


This ceremony was originally prepared & led by
**Beth Carlson-Malena**, Director of Community at Generous Space Ministries
and **Michele Rizoli**, pastor at Toronto United Mennonite Church

at the request of **Pieter & Susie Niemeyer,**
who invited their community to participate in their ongoing journey together.

The ceremony took place on **October 22, 2017**
at **Toronto United Mennonite Church.**

The script is offered as a gift and resource for the church at large.
If you find it useful in your own context, it would encourage us to hear about it.
Let us know at info@generousspace.ca.

**OPENING BLESSING**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
**And also with you.**

**WELCOME** *(Michele)*

Welcome! (Introductions & logistics)

We are a community of love and support gathered to bear witness before God to the release and reconfiguring of Susie and Pieter's marriage covenant. We gather to give voice to what has been true in their lives and to celebrate their ongoing love and friendship as a family.

We will spend some time as a community worshiping, lamenting what has changed and celebrating what is being re-created in Pieter and Susie's lives. We will end this gathering by celebrating communion together.

There are many of us here in person, but also many who are here in spirit or who for a variety of reasons, aren't able to be here. It might be timing, distance, some level of discomfort with this unusual public ceremony, or simply self-care. I want to remind us all to avoid making assumptions about people's presence or absence from this service.

You are all welcome here and we hold this as a safe and sacred space.

**Prayer**
Gracious God, we gather in your presence with humility and gratitude.
We thank you for the faithful witness of your servants Pieter and Susie.
We acknowledge the sacred movement of the Spirit in their lives and in this gathering.
May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you,
O God of Love.

**SONG: Great is Thy Faithfulness**

**FRAMING THE SERVICE – WHY ARE WE HERE?** (Beth)

This is my first release and embrace ceremony,
Any other first-timers here?

This is new territory for us.
But that's unsurprising, coming from Pieter and Susie.
As they so often must do, they are breaking new ground, forging new ways forward.
And they've invited us to come along for the ride.

Pieter and Susie, thank you for inviting us along,
for giving us the chance to show up for you,
to bear witness to the journey you've been unfolding
since you were married 24 years ago,
and especially since Pieter came out 3 years ago.

The two of you have done so much work together.
It has been difficult, beautiful, holy work.
The kind of work that happens in late-night conversations,
in early morning animal feedings,
in the countless steps Pieter took on his Camino pilgrimage, the rocks he laid at altars,
in the twists and turns of Susie's Zentangle drawings,
in prayers and tears, and tears that are prayers,
and on the shoulders of people who have become closer than friends.

It has been the work of telling the truth, to one another, to God, to their community.
Even when the truth is excruciatingly painful.
Even when it's messy and not what we want to hear.
They have watched the truth set them free,
and have invited others to share their freedom.

It has been the work of owning their own story,
which they're doing again tonight,
exercising their own voices, using their own words.
There are so many who wanted to (in Susie's words) "shush" them,
who wanted to push them back into the closet,
or reframe their story to make it less of a scandal, easier to swallow.
Some wish they would use easier-to-understand concepts like "divorce" or "separation."

Despite this, they have steadfastly chosen their own names and words.
They release what is no longer true, what has perhaps never been true,
and search out new language that fits the reality of their relationship as it shifts,
They face the future with hope, even if they don't always know who they're becoming.

Susie and Pieter haven't had a map to follow,
but they've found their way, and they're reporting back.
Tonight is about recognizing their good work and catching up with it.

So tonight we will join them in lament, in grief,
in listening, in witnessing,
and in dreaming with them.

For tonight is not about a failure of love, rather it is a triumph of love
that stubbornly persists in new forms in the presence of deeper truth.
And this stubborn love will see us all through to the other side.

**LAMENT & CONFESSION** *(Beth)*

Nothing Susie and Pieter do, and nothing we do, *should* be or *can* be in isolation.
Many of us have been present with them on this journey.
They have seen so many examples of the beauty of Christian community
among their Generous Space friends and supportive Mennonite allies.
They spoke to me of their profound gratitude for the gift you have been for them.
This is what church, at her best, is for.

But in the interest of telling the truth and naming things rightly,
we also need to talk about the church at her worst.

Pieter and Susie are here tonight, partly, because of church at her worst.
At their wedding, when the officiant asked if anyone knew a reason why they shouldn't marry,
the whole church should have piped up.

But of course, what happened was just the opposite.
The church has pressured LGBTQ+ people to marry partners of the opposite sex
either so they could be "cured" or at least "fit in."
It was the price of belonging and serving in the church.
This has happened for centuries, sometimes subtly, sometimes quite explicitly.
Being in a so-called heterosexual marriage
made you more acceptable even than those who steadfastly remained celibate,
who were looked upon with more suspicion, at least in the Protestant church.
This has caused unspeakable damage to many, many live.

I say all this without negating the fact that incredibly good things have come from Pieter & Susie's marriage, the prime example being their three wonderful children. They've used their marriage to care for one another and for all of us. God has a way of redeeming all kinds of things. (Everything, actually.)

And compared to almost every couple I know who has been in a similar situation,
Susie and Pieter have managed to keep the resulting damages to a surprising minimum,
thanks to their fierce respect for one another, their shared sense of humour,
their stubbornness in owning their story, and probably a fair bit of God's grace.

Still, they've been through the ringer, friends. They have endured deep pain.
And though they each made their own choices, their pain was largely because of us.

I say "we" and "us" even though I myself am a gay woman who has been hurt by church.
I include myself because I'm part of this church system, I'm complicit, I've perpetuated it.
I am inextricably tied up in this system even as I have also been hurt by this system.
This is complex, I know, and many of you here are in the same situation.
Sometimes we need to stand in the gap as members of the same body of Christ,
even when we've felt more like victims than perpetrators.

We are going to have a time of lament and confession to name these wrongs,
wrongs done not just to Susie and Pieter, but to all LGBTQ+ people.
in hopes of working toward continued reconciliation in the church.

If you consider yourself part of the big-picture church, whether you're LGBTQ+ or straight,
every time you hear the words "we lament."
we invite you to respond with the phrase, "How long, O God?"
and at the very end, your response will change to "Forgive us, O God."

Feel free to take a posture of confession and lament - sitting, standing or kneeling.

Let us spend a few moments in silence, preparing our hearts.

**PRAYER of LAMENT**

Out of the depths we cry to You, God.
Hear our voice on behalf of our friends Pieter and Susie,

and all those who have suffered similar pain.

For the stopped-up ears, the eyes that look away from need, and the calloused hearts in the body of Christ, we lament:
**How long, O God?**

For every beautiful queer relationship that is wrongfully labeled disgusting, degrading, and dangerous, we lament:
**How long, O God?**

For all those driven into closets within Christian communities, left to languish there, bound by shame and fear, we lament:
**How long, O God?**

For the LGBTQ+ people are treated like projects for the church to fix, and force-fed "cures" that end up poisoning them, we lament:
**How long, O God?**

For the LGBTQ+ people who hear sermons equating healing with heterosexuality, who are told their attractions will change if they pray hard enough or try hard enough, we lament:
**How long, O God?**

For so-called "successful" mixed-orientation marriage narratives that are generalized to justify ongoing harm and absolve the church's guilt, we lament:
**How long, O God?**

For mixed-orientation couples carrying impossible burdens that set them up for deep disappointment in themselves, in each other, and in God, we lament:
**How long, O God?**

For mixed-orientation couples suffering in silence, stuffing down their feelings, disregarding their needs, feeling unwanted and lonely, living in fear of being "outed" as an imperfect family, we lament:
**How long, O God?**

For LGBTQ+ people around the world who face even greater threat of harm, imprisonment, or death for coming out, we lament:
**How long, O God?**

For all the ways we have been complicit in these unjust homophobic, transphobic, and transmisogynist religious systems, we pray,
**Forgive us, O God.**

(silence)

May God forgive us,
Christ renew us,
and the Spirit enable us to grow in love
as we carry on this work of reconciliation
until we are all made new in the kingdom.
**Amen, thanks be to God.**

**SCRIPTURE READING:** 1 John 4:16 - 21
**Time of Silence**

**CEREMONY OF RELEASE & EMBRACE**[1] *(Michele)*

If we follow the narrative of God and God's people in scripture, we see that covenants have a place of sacred importance. We also see that the bond and the requirements between God and God's people changes as time and circumstance bring new challenges and opportunities to the relationship. The trajectory of scripture is always towards more inclusion.

Marriage covenants create a bond between two people, before God and witnesses. Today, Susie and Pieter bear witness to the shifts and changes in their own relational covenant, from a "heterosexual" marriage to what we are naming a queerly covenanted relationship.

Symbols have been important reminders of covenants. Pieter and Susie have chosen to continue wearing their wedding rings as symbols of their ongoing commitment to one another, but they will wear them not on their left hands, but their right hands, in recognition of what they have released and embraced today.

As you begin the words of release that you have written together, I invite you to remove your rings from your left hands.

[1] Inspiration from *Healing Liturgies for the Seasons of Life* by Abigail Rian Evans.

**Pieter:** Over 24 years ago, Susie and I entered into a covenant relationship of marriage. I remember clearly when our Pastor began with these words, "you have no idea what you're doing." I often think back to those words and in the wake of our journey realize their weight. We, nor he, nor the Church, knew what they were doing. Yet love has carried us through, and has carried us through to the place of better understanding. We made a commitment to love and honour one another and to be faithful to one another. Through our discussions, tears, and laughter I think we can say that what we have been doing and what we are doing here today is an expression of that commitment.

**Susie**: Pieter, I honour and embrace you as a beautiful gay cisgender man. I'm not interested in asking you to be something that you're not to uphold a marriage, if it requires me to dishonor you. I prefer to face truth even if it is painful. I honour and celebrate who you are in body, soul, and spirit and I commit to not perpetrating the myth that it's okay to be unequally yoked. We understand now that we need to be aligned according to God's good intentions. I release you from your marriage vows to me.

**Pieter**: Susie, I honour and embrace you as a beautiful straight cisgender woman- you are not disposable. You are a woman of great worth with a heart that loves deeply and with great integrity. I honour and celebrate who you are in body, soul, and spirit and I commit to not perpetrating the myth that it's okay to be unequally yoked. We understand now that we need to be aligned according to God's good intentions. I release you from your marriage vows to me.

**Susie**: Pieter, I will honour you as the father of my children. They are a beautiful gift of our love and my favourite people to be with. We are family.

**Pieter**: Susie, I will honour you as the mother of my children. They are a reflection of you and I and fill me with gratitude and joy. We are family.

**Susie**: Pieter, your family is my family. Celebrating milestones and sharing heartaches.

**Pieter**: Susie, your family is my family. Celebrating joys and carrying burdens.

**Susie**: Pieter, I want to add, in the words of Ruth, your people will be my people. Your queer tribe is my church and my family. I love them!

**BLESSING OF RINGS**

**Susie**: Pieter, I have released you from our marriage vows

and I embrace our queerly covenanted relationship,
To have and to hold under a new definition. *(Susie places ring on Pieter's right hand)*

**Pieter**: Susie, I have released you from our marriage vows
and I embrace our queerly covenanted relationship.
To have and to hold under a new definition. *(Pieter places ring on Susie's right hand)*

**Michele:**
Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 18.18)

May God comfort you as you grieve what you have surrendered and released.
May Christ give you grace as you learn to love and embrace each other in new ways.
May the Spirit bless you as you walk forward together in this new covenant.

**SUPPORT OF THE COMMUNITY**

Please join me, as you are able, in our community expression of support:

**Susie and Pieter, we have witnessed your renewed covenant.**
**We share your sorrow; we rejoice in your hope.**
**We pray for your new path and commit to walking it with you.**
**May God strengthen you, preserve, shelter and keep you, now and always.**
**Amen.**

**PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE – Dave & Jim**

Along with our own contributions, we are grateful to Susan Kennell Harrison, Ruel Billones, Hayro Luque, Ashley Skorobohacz, and Beth Carlson-Malena for contributing to these prayers.

We invite you to participate with us. When we say, "God, in your mercy," please respond with, "Hear our prayer."

Let us pray.

God of intimacy, God of redemption,
We pray blessings over this newly-queerly-covenanted couple, Susie and Pieter.

We gratefully rejoice in who they have been together.
We also rejoice in who they are becoming together.
Comfort them also in their solitude.
Ease their loneliness with friendship.
Heal the heart-spaces damaged by homophobia in them, and in us.
Celebrate with them as they seek new ways to understand and express their sexual selves.
As they release old dreams for their family and embrace new dreams,
grant them open eyes, open ears, open hands and open souls
to receive the abundance of joy and life on the journey to come.

God, in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer.**

Creator of our brother, friend, and mentor, Pieter,
Thank you for giving Pieter a gentle tenacity and steadfast servant-hearted love.
As he has willingly become vulnerable, you have shown your strength.
Continue to help him be fully present to himself and to You.
Release him from any active or residual shame or fear that may remain in him.
May he know the close presence of Your Spirit
as he inhabits a liminal space of intermingled grief and celebration.
May he continue to make the way by walking it.
May he move with confidence into the places in which he is being waited for,
bringing freedom and resurrection life
to others on the margins of church and society.
May the impact of his story and his gifts be beyond his wildest hopes.

God, in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer.**

Creator of our sister, friend, and mentor, Susie,
Thank you for Susie's depth of soul and greatness of heart.
Thank you for her hugs, her tears, her words of encouragement.
Embrace her in your love, and in our love.
May she never feel alone.
May she never again feel silenced or "shushed" by the church,
Instead, we pray that she would be Your megaphone,
and that more and more people would listen and learn from her story and her wisdom.
May she discover in herself the same intricacy, uniqueness and beauty

that she so often celebrates in others, and in all of creation.
Grant her courage and hope
as she anticipates You leading her along new paths.

God, in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer.**

Mothering and Fathering God,
Jesus who loved to welcome children,
Bless Pieter and Susie's children.
Calm their fears, heal their wounds,
Give them strength to forgive and accept decisions that have made their world uncomfortable.
May they grow in the knowledge of Your love,
and the continuing love of their parents, who are revealing new parts of themselves.
Protect them from the harmful things said by those who do not understand.
Bless them with wholeness, freedom, authenticity, and good boundaries.
Keep them in your loving care, today and always.

God, in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer.**

God of kinship and community,
We thank you for giving all of us the gift of walking in friendship with Pieter and Susie.
Help us to reject our desire to fix things.
Help us to meet them where they are,
celebrating their uniqueness as image-bearers of God,
stepping up, supporting them and accompanying them into their unknown future.
Make us ambassadors and defenders of non-traditional families in our society,
and especially in our churches.
Teach us to be good stewards of their story.
We have witnessed so much love, grace, redemption and courage in their lives,
and this inspires us.
May your Spirit bear this beautiful fruit in our own lives, too.

God, in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer**.

In the Name of our Maker who formed us in love,

in the Name of Christ who redeemed us,
and in the Name of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us.
**Amen**.

**COMMUNION - (Beth and Michele)**

We are celebrating communion today partly because we just love doing it,
like Jesus said "as often as we gather together,"
but tonight it's even more fitting, because eating a meal together
has often been the final step in confirming a new covenant.
Jesus himself said that the cup we drink is the cup of the New Covenant,
another symbol and sign given to us by our covenant-making God.

This meal is also a meal of resistance.
It resists all binaries - even breaking down the binary between death and life.
Eating it reminds us that we are one body - it unites us to the global church,
even with those in the church who have harmed us.
It's a meal of reconciliation, of enemy-love,
an appetizer from the endless table of the kingdom where everyone has a seat.

In all of our mess, all of our confusion,
all of our grief, all of our loneliness,
all of our regret, all of our transition, and all of our risky hope...

God says, "Come to the table. I want to renew my love for you.
I want to replenish you with new life.
I want to make a new covenant with you."

We'll do a brief communion litany together,
and then no matter where you're at,
if you're hungry for this binary-breaking, covenant-making Jesus,
you're welcome to come take a piece of bread, dip it in the grape juice, and eat it.
There are also gluten-free crackers on the plate.

**Call to Worship**[2]

Come from east and west, north and south;
Come lesbian, bisexual, gay and straight, cisgender, transgender and non-binary;
Come apparently healthy and able,
come with your physical, mental and emotional challenges and disabilities,
and see the vision of a world made whole,
a land of peace, where wolf and lamb shall feed together.
Come and take your place,
feasting on the fruit of the vineyard and the labour of many hands.
Come in the name of the one who makes all things new.

**Prayer of confession**

O Ancient of Days, you are the Alpha and the Omega, the one who sets our going out and our coming in: open our hearts to the signs of your coming. Examine our lives that we may not be found wanting. Forgive our enmity, and resentment of every "other" we encounter, that we may gain our lives and receive you with joyful hearts. AMEN.

*Silence*

**Communion Prayer**

Eternal God, Source of all being, we give you thanks and praise for your faithful love.

In the beginning you created us in your image as human beings
needing relationship.

In the fullness of time you sent us your Son, our Messiah.
In the life of Jesus of Nazareth you reveal love that breaks down the dividing walls of judgment.
We remember how Jesus came to share your love,
to reach out to the stranger, to those condemned by society,
to the sick and sorrowing, to the unloved and the persecuted.

In the company of all the saints in heaven and on earth
we gather around this Table to remember his life,
lived, laid down, and taken up again for us.

---

[2] Communion Liturgy is adapted from an Emmanuel College service, which used resources from Tigert, Leanne McCall and Tirabassi, Maren C., Eds, *Transgendering Faith: Identity, Sexuality and Spirituality* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004)

In the relentless love that led Jesus to the cross you overcame the power of evil and sin.
In raising Jesus from death you confirmed the power of that love.

When those we trust betray us, unfailingly you remain with us.
When we injure others,
you confront us in your love and call us to the paths of righteousness.

You stand with the weak, and those, broken and alone,
whom you have always welcomed home,
making the first last, and the last first.

You call us into friendship with you and one another to be your holy people,
a sign of your presence in the world.

O God, you liberate all that you have created.
Send now your Spirit upon us to make us one with Christ
so that our lives might be conformed to Christ's.
Let the bread we break and the cup we bless
be a communion of the body and blood of Christ.

Let us pray together a version of the Lord's Prayer.

*Our Mother who is within us,*
*We celebrate your many names.*
*Your wisdom come; your will be done,*
*unfolding from the depths within us.*
*Each day you give us all that we need.*
*You remind us of our limits and we let go.*
*You support us in our power, and we act with courage.*
*For you are the dwelling place within us,*
*the empowerment around us,*
*and the celebration among us,*
*now and forever. Amen.*[3]

**Words of institution**[4]

When Jesus knew that his hour had come,

[3] Written by Miriam Therese Winter
[4] Adapted from *Mennonite Minister Manual, Revision of Form 1 16/17*

he gathered with his friends for a meal.
Getting up from the table,
he tied a towel around himself and washed their feet.
And, after he had finished, he said,
“I have set an example for you;
do as I have done to you.”

Then he took bread, blessed it,
and gave it to them:
“This is my body, broken for you.
Do this to remember me.”

*(TAKE THE BREAD)*
Blessed are you, mothering God.
You made bread to strengthen us;
you gave us this bread
as a sign of your Beloved’s body.
Let our sharing in it be a foretaste of the bread that feeds the whole world. AMEN.

*(TAKE THE CUP)*
And he blessed the cup, and gave it to them:
“This is the cup of the new covenant.
Drink of this cup to remember me.”

Blessed are you, mothering God
You made the fruit of the vine to nourish us;
you gave us this cup
as a sign of your Beloved’s life blood.
Let our sharing in it be a foretaste of the wine
of your kingdom. AMEN

This is Christ’s Table.
All who have committed themselves to the way of Christ are invited to participate.
To those who do not wish to take part in this symbol today,
Know that you are beloved by God
Whoever you are and wherever you are on your faith journey.

In the name of the One who said,
“Love one another, as I have loved, you,”
Come to the table of Jesus Christ.

*(DISTRIBUTION BY INTINCTION)*
*Servers of bread say:* The Bread of Life
*Servers of cup say*: The Cup of the New Covenant

**SONGS: *Oceans* by Hillsong & *Be Thou My Vision***

**Post-communion prayer**
O Holy One, we give you thanks for uniting us – in all our diversity – into one Body and one Blood, into a new family fed at one table. By your Spirit, continue to feed, guide and instruct us that we may continue to be living signs of your love and give glory to your promise. Through Jesus Christ, the bread of life. AMEN.

(Beth)
Over the last several years of Susie & Pieter's journey,
they have each clung to specific phrases, or mantras.
For Susie, it was, "God loves me. That is enough."
For Pieter, it was "Love will see all of us through to the other side."
God promised never to leave us, and God is love, so love will see all of us through.

To root us and ground us in this love that is enough, this love that guides us through,
we invite you to help us close this service by singing "The Love of God."

**CLOSING SONG: The Love of God**

**CLOSING BLESSING:** (Robbie)