

A stylized portrait of Mpho Tutu van Furth, a woman with short dark hair, wearing a white headband and a white top with a red necklace. The portrait is rendered in a high-contrast, graphic style with a color gradient from purple to orange. The text 'PRIDE TALK '24 AMSTERDAM' is overlaid on the top left of the image.

**PRIDE
TALK '24**
AMSTERDAM

Mpho Tutu van Furth
God Unlimited

DE NIEUWE KERK AMSTERDAM

18 JULY 2024

PRIDE TALK '24 AMSTERDAM

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TEXT
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This is an edited version of a speech delivered by Mpho Tutu van Furth in Amsterdam, The Netherlands on 18 July 2024.

For ease of reading, individual excisions are not marked, nor is it indicated when the case of a letter changes due to the deletion of part of a sentence.

The full text is available online at: nieuwekerk.nl

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Good evening everyone, what a pleasure to be with you this evening for this Pride Talk. I am so thrilled to be here and so thrilled to see all of your beautiful faces.

The Netherlands has long been regarded as a beacon of progressive values, championing the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals. We can be excused for thinking that the struggle against homophobia and prejudice is won and done! Meaning we achieved the desired end and now the work is over.

Because after all, it was in the Netherlands that the COC was established in 1946. It is the oldest LGBTQIA+ organization in the world. Almost a century of advocacy. Won and done!

In 1986 the Remonstrant Brotherhood officially allowed the blessings of same-sex unions. It was the first Christian denomination to do so. And in January 1987 at Vrijburg in Amsterdam, where I was privileged to serve as pastor, two men received such a blessing for their 'levensverbintenis' [life covenant]. Won and done!

In 1998 registered partnerships enabled same-sex couples to enjoy the same legal rights in the Netherlands as their heterosexual counterparts. Won and done! And in 2001 same-sex marriage became legal in this country. Won and done!

Except that in every struggle for justice won is won, but it is never won and done. It is always won with struggle and stays won with vigilance. Recent surveys show a growing indifference, and in some cases, outright opposition among young people toward LGBTQIA+ rights. The rights were won but, from where I'm standing, there is a lot more to be done.

The Netherlands has made significant strides in ensuring that LGBTQIA+ individuals can live openly and without fear. Policies and laws have been enacted to protect individuals from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Social acceptance has grown over the years, with a majority of the population supporting equal rights for LGBTQIA+ people. However, this landscape is not as steadfast as we want to believe. It is not as solid as we would want it to be.

Recent studies and surveys have shown a troubling trend: An increasing number of young people in the Netherlands are expressing indifference or even opposition to LGBTQIA+ rights.

This shift is multifaceted. On one hand, there is a sense of complacency among the youth who have grown up in a relatively accepting society; they may take these rights for granted and feel that the battle for equality is over. Complacency is a kind of drugged drowsiness. While we walk around assuming that what has been will always be, those wins are being challenged, eroded, or ignored.

Complacency is not only the domain of the young. Thirty years ago, after decades of anti-apartheid struggle, South Africa celebrated its first democratic elections. People of every race stood in day-long lines to cast their ballots. Mandela's ANC won handily. The vast majority of South Africans were elated. Our team had won. The international community was elated. Rather than assessing and funding a plethora of liberation movements and civic organizations international donors could send their support to the sole legitimate representative of South Africa's aspirations: the government. We all swallowed the sweet syrup of complacency. Justice, we thought, had won. Justice was done. Everything was beautiful in the best of all possible worlds. South Africans treated democracy as a bit of a spectator sport. Our ballot was our ticket to the game. Cast your vote and watch the government of the day do what is good for you. But democracy is not a spectator sport. Your ballot is not a ticket to allow you so snooze in the stands. Your ballot is the permission slip that allows you to hold your elected representatives to account. For South Africans the dream of our rainbow nation was besmirched by arrogance and corruption. We woke up to the need to spit out the seductive drug of complacency and demand the rights that had been so hard won. The ANC, we learned, was a political party like any other. It was made up of some people who were determined to fulfil the promise of the rainbow nation. It consisted of some leaders who wanted to create a society in which everyone had equal access to opportunity. Some of our leaders did want to create a society in which justice prevailed. And yet the ANC was a political party that included too many people who were delighted to be in power to serve their own corrupt ends. Our most recent elections reflected a kind of coming of age; an awakening to our own complacency. The electorate had called the government to account and now the ANC has formed part of a government

of national unity. They remain the largest coalition partner but they can no longer have it all their own way.

It took South Africa thirty years to stir from the slumber of complacency. I pray that in this country we are quicker to respond to the deafening ding of the wake-up call.

The history of LGBTQIA+ rights in the Netherlands is so long and so storied, but the struggle in that story is so seldom told. We act as though the whole nation always turned out happily for the Pride party. Pride is a deserved celebration of how far we have come, but it comes with very little mention of how we got here. We trumpet the wins without recounting the lurches and the losses along the way. It is therefore no wonder that young people think that the victory for dignity was always a foregone conclusion. No wonder we live under the illusion that our forerunners came out of the closet at no cost.

Complacency is not the only challenge to LGBTQIA+ rights. This growing indifference among the youth is part of a larger trend of hostility toward minority rights. Across Europe, there is a noticeable shift towards more conservative parties and governments. In the Netherlands, this is evident in the rhetoric of certain political parties and public figures who argue against the so-called 'excesses' of political correctness and minority protections.

There is a resurgence of conservative and nationalist ideologies that oppose minority rights, including those of the LGBTQIA+ community. Though I must say, 'conservative' sounds to me like a misnomer. I am more inclined to name them preservative ideologies. 'Conservative' sounds so benign. We want to conserve precious resources and keep them available for future use. But a preservative is like that red dye that we removed from our food chain because that stuff is deadly. It's as toxic and carcinogenic as some of the right-wing ideologies that challenge the progress that has been made in recent decades towards full inclusion and access to opportunity for all people. Preservative values want to maintain every unjust status quo. Preservative values want to keep people with a 'migratieachtergrond' [migration background] out of boardrooms. Preservative values want to keep the gender pay gap in the Netherlands higher than the – bad enough – EU average of 13%. Preservative values want to decimate climate policy.

Preservative values make stuff look fresh, good and healthy while it's warmed over supremacist ideas that are killing us all slowly.

In addition to complacency and right-wing ideologies, social media has also played a role in echoing and amplifying voices of intolerance. Online platforms have become breeding grounds for hate speech and misinformation, which can sway public opinion and normalize bigotry. This growing hostility is not confined to the digital realm but is spilling over into real-life interactions and policies.

The LGBTQIA+ community is often a target of these sentiments. Hate crimes and discriminatory practices are on the rise, and while the law provides protections, societal attitudes are proving harder to change. This environment of increasing hostility necessitates a reinvigoration of efforts to educate and engage all segments of society about the importance of equality and human rights.

One critique often leveled at the LGBTQIA+ rights movement is its sometimes narrow focus on issues of sexuality and gender identity to the exclusion of other intersectional concerns. While the fight for marriage equality, anti-discrimination laws, and the right to gender identity is crucial, we must recognize that LGBTQIA+ individuals also belong to other marginalized groups. Issues of race, class, disability and religion intersect with those of sexual orientation and gender identity, creating unique challenges that have to be addressed holistically.

For instance, LGBTQIA+ people of color often face compounded discrimination, experiencing prejudice not only for their sexual orientation or gender identity but also for their race. Similarly, LGBTQIA+ individuals with disabilities encounter barriers that are both physical and societal. They have the reverse of the 'seven vinkjes' [in reference to Joris Luyendijk's book *The seven checkmarks*]. Therefore, our advocacy must be intersectional, acknowledging and addressing the multifaceted nature of discrimination and oppression.

Another significant challenge is the ambivalence of the religious community towards LGBTQIA+ rights. In the Netherlands, as in many parts of the world, religion still plays a significant role in shaping social values and norms. While some religious groups have embraced LGBTQIA+

individuals and championed their rights, others remain hesitant or openly hostile. I am a priest in a denomination that only recently, in my lifetime, admitted women to ordained priestly ministry. I am an Episcopal priest. A priest in the American branch of the Anglican Church. I served for some years with great joy in the South African church in which my father served. And then I met and married the love of my life. [She smiles at her wife in the audience]. She's blushing. Because Marceline is a woman, I suddenly faced a wall of injustice that I had known and noticed but had not felt. I had crossed into the land of the last taboo. For some reason, the Anglican Church of my childhood has embraced the fiction that we can legislate love. My license to officiate was revoked and I could no longer exercise my priestly ministry in my motherland. For me, the emotional experience was like that of a child disowned by her family. My priestly identity is as much a part of me as being a mother is, as much a part of me as my name.

Last year my beloved godfather died in England. I visited him in the month before his death and he asked me to officiate at his funeral. As a visiting clergy person from a sister denomination, it seemed like little more of a courtesy for my godfather's daughters to ask the bishop's permission for me to fulfil my godfather's dying wish. Permission was refused. It was an event that inspired my atheist wife to write a letter to God. The letter drew far more attention and ire than a gracious 'yes' would ever have done. I serve now in a congregation that offers a gracious 'yes' to every person that Jesus would welcome to his banquet table; that means every person. All Saints Amsterdam – sales pitch www.allsaintsamsterdam.church – meets, ironically, in the building of Vrijburg, the church that was first in the world to solemnize a same-sex relationship. Though my natal denomination did, and still does, question the compatibility of my sexual orientation with my faith, that has never been a question for me. I worship a Christ who was on the cutting edge of up-ending injustice. It would be disingenuous for a priest to proclaim that God is anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-patriarchal, and opposed to oppression in every form, only to assert that the same God supports the oppression or exclusion of gender and sexual minorities. As the Dutch say: 'dat klopt niet' [that isn't right].

The Christian Gospel is good news for all the poor. It is good news for all the oppressed. It is good news for all the marginalized. Or the Gospel is not good news at all. I can understand people walking away from the two-

tongued proclamation: a God of love whose answer to love is death and exclusion.

I must admit to being less diplomatic than my father, who famously said he could not worship a homophobic God and would not go to a homophobic heaven. On the window of the cathedral in Cape Town is another of his quotes. It says 'you may be surprised by who you meet in heaven.'

This ambivalence that Christian or religious organizations have created a complex dynamic. On the one hand there are progressive religious leaders and communities that offer support and acceptance, on the other hand there are conservative factions – preservative factions. This division within the religious community means that LGBTQIA+ individuals may feel alienated from spiritual spaces which can be a significant source of support and community for many.

It is also important to acknowledge that the LGBTQIA+ community has, in many instances, ceded the territory of spirituality to the right. We have allowed them to remake God in their image. A pint-sized god who fits into the right wingers back pocket! A god who is stern, serious, and strait-laced. It just seems so inconsistent with the image of God we see with our own eyes in the world that God created. Tell me, how many shades of green do you need to paint a tree? Thousands of leaves and every one of them different. Why bother to make each snowflake unique? For what do we even need so many shades of blue for the sky – ok, Netherlands, for what do we need so many shades of grey? That's the real question! And look at all the people: skin, hair and eyes in every tint and shade. Do you mean that the God who created that universe, with birds that wake the morning singing a joyful riot. Do you think that wildly wonderfully creative God would shrink to fit into the pinched joylessness of preservative religion? That version of religion that says love can only travel a narrow, proscribed, pitiless channel. God just looks at that and laughs! Because every cup we set to catch God's love just overflows. God's love overflows. God's love overflows in joy, in compassion, in mercy, in beauty, in generosity, in diversity. God's love overflows in the beauty of you!

This ceding of spiritual territory has allowed conservative religious factions to dominate the narrative around morality and ethics, often to the detriment of LGBTQIA+ rights.

Reclaiming this space is crucial. Spirituality and faith can provide a strong foundation for advocacy and support, offering a sense of belonging and acceptance that transcends societal prejudices.

Spirituality doesn't mean you have to go to church – although All Saints would welcome you. It doesn't even mean that you have to believe in God. Though God would welcome you, too. It does mean that you must find ways to feed your soul so that you are strong enough to face the struggle ahead. It does mean that you must build community so that you have companions at your side to halve your pain and double your joy. It does mean that you must find or create rituals that you can lean into when the world around you seems to crumble.

So, where do we go from here? The challenges are significant, but they are not insurmountable. Here are some steps we can take to address these issues.

We must continue to educate young people about our history and the importance of LGBTQIA+ rights.

We need to tell and retell the story of who we are and how we came to be. We need to name the heroes of the struggles. We need to remember those we lost along the way. We must educate ourselves about the story of LGBTQIA+ advocacy. We need to know the story of our own community. We need to dance for what was done to win our frayed freedoms, our fun, our safety. We must celebrate our wins. And we must remember and grieve our lacks, our lessons, and our losses.

Our advocacy efforts must be inclusive and intersectional. We need to address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals who also belong to other marginalized groups. This means listening to and amplifying the voices of those who are often sidelined within the movement. Yes, I know that is self-serving. As a Black, bi-sexual, African woman of a certain age who speaks lousy Dutch, I only get two-and-a-half of the seven 'vinkjes' that would have paved my way to success.

We must engage with religious communities to foster understanding and acceptance. That sounds insipid. But what I mean is that we can't quietly fade away. We have to talk back to the bigots. This involves working with

progressive religious leaders and communities to create spaces of inclusion and support for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Social media platforms must take greater responsibility in combating hate speech and misinformation. We need stronger policies and enforcement to ensure that these platforms do not become breeding grounds for intolerance.

While the Netherlands has strong legal protections for LGBTQIA+ individuals, we must remain vigilant. Continuous efforts are needed to ensure that these laws are upheld and that any gaps in protection are addressed.

Building strong, supportive communities is essential.

The fight for LGBTQIA+ rights in the Netherlands is won, but it's not done. It's not over yet.

While we have made significant progress, we cannot afford to be complacent. The growing indifference and opposition among young people, the hostility toward minority rights, and the ambivalence of the religious community all present significant challenges. However, by focusing on education, intersectional advocacy and engagement with the religious communities we can continue to advance the cause of equality and human dignity.

This country has led the world in creating a justice and safety for the LGBTQIA+ community. Let us continue to lead the world by making sure that those gains remain secure.

Thank you.

BIOGRAPHY

Mpho Tutu van Furth (in full The Reverend Canon Mpho Tutu van Furth, 1963) is a South African Anglican priest, author and human rights activist. She is the daughter of activist Nomalizo Leah Tutu and Archbishop and Nobel Prize winner Desmond Tutu. She wrote two books with her father (*The Book of Forgiving* and *Made for Goodness* published by HarperCollins Publishers) and a biography about him (*Tutu: The Authorized Portrait* published by Macmillan Publishers). She also wrote *Forgiveness and Reparation, the Healing Journey*, published by Fortress Press.

She was ordained in 2003 in the Episcopal Church, but the Church of England, and the Anglican Church of South Africa do not allow her to serve as a priest in the church because she is married to a woman, Marceline van Furth.

Mpho Tutu van Furth giving her Pride Talk '24 at De Nieuwe Kerk, 18 July 2024

PHOTO Isabell Janssen



PRIDE TALK AT DE NIEUWE KERK AMSTERDAM

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Amsterdam was once allowed to call itself the Gay Capital of the world. Is that a position that still exists? If so, what does it entail? Do we still aspire to this position today? Does it fit the diversity of the multi-coloured LGBTQIA+ community? How do foreign countries see our community? And how do we in Amsterdam and the Netherlands relate to the international community and this global struggle of inequality, discrimination and violence? The annual Pride Talk puts these questions on the agenda.

Every year, on the eve of Queer & Pride Amsterdam, when the LGBTQIA+ community celebrates its achievements and reflects on the emancipatory struggle that remains to be fought, De Nieuwe Kerk gives the stage to an international activist and amplifies their message.

The first edition was held in 2023 by legendary American activist David Mixner (1946–2024). He was a writer, fundraiser and performer. In the early 1960s, he campaigned for John and Bobby Kennedy and for Martin Luther King. His Pride Talk, titled *My concept of sin is not to care*, is available online.