

# Belonging: A Journey Towards LGBTQ+ Inclusion at The King's University

MELANIE J. HUMPHREYS

The King's University

Melanie.Humphreys@kingsu.ca

---

Christian higher education in Canada is caught in a culture war. The pressure to conform to either a faith position or secular position on the topic of sexual orientation is putting institutions and perhaps, more importantly, people at risk. The King's University (King's) became a focal point for this issue when in 1991 King's released an employee who was in a same-sex relationship. The resulting landmark case contributed to establishing sexual minority rights in Alberta and in Canada. This paper describes the journey King's has been on towards LGBTQ+ inclusion. It will relate the process by which King's came to a statement on inclusion, the impact on King's culture and reflect on possible implications for the future of Christian higher education.

---

Why would a student who identifies as a sexual minority attend a Christian university? Christian universities are not generally characterized as safe spaces for students to wrestle honestly with questions of faith and sexuality. And yet they come. In my interactions with sexual minority students on Christian university campuses, I have observed that these students are largely deeply spiritual and genuinely seeking a “viable narrative for holding faith and sexuality” together (Yarhouse, Dean, Stratton, and Lastoria, 2018). What is required of a Christian university to engage well with these students who are on a quest to understand themselves, their campus, and their world? I would suggest that all students are on a similar quest, but that serving sexual minority students requires some reframing on our part as we think about how our institutions are positioned. In this paper, I will relate some of The King's University's journey

---

**Keywords:** Reformed Church, inclusion, same-sex relationship, academic freedom, sphere sovereignty

towards “cultivating an inclusive environment of mutual respect where all may belong and flourish.” This line comes directly from The King’s University’s Statement on Inclusion, which was unanimously adopted by the King’s Board of Governors in 2018. We did not arrive at this position lightly nor without considerable pain. Regardless of your position on the matter, I hope that you will hear me out. I will reflect on the impact the Statement on Inclusion has had on King’s culture and possible implications for the future of Christian higher education in Canada.

### Context

A brief introduction to The King’s University (King’s) may be instructive for those who are unfamiliar with the university. King’s was founded in 1979 by individuals who were deeply rooted in the Christian Reformed Church, and it maintains that affiliation to the present. Robert Benne, who wrote a seminal book titled *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (2001), had this to say about the Christian Reformed tradition: “It is hard to imagine a more religiously intense and theologically literate – or perhaps religiously literate and theologically intense – church tradition than that of the Christian Reformed Church” (69). Benne goes on to say that every Dutch farmer is well capable of taking on the clergy [and I would add university president] in a theologically informed discussion. I know some of these farmers! Some of them were involved in the founding of King’s and worked hard for years to realize the dream of establishing a full-fledged, accredited, respected, teaching and research, liberal arts and sciences Christian university in western Canada. And they succeeded! The Reformed tradition’s emphasis on the integration of faith and learning is still an important distinction of a King’s education today. Stories of those early days are beautifully captured in two volumes: *Torchbearers for the King: A History of the Establishment of The King’s University College* (2004) by Harry Cook and William Vanden Born and *A Step in Time: A History of the First 25 Years of The King’s University* (2019) by Henk Van Anel. King’s obtained degree granting status from the province of Alberta in 1987. The same year, King’s was accepted into Universities Canada, a membership organization that, while not an accrediting agency, functions like a gold seal of approval in the Canadian context.

### Journey towards inclusion

I asked for your forbearance with the topic of inclusion because there is perhaps no topic that is more contested and divisive within the contemporary Christian church. It has divided congregations, split churches, and

destroyed individuals and families. Our inability to engage well as a Christian community with individuals who have questions around faith and sexuality leaves these individuals to navigate these questions on their own or with those that have no reference point to the gospel of Christ. The King's University Statement on Inclusion (see below) came about as King's grappled with a challenging and difficult period in our institutional history. While not the defendant in the case, King's provided the occasion for a landmark case, *Vriend v. Alberta*, 1998, which established sexual minority rights in Alberta and across Canada.

### **Statement on Inclusion**

The King's University (King's) believes that all people are worthy of respect. Our faculty, staff and Board of Governors are committed Christians and affirm Christ's call to love others as we love ourselves. Held by this strong foundation, we consciously cultivate a safe, inclusive environment of mutual respect, where all may belong and flourish.

We are committed to equity of access and opportunity for all our students, faculty, and staff in keeping with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act. King's accepts all students who qualify academically, and we are deeply committed to serving all students who attend our university.

### **A brief case history**

In January 1990, Delwin Vriend, who was employed at King's as a laboratory coordinator, let it be known that he was in a same-sex relationship. King's, at the time, did not have a policy on the matter; however, much of its supporting community, faculty, and staff generally held the view that same-sex relationships were contrary to a Christian ethic. There was no immediate rush to terminate Vriend's employment. Instead, what followed was a period of intense discernment. Ultimately the King's Board decided that, while homosexual orientation is "a condition that may not be of a person's choosing, and as such may not be blameworthy... [that] people are responsible for the way they act" (H. Van Andel, personal communication, January 14, 1991). Following the release of a memo from the Board and President to faculty and staff in January 1991, public pressure mounted and prompted the Board to a majority vote to offer Vriend the options of resignation or termination. He declined to resign, and his employment was terminated.

Attention then shifted from King's to the Alberta government as Vriend filed a complaint with the Alberta Human Rights Commission. At the time, there were no protections for sexual orientation under Alberta's

Individual Rights Protection Act (renamed Alberta Human Rights Act in 2000). The Alberta Human Rights Commission refused to hear his case. In 1993, Vriend appealed the Commission's decision to the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench. In April of 1994, Justice Anne Russell ruled Alberta's law unconstitutional. She "read" sexual orientation into Alberta's human rights law. Consequently, in May 1994, the Alberta government announced that it would appeal Russell's ruling. In a 2–1 decision in 1996, the Alberta Court of Appeal ruled that Alberta had no duty to include sexual orientation in its human rights legislation.

In 1996, the Supreme Court of Canada agreed to hear Vriend's case. On April 2, 1998, the Supreme Court of Canada found unanimously that Alberta's human rights legislation was unconstitutional. The justices decided to 'read' sexual orientation into Alberta law. Social conservatives in Alberta called upon Premier Ralph Klein's government to invoke the notwithstanding clause to override the court's decision. However, on April 9, 1998, the Premier announced that his government would not invoke the clause but would accept the Supreme Court's ruling, stating, "It is wrong, morally wrong, to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation" (Simons 2018).

### **Towards a statement on inclusion**

Morally wrong. What a heavy indictment for King's. There was a sense, by some, that we had not lived up to our mission as an institution. The King's University's enduring mission is to *provide university education that inspires and equips all learners as followers of Jesus Christ, the Servant King*. For a university dedicated to helping build a more humane, just, and sustainable world, we had not protected the least of these (Matthew 25:40, NIV). In the years that followed, there were several initiatives to come alongside sexual minorities at King's. For example, a Safe Spaces initiative (1998) saw faculty and staff placing rainbow triangles on their doors to indicate they were safe people to talk with about sexual orientation. SPEAK was established in 2011, beginning as a closed group in the counselor's office before launching publicly as a gay-straight alliance. SPEAK is an acronym for Sexuality, Pride, Equality, Affirmation at King's. The first SPEAK forum on sexuality, gender identity, and Christianity was held in the spring of 2013 along with some workshops on the topic of creating a welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ persons. For those who are unsure, the LGBTQ+ acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer. The plus (+) that follows this acronym is an acknowledgement that there are other sexual identities such as pansexual, asexual, and two-spirit.

The King's drama program produced the Laramie Project in 2014, which sparked additional conversation and awareness regarding discrimination and hate crimes involving LGBTQ+ persons.

In June of 2017, the Board determined that King's needed to develop a broad statement on inclusivity and delegated the task to the President. I can take no credit for the process, unfortunately, but I did commission the taskforce comprised of faculty and staff that designed it. I will relate the process here, as it helped us engage in healthy dialogue about who we wanted to be as a Christian university. It was a remarkably disarming process for what is a difficult topic. We conducted a simple tabletop exercise in which we had small groups of faculty and staff conduct a word sort. Each table was provided with a bag of words and phrases the taskforce had compiled from our faith statement, mission, values, and research into best practices and literature. Employees sorted the contents of the bags into three piles. The first pile was a 'yes' pile, or words that should be included in an inclusion statement. The second pile was a 'no' pile, or words that should not be included in a statement. The third pile was for 'contested' words about which there was no consensus. Participants were then asked to put aside the 'no' and 'contested' words, and craft a statement using the 'yes' words that they all agreed should be in an inclusion statement. Each table crafted their statement on chart paper which we hung about the room. There was remarkable similarity across the statements.

We conducted the same table exercise with the Board of Governors. This time we hung the statements from the Board around the room, intermingled with the statements from faculty and staff. Each of the governors were given a sheet of coloured dots by which they "voted" for phrases, words, or statements they liked. The true purpose of the dots was not to vote but to make sure that everyone read the statements carefully. The dots did give us some guidance as we crafted the final statement. Once again, the statements from Board members, faculty, and staff were remarkably similar. Anyone who has been engaged in higher education for any amount of time would recognize that this in itself (congruity across stakeholder groups) is something of a small miracle. A small group comprised of two Board members and the President then crafted a draft statement for response, and the statement was honed until it was ready to bring back to the Board for approval. Before the Board could meet to approve the statement, the twentieth anniversary of the landmark ruling of the Supreme Court occurred. This resulted in a flurry of activity and a resurfacing of articles from the early days of the Vriend case in *The Edmonton Journal*. King's was once again in the news as the bigoted little college that fired the

gay employee. Paula Simons, journalist, was invited back to King’s to tell the story of how King’s had changed in the intervening years. Overall, the response from the King’s supporting community regarding the changes at King’s was good. In November of 2018, The King’s University Board of Governors approved the Statement on Inclusion.

**Framing our position**

I do believe that The King’s University’s journey towards inclusion is one of faithfulness to our mission as a Christian university. King’s Statement on Inclusion goes too far for some and not far enough for others. This is likely a good sign that the Statement on Inclusion is exactly what it should be at this point in our history. A little controversy is a positive thing within a scholarly community, particularly around matters of conviction, provided that the exercise of that scholarly activity is free of censorship or coercion. I expect that controversy makes some uneasy; however, King’s has a well-defined policy on academic freedom that is informed by our foundational identity statements, including our faith statement (and faculty faith commitment statement), and mission and vision statements, all of which can be found on The King’s University website. As our Statement on Inclusion states, held in the strong foundation of our faith and Christ’s love, we are consciously creating a space where all may belong and flourish.

Key to understanding King’s position on inclusion is understanding that King’s is more missional than confessional in our approach to learners. King’s is not a church. Yarhouse (2015, 147) provides the following visualization contrasting a traditional confessional focus to that of a missional focus.



Belong, believe, and become—what good descriptor words for what a Christian liberal arts and sciences education is all about! At King’s our common curriculum is designed to help students to develop ways of thinking well, to articulate how ideas shape their world, and to act to bring flourishing to our world. It is an educational environment that promotes personal, spiritual, and academic growth. The missional position of King’s has been a characteristic feature of the university since its founding; the

founders “aspired to form a non-denominational liberal arts institution with its basis in a Reformed view of Scripture and society” (Cook and Vanden Born, 2004, 5). King’s has an open enrolment policy and has a responsibility to assist each learner that enters our doors. A confessional position regarding sexuality as a prerequisite for entry does not make sense for an open enrolment institution. And arguably, it may not be “sustainable in our changing sociocultural context” (Yarhouse, 2015, 147).

A second key concept that framed King’s journey towards inclusion is the Reformed theological concept of sphere sovereignty. Briefly, the idea of sphere sovereignty (also known as differentiated responsibility) is the idea that each sphere or area of life has its own authority under God. Richard Mouw (2011) explains the concept brilliantly in his book on Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). In Kuyper’s time (as it is today), there was tension between the church and secularists as to who controlled cultural life. “The secularist perspective rightly wants to liberate these spheres from the church’s control. Where it goes wrong is in its insistence that to do so is also to take them out from under the rule of God. If there is a God, the secularists have said, he can have the church — but we will liberate everything else from divine control” (Mouw, 2011, 41). Kuyper, according to Mouw (2011, 40), identified a “third way,” a way to bypass the cultural impasse. Mouw cites the Vrije University (Free University) in the Netherlands as an example of how Kuyper’s concept of sphere sovereignty works in practice. The Free University’s “Christian identity was to be guaranteed by “Reformed principles” for academic life that were to be implemented and monitored by a Christian association that was independent of both church and state” (Mouw, 2011, 42). The King’s University follows in this tradition. The primary mandate of our Board of Governors is to ensure that King’s remains true to its mission and vision. King’s receives funding from the Christian Reformed Church, yet it is not owned by the church. In the same vein, King’s receives public funds, yet it is not owned publicly. To use current terminology, though not entirely parallel, King’s benefits from a high degree of institutional autonomy, which is a rarity in Canada today, both for faith-based and public universities.

### **Impact on King’s culture**

A politician and avowed secularist who recently visited campus asked the question, “How is it that King’s has managed to take this step towards inclusion, where others have not?” My response to his question was that King’s was responding to a particular history, our history. It was our burden to sort out how to move forward in a faithful way as an academic



community before God. Other Christian universities have their own history and church traditions to navigate. As a Christian university, our faculty and staff come from a great range of Christian traditions and denominations. It gives us a good opportunity to live into what Yarhouse, Dean, Stratton, and Lastoria (2018) refer to as an “intentionally relational culture” (292). I recognize that this is unsatisfactory for those who would like the university to state a doctrinal position on homosexuality or marriage. However, this is exactly the impasse that Kuyper identifies. King’s, in our educational sphere, needs to respond (to use another Kuyperian saying) “*coram deo*, before the face of God” (Mouw, 2011, 41).

The journey towards inclusion has allowed King’s to live into our mission more fully as it has allowed for some healing and reconciliation to occur within our community. A powerful moment of healing will be forever etched in my mind as the former President who released Delwin Vriend from employment at King’s stood before the King’s Board of Governors and explained how he and his wife had changed their minds and were now fully supportive of King’s Statement on Inclusion. I have been asked whether we would formally extend an apology to Delwin Vriend. That may be a possibility in the future, but that needs to happen at his timing, not ours. Perhaps most importantly, the individuals who are at King’s today who identify as LGBTQ+ do not have to live in fear of being dismissed, fired, or marginalized and can go about the business of learning and working.

### **Implications for the future of Christian higher education in Canada**

This is a faithful narrative of King’s journey towards inclusion. We have not arrived. A missional approach, in contrast to a confessional approach, is more messy and less defined. There are no simplistic answers. Pressure will continue to be applied to Christian higher education institutions to adopt more inclusive policies. This pressure will come from accrediting bodies, legal challenges, membership associations, and the university community itself. The Statement on Inclusion has sidelined the culture war and allowed King’s to get back to wrestling honestly with really difficult questions about sexuality and faith with our people.

### **References**

- Benne, R. 2001. *Quality with Soul: How six premier colleges and universities keep faith with their religious traditions*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Cook, H. and W. Vanden Born. 2004. *Torchbearers for the King: A history of the establishment of The King’s University College*. The King’s University Press.



- Mouw, R. J. 2011. *Abraham Kuyper: A short and personal introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Simons, P. 2018. "How the Vriend case established LGBTQ rights 20 years ago in Alberta – and across Canada." *Edmonton Journal*. <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/insight/paula-simons-how-the-vriend-case-established-lgbtq-rights-20-years-ago-in-alberta-and-across-canada>
- Van Andel, H. 2019. *A Step at a Time: A History of the First Twenty-Five Years of The King's University*. The King's University Press.
- Vriend v. Alberta. 1998. *CanL II* 816 (SCC), [1998] SCR 498. <https://canlii.ca/t/1fq5>
- Yarhouse, M. A. 2015. *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating transgender issues in a changing culture*. Westmount, IL: Intervarsity Press.
- Yarhouse, M. A., J. A. Dean, S. P. Stratton and M. Lastoria. 2018. *Listening to Sexual Minorities: A study of faith and sexual identity on Christian college campuses*. Westmount, IL: Intervarsity Press.

### About the author

Dr. Melanie Humphreys serves as the President of The King's University in Edmonton, Alberta. Dr. Humphreys serves on several boards and councils including serving on the executive of the Alberta Post Secondary Network, committee chair for Universities Canada's Education Committee, and trustee for Los Angeles Pacific University. Humphreys holds a Ph.D. in Higher Education from Azusa Pacific University. She earned a degree in English and Psychology and a Master of Administrative Leadership from Trinity Western University.