knew of 10 LGBTQ students in the school where she was principal who had hurt themselves](#), including by cutting themselves or attempting suicide because of homophobia at home or school. She says she went to the district for help but nothing changed.

Many Canadians may believe that LGBTQ people are protected from discrimination. But my research into [religiously inspired homophobia and transphobia in Canadian Catholic schools since 2004](#) shows there are [other LGBTQ-identified teachers who suffer similar fates](#).

I personally experienced this risk when [I taught high school English for CCSD](#).

It might seem strange that someone like me, a publicly "out" lesbian, sought employment with a Catholic school. But I was raised in a Catholic family that counts clergy among its members and I regarded myself as [culturally Catholic](#). Having a Catholic background also made it easier for me to find a teaching position at a time when they were hard to get.

In the years that I taught for CCSD, I experienced homophobia daily. I knew I could no longer work for CCSD when a student where I was teaching died by suicide after suffering months of homophobic bullying because he was gay.

I left teaching to research homophobia and transphobia in Canadian Catholic schools and also to begin to question and understand how these phobias are institutionalized. In other words, who or what systems are responsible for creating and implementing homophobic and transphobic religious curriculum and administrative policies?

Hotbeds for homophobia?

Using Catholic doctrine to fire LGBTQ teachers and to discriminate against queer students in Catholic

schools violates [Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the equality rights provision](#). Shouldn't publicly funded Catholic schools respect the law?

Publicly funded Catholic schools currently have constitutional status in the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario. These separate schools are operated by civil authorities and are accountable to provincial governments. [Religious bodies do not have a legal interest in them, and as such, Canadian Catholic separate schools are not private or parochial schools as is common in other countries](#).

Of course, the Charter also ensures [freedom of conscience and religion](#). However, when the expression of particular religious beliefs calls for the suppression of another's equality rights, freedoms are curtailed rather than safeguarded.

This recurring discrimination against sexual and gender minority groups could be due to [the central contradiction within Catholic doctrine itself](#): the church's teaching best summarized as "It's OK to be gay, [just don't act on it](#),"—a position some Catholics reject.

[An influential 2004 Ontario curricular and policy document, "Pastoral Guidelines to Assist Students of Same-Sex Orientation"](#), presents a variety of guidelines, personal stories and [sections of the Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) pertaining to homosexual attraction to convey a [contradictory position](#). While homosexual acts are "intrinsicly disordered," people experiencing homosexual attraction are called to chastity and "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity" and therefore are in need of "pastoral care."

The pastoral guidelines document includes a statement on building safe communities and a 1986 letter to Canadian Bishops from [the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith \(a Vatican office\)](#). The letter elaborates on the official Church teachings, stating the "inclination of the homosexual person" is a "strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil." Many LGBTQ people refer to this document as the "Halloween Letter" because it is so scary and was issued October 1 (1986). The

Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario shares [the resource, with this letter, on its website](#).

Where schools promote such contradictory messages associating respect and depravity with LGBTQ people, they have made Alberta and Ontario Catholic schools potential hotbeds for homophobia —places where dedicated teachers fear for their jobs, and where LGBTQ youth are denied true acceptance and as a consequence are at risk of bullying and depression among other things.

Impact on students

My recent book [Homophobia in the Hallways: Heterosexism and Transphobia in Catholic Schools](#) explores causes and effects of the long-standing disconnect between Canadian Catholic schools and the Canadian Charter of Human Rights vis-à-vis sexual and gender minority groups.

Charter rights regularly clash with Catholic doctrine about sexuality in schools as this doctrine is [selectively interpreted and applied regarding how employees embody a "Catholic lifestyle"](#), as [suggested in Catholic lifestyle teacher contracts](#).

I sought to document how such homophobic policies and views are impacting teachers and students and to uncover what is actually happening.

Through interviews with 20 LGBTQ students and teachers in some Alberta and Ontario Catholic schools, and through media accounts, I found that publicly funded Catholic schools in Canada respond to non-heterosexual and non-binary gender students and teachers and in contradictory and inconsistent ways.

All of the research participants experienced some form of homophobia or transphobia in their Catholic schools. None described a Catholic school environment that accepted and welcomed sexual and gender diversity.

I documented the firing of lesbian and gay teachers because they married their same-sex partners; the firing of lesbian and gay teachers because they wanted to have children with their same-sex

partners; the firing of transgender teachers for transitioning from one gender to another.

Something as simple as discussing holiday plans can reveal that a teacher who is a lesbian has a same-sex partner. If this detail is revealed to leaders, this teacher can be at risk of being deemed to be living contrary to Catholic teaching and therefore subject to punitive action.

The teachers are given very little, if any, warning and find themselves in meetings without the support of a union representative or lawyer.

I also documented how schools seek to prohibit students from attending their [high school proms with their same-sex dates](#), bar students from appearing in gender-variant clothing for official school photographs or functions like the prom; and deny students the right to establish [Gay–Straight Alliances](#).

I noted a similarity of experiences among research participants in the distant provinces of Alberta and Ontario, in terms of how they were subject to heteronormative repression where schools are legally accountable to provinces [but look to Bishops for pastoral leadership](#).

Oppression is a problem not only for LGBTQ people and our allies, but for all of us concerned about human dignity, human rights, love for our neighbours and social justice.

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