

B.C. Human Rights Tribunal to hear complaint against parish

The B.C. Human Rights Tribunal will hear a case involving the White Rock Pride Society and Star of the Sea Parish after the society filed a human rights complaint alleging the parish discriminated on the basis of sexual orientation.

In 2018, White Rock Pride Society president Ernie Klassen called the parish to inquire about renting the Star of the Sea Community Centre for an event the following year.

After providing information about the intended fundraising event for the non-profit organization PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), his rental application was denied. Klassen filed a complaint with the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal.

“The parish damaged the inherent dignity, feelings, and self-respect of the pride society’s members, who identify as part of and support the LGBTQ+ community,” Klassen said in his complaint filed in 2019.

The parish’s rental agreement states use of the private centre must be in accordance with Catholic values.

James Borkowski, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Vancouver, told reporters at the time that the parish reviews all rental applications “to ensure that the proposed use of the parish centre would not be contrary to the teachings on faith and morals of the Catholic Church.”

“We regret that this will inevitably disappoint some people.”

Borkowski added the White Rock Pride Society was provided letters of clarification and offered help to find another location for their event.

Star of the Sea Parish applied to have the human rights complaint dismissed, but that request was denied on May 26 of this year.

In the tribunal’s decision, member Kathleen Smith wrote, “I agree with the (White Rock Pride Society) that this case requires the benefit of a full hearing. There are significant facts and issues in dispute,” said Smith.

For example, Smith wrote, a tribunal case in 2005 found the Knights of Columbus could refuse to rent a hall for events that could undermine their relationship with the Catholic Church or their mission. Smith wrote there needs to be more discussion about “whether and how” the tribunal could apply those findings in this situation.

In addition, Smith wrote, "The parish asks the tribunal to apply the protections of the (Human Rights Code) in a way that proportionately balances the religious freedoms of the parish with the rights of the society members to be free from discrimination based on sexual orientation."

A date for the hearing has not yet been set.