



## staff commentary

by Jeff Taylor :: social media editor

### *How the struggle for LGBT rights both is and is not like the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, and why that matters*

During Charlotte's public forum to discuss expanding the city's non-discrimination ordinance to include LGBT persons, an African-American man in my small group spoke up and said that he was opposed to hearing the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s compared with the current struggle for LGBT rights.

I don't believe it had been brought up that night, but certainly the comparison was not a new one and I assumed he had read it in some comment section or something in one of the articles or Facebook posts in the run-up to the non-discrimination ordinance vote.

"They just really aren't the same thing to me," he said.

Black people didn't "choose to be black," he went on, also pointing out that gay people aren't routinely getting dogs and hoses turned on them.

I have to admit that my response was out of my mouth before I had even given myself time to adequately consider his concern.

"People don't choose to be gay or trans either," I told him, adding that kids can be thrown out of their houses when their parents find out they are gay or trans. It wasn't like anyone's parents were going to suddenly wake up one day and go, "Wait, you're black?!? Get out of here!"

At this point it became obvious that I had allowed myself to get defensive, to participate in the Suffering Olympics, where really no one is the winner.

While LGBT people do experience higher rates of violence and suicide than the general public, they are not, we are not, victims of the state in that direct and coordinated a way.

Or at least not anymore, but it did used to happen — the Stonewall Riots being the most famous example.

"You're right, though, it's not the exact same thing," I sputtered lamely, not knowing how to proceed exactly.

And it isn't. But it is in the same ballpark, right?

As another man in my small group pointed out, after saying he had been raised to think much differently from how he had come to believe: "All discrimination is wrong."

I brought up this interaction, this argument and its tendency to crop up when the phrase "LGBT civil rights" is mentioned, while interviewing Bishop Tonyia Rawls for a piece on LGBT people of color who have made a difference in Charlotte. Rawls is an activist, organizer and spiritual leader.

"As a black person, I do not run from the comparison that I feel when I think about the Civil Rights Movement and the LGBTQ rights movement," Rawls told me. "I don't run from that and I don't struggle with that."

"But what I do think is important is for white folks in particular, who have been historically privileged, and white LGBTQ people who are also privileged in other ways, to be sensitive

to how those comparisons are made, because there isn't the same point of reference."

What is often lost in these conversations is how it is possible to be both advantaged and disadvantaged at the same time. Essentially no one exists at the complete ends of the spectrum of utter majority or absolute minority. We are all potential victims of discrimination, and now with the passage of House Bill 2, which makes it illegal to sue for discrimination in state court, we all need to band together more than ever:

Now is not a time for separatism.

"Justice is justice, period. So when Dr.

King talked about the Holocaust, and when he talked about what was happening in Vietnam, he's not Vietnamese nor is he Jewish. But what he was, was somebody committed to justice," Rawls said. "And so he spoke as one who saw those comparisons, and those comparisons compelled him to be able to do greater work for black folk."

Rawls urges white allies to be aware that the best way to make the comparison between the two is not to say they are

the same thing, because they are not, but rather that they were moved by what they saw happen with the Civil Rights Movement and it inspires them to fight for equality.

"It's not an apples to apples (comparison), but it is in the same fruit family," Rawls added. "So I can talk about, 'I'm part of this fruit family,' no pun intended, right?"

Speaking of Doctor King, many are still unaware that the historic March on Washington was organized in large part by a gay black man named Bayard Rustin.

Which brings up the important point that, of course, there is crossover, that many of the people who are fighting for their rights as people of color are also fighting for their rights as members of the LGBT community.

Transgender women of color, for instance, are particularly vulnerable in society today. Of the more than 20 trans women who were killed last year, the majority were trans women of color. That includes Elisha Walker, who was from North Carolina.

Many of the organizers and leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement are queer and trans, who work to expand both LGBT rights and rights for people of color.

We are all beginning to realize more and more just how important it is to lift up the most marginalized among us, those who are least understood and all too often least heralded. Those opposing us will always look for the least represented groups to target, knowing they will be the easiest to turn into a boogeyman. We have to fight that off at the pass and come as a united front.

The fight for LGBT rights goes on, as does the fight for the rights of people of color and those living in poverty, so why not go hand in hand? As the African Proverb says, "If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." ::

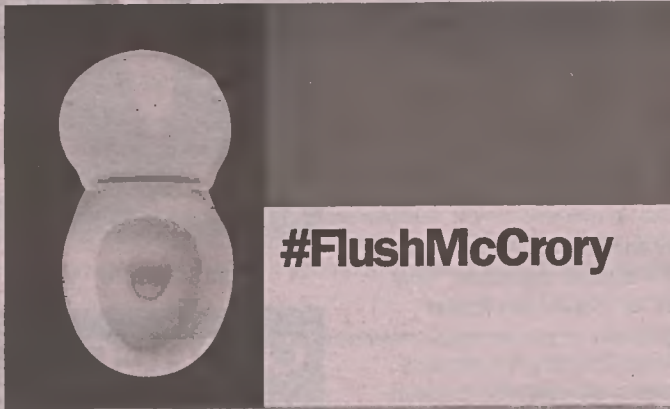


The March on Washington in 1963 (top) and riots at the Stonewall Inn in 1969 (right).

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