

Alberta's Catholic bishops speak out on GSAs

By Carolyn Kury de Castillo & Lisa MacGregor Global News

Some people are calling it the first blunder for the Prentice government. Bill 10 was proposed as a way to prevent bullying and suicide. And while the gay-straight alliance is on the shelf for now, the issue isn't dying down. Sunday, Calgary's Catholic bishop gave his two cents calling the bill a win-win for everyone. But as Carolyn Kury de Castillo reports, not everyone is buying in with the bishop.

CALGARY- Calgary's Roman Catholic Bishop Fred Henry and Edmonton Archbishop Richard W. Smith both weighed in on the ongoing debate surrounding Bill 10, the controversial legislation about student-led gay-straight alliances (GSAs). The Alberta Roman Catholic leaders each penned letters against mandating the clubs in schools.

Gay-straight alliances are after-school clubs made up of gay students and their classmates to help gay students feel welcome and to prevent them from being abused and bullied.

The polarizing bill was proposed by the Prentice government as a way to prevent bullying and suicide. For now, Bill 10 may be on the shelf but the controversy isn't dying down.

Bishop Henry called Bill 10 a win-win for everyone. "It enshrined parental rights, recognized the autonomy of local school boards and the students rights regarding diversity clubs without mandating Gay-Straight Alliances," Bishop Henry wrote.

"It infringes parental authority over their children, the freedom to instruct one's children in a manner consistent with their faith, and citizens rights to manifest their religious beliefs by worship and practice in the absence of coercion or constraint by government."

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith relayed a similar message Sunday in a written statement. "We fully support the government's laudable goal of fostering safe environments in schools. In fact, we already have policies for this very purpose. Any legislation aimed at this objective should demonstrate to all vulnerable students that they are embraced by the province's concern," Archbishop Smith wrote.

"Catholic schools insist that the approach to protecting children be a fully inclusive one. Sadly, students may be subjected to bullying for a variety of reasons, such as race, body image, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and others."

But the Alberta Roman Catholic leaders messages aren't being well received by all.

Bishop Fred Henry's statement gave plenty for Catholics to think about at mass at Hillhurst United Church in Calgary Sunday.

"I follow the bishop very closely. It's been hard at times but I still do it because he still is the bishop," Doreen Rideout attending the mass said.

Bishop Henry says mandating gay straight alliances is "problematic" because it infringes parental authority over their children and the freedom to instruct one's children in a manner consistent with their faith.

"You need to love everyone and support everyone but I think sometimes certain ways people try to implement things can be detrimental like especially in Catholic schools," Mark Boston said.

Bill 10 could have forced gay straight alliance meetings "off" school property if the the school boards objected to them.

"My children were brought up in the Catholic Schools and I think there is room for everybody," Pat Wodynski said. "I think it's sad that there has to be a government ruling on it in the first place."

Other Calgary church leaders support the gay straight alliances, school clubs designed to prevent gay students from being bullied.

"Once people share stories about who they are, how God made them, then there is an awareness that I think builds community and strength. And I believe that's what school should be about," Reverend John Pentland said.

Reverend Pentland says the bishop's comments are not helpful to Catholics who support the school clubs and object to Bill 10.

"I'm sure it's confusing for people for friends and our catholic faith to have their leader say such a thing. I hope they use their own mind and conscience and let their MLA's know," Rev. Pentland said.

Many Catholic parishioner's declined to go on camera regarding their thoughts on Bill 10, because they don't agree with the bishop's message. One thing most "could" agree on was Pope Francis' message of "who am I to judge?"

"Our Pope Francis said to us that it's important that we all follow the teachings of Christ and that we shouldn't be worked up over how other people choose to live," Roger Dion said.

The amendment was introduced by the PCs to try to recapture the political initiative on an issue that is growing to symbolize how Alberta views and treats homosexuals.

Statistics in other jurisdictions show the rate of suicide among gay youth drops significantly when a school has a GSA.

GSAs operate with no problem in many public schools in Edmonton and Calgary, but the Liberals say there are none in rural or faith-based schools. Liberal Laurie Blakeman has said Catholic school officials are blocking GSAs in their facilities.

On Thursday, Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi told local business leaders that Alberta risked being portrayed as hillbillies if the province pushes ahead with Bill 10.

According to the Journal of Research on Adolescence, the rate of suicide among gay youth drops significantly when a school has a GSA.

There are 94 such clubs in schools in Edmonton and Calgary but none in rural areas or faith-based schools. Catholic school officials have resisted the clubs, saying they already have supports to make all kids feel included.

It has been a long-running and polarizing issue in Alberta.