

Dear members of the General Issues committee of Hamilton, Ontario's city council:

Good day. I hope this finds you well.

My name is Joshua Weresch, a settler and colonizer, born and living here on Anishinaabeg land. I write as a follower of Jesus Christ and member of Central Presbyterian Church here in Hamilton, Ontario, as a husband and a father of three children, and as the son of a family of German immigrants, though born in the former country of Yugoslavia, who came to Canada in 1967. I write in regards to the agenda items at today's meeting on the 21st of March, 2018, particularly about the many delegation requests that the city deny permits to allow 'hate groups' to assemble in city parks and on public lands.

In short, I would ask that the city refuse these delegations' requests and allow permits for 'hate groups' to assemble in city parks and on public lands. The city should not be policing in any form which groups can assemble and what they can utter and should remain neutral, allowing permits to all groups who want to assemble. It is much more important that a space is maintained, publicly, for the public discussion and disagreement regarding ideas and words, for the freedom of all speech. This is the difficulty of the democratic way. I do not write any of this lightly. Some of the people who are making delegation requests today are people whom I know personally, have shared a meal with as they hospitably opened their homes to me, and have enjoyed our conversations together, committed to justice and the flourishing of the human person. Nevertheless, I hope that we can respectfully disagree and continue essential dialogue and conversation, which is deeply necessary in the midst of these fractured days.

There are several difficulties I have with the idea that the city should refuse permits for 'hate groups' to assemble in city parks and on public land. Let me state, first of all, however, that I do not support 'hate groups' of any kind, though I understand that my letter in favour of permits for groups of this nature to assemble will wrongfully be considered as support for their cause. Unequivocally, that is not the case. I would support the freedom of all people, of all groups, to speak freely, whether that be popularly considered 'hate speech' or not. Dickson J., as quoted in the Annotated Language Laws of Canada (2nd ed., Department of Justice, July 2017), defined the word 'freedom' in this manner: 'Freedom can primarily be characterized by the absence of coercion or constraint. If a person is compelled by the state or the will of another to a course of action or inaction which he would not otherwise have chosen, he is not acting of his own volition and he cannot be said to be truly free. One of the major purposes of the Charter is to protect, within reason, from compulsion or restraint' (s. 2 [Fundamental Freedoms], ss. 43 [Annotations, *Ford v. Quebec (Attorney General)*, 1988 (2 S.C.R. 1988)]). I find Dickson's definition to be a useful one and, given it, consider the city's refusal to allow permits to 'hate groups' to be coercive and constraining.

Second of all, I have difficulty with the phrase, 'hate group'. While I certainly believe that there are groups whose members affiliate on the basis of mutual hatred of others, I believe a phrase of this nature essentializes and crystallizes such members into a mold from which they cannot escape. It over-simplifies the situation and de-humanizes those involved in the discussion. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that evil is the systematic substitution of the

abstract for the concrete and I believe that the characterization of another group as a 'hate group' merely abstracts and dehumanizes their members, as much as the language that group uses de-humanizes others. As a person of Christian faith, I cannot stand by and abide the dehumanization of any person, whether I agree or disagree with that person's views or not; countless wars and conflicts have been maintained by the language one group has used to describe and oppress another and we, as a society, a word rooted in the Latin word for 'companion' and 'friend', cannot continue down that road. Faith, whether Christian or not, the beliefs of many religions, the virtue of humility lead toward the affirmation of the essential goodness and humanity of each and every person, rich and poor, oppressed and oppressor.

Also, the city's refusal to allow 'hate groups' to assemble will only drive such groups further away from conversation and will justify their own perceptions that they are being slighted, misunderstood, and justified in their various hatreds. Listening, as respectfully as possible, is not an easy task but it is essential if love is to prevail, though it is almost impossible to listen respectfully to speech that dehumanizes another person. The give-and-take of dialogue, of the slow, local and democratic process, of the possibility of forging friendships between unlikely people, are essential for the preservation and flourishing of a human life.

I hope that you will consider my request that the city allow permits for all groups, whether 'hate groups' or not, to assemble on public land and in city parks. The defence of free speech and assembly requires this; as the organization, Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, writes, The best response for offensive speech is not less speech but more speech. Thank you for your time and attention in these regards.

Respectfully,

Joshua Weresch

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