

Recommendations for Safe, Sacred and Meaningful Conversations

For the Special Response Process Hearings
in the Church of the Brethren

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BRETHREN MENNONITE COUNCIL
FOR LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL
AND TRANSGENDER INTERESTS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SAFE, SACRED AND MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

The hearings on the 1983 Human Sexuality Paper, and the church's beliefs and behavior regarding human sexuality, are an opportunity for growth, but also for conflict and pain. Many churches have not talked together about the place of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the church. Are you concerned about what will happen in your congregation when the hearings begin? Are you wondering what to expect?

It has not been possible to train all pastors, church leaders, and others who will be facilitating these hearings. Please consider the following areas of challenge and recommendations for safe, sacred, and meaningful hearings.

- **These conversations are about people, not simply an "issue."** Take care in your own language, and encourage those in your hearing to take care, not to talk about "one side or another" or "this issue." There are many experiences, not only two sides. There are actual lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the church who are at the heart of these conversations, but are so often invisible when we simply discuss an "issue."

Recommendation: Replace "issue" in your vocabulary with "questions around sexual orientation and inclusion in the life of the church" or "the inclusion (or exclusion) of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in this church."

- **The term "homosexual" does not include all of the people whose identities are being discussed.** In the Church of the Brethren there are lesbian women, gay men, bisexual people and transgender people. All of these people's participation in the church is affected by the 1983 Human Sexuality Paper and these hearings. The term "homosexual" refers only to gay men and lesbian women, leaving out bisexual and transgender people. Also, the term "homosexual" has generally fallen out of use, especially for younger generations, and has an offensive connotation.

Recommendation: Use "LGBT" or "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people" in your own language.

- **Discussing human sexuality is not an equal endeavor by all in the hearing.** Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, as well as their families and friends, experience discrimination in the church and the wider culture. LGBT people are often harassed and harmed by others because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Neither the church nor the wider culture are a safe place for LGBT people, and their friends and families may also fear speaking vulnerably. Would you speak openly if you were repeatedly referred to as a sinner, abomination, or the reason for conflict? While many people may be sharing their *perspective* at the hearing, LGBT people and their families are sharing their *lives*, and this is a significant distinction. By not recognizing and addressing the particular vulnerability of LGBT people and their families in this conversation, we run the risk of doing harm to people.

Recommendation: Name this power difference at the outset of the hearings. Provide, and publicize, pastoral care

during and after the hearings for those who may need spiritual and emotional support. Provide, and publicize, a way for LGBT people and their families to speak to you (or another leader) privately to share their comments for the hearing process.

- **There will probably be LGBT people and their families in your hearing(s).** While many in the church do not know any lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people in their own congregations, you should assume that there are LGBT people and their families in your midst. Christian Community, Inc. recently did an extensive research project involving over 5,800 church going youth from a broad range of denominations. Nearly 100% of the congregations represented in that research had at least one youth who self-identified as gay, lesbian or questioning. However, when the pastors of those congregations were asked about gay or lesbian youth in their church, only 18% thought they had one or more teens that might be gay or lesbian, and only 12% could actually name anyone (*Faith Matters: Teenagers, Sexuality, and Religion* by Steve Clapp, Kristen Leverton Helbert and Angela Zizak). This 88% gap is a disturbing indicator of the degree of fear, denial, lack of safety, and plain ignorance that exists within our congregations.

Recommendation: In your own language, acknowledge that the people we are talking about are real people in the Church of the Brethren, and in this hearing: "For many of us gathered, this issue is very personal, and affects our own lives. In fact, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and those who love them are in this congregation, and even this room." Remind people that hateful and hurtful comments are not permitted in the hearing. If you hear comments that stereotype or ridicule LGBT people, speak up for respect, even if you are nervous: "We are gathered here in the name and spirit of Christ. While we all have strong opinions, we must undergird all of our words with love and respect. Such comments are not loving, helpful, or welcome."

- **These hearings involve complex dynamics.** Are you feeling overwhelmed? Unprepared? Because of the great potential to do harm, it is important that facilitators be trained and experienced in facilitating highly charged situations where there is an imbalance of power among participants. While this may require significant resources and effort, it would greatly enhance the confidence that people feel in participating in such a process.

Recommendation: Look for a trained facilitator to lead your hearings, or assist you. Seek out training from Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests.

Thank you for participating in these incredibly important conversations in the Church of the Brethren. May the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the passion of the Spirit be present in your hearing.

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