

READING THE BIBLE WITH TREMBLING HANDS

Dealing with Troubling Texts

Harry Knox

We are in the midst of a conversation in the church and in the larger society about who we lesbian and gay people are, what God thinks of us, and whether or not we should be safe and embraced and respected in our congregations and our secular communities.

I have spent my adult life begging my mostly Christian neighbors to stop killing me with kindness. For the most noble of reasons—the desire to call me to holiness—my neighbors have denied me the right to work, looked the other way when I was

I have been given perfect peace about the fact that my sexual orientation is one of God's many gifts to me.

a victim of hate crimes, denied me and my partner the protections and benefits of marriage, sought to silence my voice in church, and heaped ridicule and shame on my family.

No matter their motivations, they have proven that they are not my friends. You cannot deny my basic human rights and

expect me to consider you to have my best interests at heart. The stakes are much too high.

Those who have sought to punish and oppress me have used the most powerful tool I know of as a weapon against me. They have perverted the Holy Bible—that powerful standard of justice for even the most marginalized among us and the touchstone of grace that offers hope and reconciliation—into a tool of oppression.

I'm a Christian and a gay man. I am at perfect peace with God about the condition of my soul. I have prayed through many sleepless nights begging forgiveness for the sins that separated me from God. But as God and I together have worked through

what it means for me to be gay, as I have studied the Bible and prayed, and sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I have been given perfect peace about the fact that my sexual orientation is one of God's many gifts to me and therefore to deny it is to deny the one who is its author

(continued on page 11)



BMC Executive Director Carol Wise (front row, left) joins participants at the first Welcoming Church Training this past February in Minneapolis.

WELCOMING CHURCH TRAININGS LAUNCHED

The first of five 2008 Welcoming Church Trainings was held in Minneapolis on February 14-17. Twenty five participants representing five church traditions worked diligently on issues and skills related to change theory, church conflict and resolution, storytelling, biblical content, and positive strategizing for change.

Perhaps you are a leader (lay or ordained) in a congregation which is considering becoming welcoming to lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (lgbt) persons. Maybe you are deeply committed to helping other congregations in your denomination become more welcoming of lgbt folks. Either scenario means that this training will be very helpful to you in honing your skills and gaining more knowledge about how to help

congregations through those tough conversations toward a more fully inclusive church.

Welcoming Church Training is a marvelous opportunity to help your congregation become a more welcoming and just place. The training is informative, insightful, educational, practical and deeply spiritual. There are four additional trainings ten-

(continued on page 8)

IN THIS ISSUE

BMC Gathering.....	2
Elders Task Force	3
Done with Dialogue.....	5
Why I Chose BMC	6
Know What You Know	7
Connecting Families	8
Happenings	9



ABOUT LOVE

Randall Friesen

We human beings are all the same. And we're all different. We each have such remarkable capacity to love. And we express love in distinctive, personal ways.

The differences—who we love, how we love, why we love—run the spectrum. It gets dangerous when love is regulated by one group. The restrictions put on LGBT people are, in actuality, restrictions on love. It really is all about love.

When we are told that the way we love is wrong or immoral, we take it as an assault on one of the most significant areas of our lives—our relationship with our life-partner. We take it as an assault on not only us personally, but against the ones we love. And we *will* fight for our partners!

While putting together this issue of *Outspoken*, I found myself discouraged. It takes a great deal of work to constantly fight for the one you love. Emotions collide, doubts arise, tempers blaze.

But at the end of the day, you find yourself coming home to the one you love, who loves you back, and you wonder what's going on with the world. Why is this delicate, wondrous relationship so contentious?

This issue of *Outspoken* covers a range of viewpoints. In it, Harry Knox, from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation calls for fair play of ministers when discussing gayness in relation to the Bible. John Linscheid presses us to "move on" with the issue, pointing to the weariness of LGBT people to constantly have to defend and explain themselves. And Marti Shaak urges the Church of the Brethren to cease the hypocrisy of calling for dialogue while denying its expression.

So the clash continues. And while the world rages and the church waffles, I retreat back into the sacredness of my heart and whisper into my partner's ear how much I love him.

EXPLORE YOUR CREATIVITY!

Wilma Harder, BMC GATHERING COORDINATOR

Formerly known as the BMC Convention, BMC's biennial gathering will take place October 10-12, 2008, at the Potawatomi Inn in Pokagon State Park near Angola, Indiana. The theme for this event is *Exploring Your Creative Spirit* and will include many opportunities for creative expression, introspection, community building, outdoor activities, music, conversation, and good plain fun. The park, which encompasses over 1,200 acres of woods near Lake James and offers miles of hiking trails, interesting birding, boating and horseback riding, is a beautiful setting that accents the theme of this event.

In addition to soaking up the natural setting, Gathering attendees will have the option of attending workshops related to spiritual creativity, creativity in the workplace, creative money management, and selected others. Workshops will be presented by fellow BMCers and those with close connections to BMC. Canadian born singer/songwriter Ferron will lead a day-long poetry writing workshop, as well as perform in concert. The Gathering will again feature the legendary BMC auction.

In an endeavor to keep fees down so that all can attend, BMC is seeking major sponsorships for the Gathering. If you have connections to a company or individual who would be interested in underwriting the event in exchange for advertising and much gratitude, please contact Wilma Harder at wilmajenharder@juno.com.

The creativity will be flowing this year, and you won't want to miss it! Come explore this aspect of yourself in a beautiful setting with wonderful, generous people! For more information, check out www.bmclgbt.org/events.shtml. If you have pre-gathering ideas, including funding and/or workshop possibilities, contact the BMC office or Wilma Harder. See you there! •



Pokagon State Park, site of BMC's upcoming Annual Gathering.

For additional information, visit:

Potawatomi Inn:

www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/properties/inn_potawatomi.html

Pokagon State Park:

www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/properties/park_pokagon.html

Ferron: www.ferrononline.com

Call to Non-Violent Resisters

We need your ideas! The more creative, the better! The Program and Arrangements Committee of the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, has effectively denied BMC a place at the denominational table by putting on indefinite hold our request for exhibit space at Annual Conference. BMC is seeking creative, original and bold ideas for a meaningful and faithful witness at the 2008 Annual Conference. The celebration of the 300th anniversary of Brethren beginnings offers a unique opportunity to emphasize the radical nature of that early witness and claim again that spirit of faithfulness and hope. Send your best ideas to bmc@bmclgbt.org. We'll even toss in a prize for the one selected.

Supportive Communities Multiply!

The Supportive Communities Network (SCN) is a network of Mennonite and Brethren congregations, organizations and groups that are publicly affirming of lgbt people and welcome their full inclusion in the life of the community. We are pleased to announce the reception of four additional SCN Communities:

Emerging Welcomers at Turkey Creek Church of the Brethren (Nappanee, Indiana)—This group of individuals from the Turkey Creek Church of the Brethren understands their spirituality as a journey that “welcomes questions and is open to mysteries.” This journey has led them to embrace the welcome that Jesus modeled and taught, as reflected in their statement: “As followers of Christ we humbly and courageously proclaim God’s hospitality and move with others in the emerging welcome that embodies grace, justice and peace.”

Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship (New York, New York)—This dynamic and unique congregation, located in the heart of the city, began in the late 1970’s and was formally organized in 1988. It was begun by residents of Menno House, a residence that was purchased in 1958 to provide housing for conscientious objectors to war while they completed their alternative service. Since 1976 the house has served as a residence for church volunteers, students, employees of non-profits, short term visitors to NYC, and the church office. Their statement of welcome reads: “We welcome God’s children of any race, ethnic identity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, economic status or life situation. The fellowship seeks to offer a

foundation in Jesus Christ, the Bible, prayer and action. It is a setting in which questions and challenges to traditional thought and practice are welcome.”

York Center Church of the Brethren (Lombard, IL)—This congregation has a rich history that emerges from the Brethren western movement into the great city of Chicago and includes a strong association with Bethany Seminary when it was located in Lombard. Their mission statement includes, “The York Center COB is a congregation of Christian Believers who are grounded in the New Testament and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are an open and affirming fellowship enriched by our diversity and unified by our deep faith in the love of God...”

Beacon Heights Church of the Brethren (Fort Wayne, Indiana)—After many years of study, reflection and welcome, with a resounding yes, the Beacon Heights congregation passed a welcome statement and voted to join SCN with a unanimous vote. Their statement begins with a simple declarative: “Beacon Heights Church believes everyone is a child of God” and then offers a wide welcome as a community who is called to “nurture the dignity and wholeness of all people” and “practice and promote justice in human relationships.”

If you are interested in your congregation becoming part of the prophetic welcoming movement by joining the Supportive Communities Network, we encourage you to consider participating in one of the Welcoming Church Trainings, or to call BMC for resources and support at 612.343.2060, bmc@bmc.lgbt.org. •

Serving LGBT Elders

LGBT people who grew up in a pre-Stonewall era were shaped by a life experience where their desires and their lives were characterized as criminal, mentally ill, evil, and abnormal. The risks and the courage that so many exhibited in spite of the tremendous consequences is often stunning to consider. Yet for many, the scars remain.

It is estimated that there are approximately 2.9 million gay and lesbian people in the US who are over the age of 65. Research indicates that, in contrast to the larger community, elder gay and lesbian people are: at high risk for isolation; more likely to experience depression, poverty, illness; reluctant to access services; and face ongoing discrimination. Additionally, lgbt elders also face unique financial challenges. Social Security survivor and/or spousal benefits, pension and 401(k) laws, and inheritance laws all discriminate against lgbt people. Medicaid regulations protect the assets and homes of married spouses when the other spouse enters a nursing home, yet no such protections are offered to same-sex partners

A hostile social environment has meant that many lgbt people have created our own families of choice and uniquely relied upon our own communities for survival. In this sense, lgbt elders are leading the way in terms of what

many non-lgbt people are now beginning to experience due to numerous changes in family structures and lifestyles. Yet we as a community are challenged to do better than we have done in terms of advocating and caring for the elder lgbt people among us. After all, as Amber Hollibaugh of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force reminds us, “Our advocacy will determine the community each of us will age in, and we do not want to create a movement that will one day throw us out.”

At its recent board meeting in Chicago, Illinois, the BMC board elected to develop an Elder LGBT Task Force to highlight the contributions, and address some of the needs and particular concerns of this significant part of the BMC community. Through this program, BMC plans to raise the visibility of lgbt elders within the BMC community; offer opportunities for gathering and connection; assess the lgbt friendliness of Mennonite and Brethren retirement communities; advocate for lgbt-positive policies and practices at Mennonite and Brethren retirement communities, including staff sensitivity training; and provide information and resources as needed by the elder Brethren and Mennonite lgbt community.

If you have an interest and would like to work on this project, please contact the BMC office at bmc@bmc.lgbt.org. Board member Becky Krepes from North Manchester, Indiana, will be chairing the work of the task force. •

Consider a Gift

BMC welcomes your financial contributions so that we can continue the work for lgbt justice and care for the well-being of lgbt people, our families, and supporters within the Mennonite and Brethren churches. To donate to BMC, go to our website at www.bmc.lgbt.org and click on “Donate Now.” Contributions may also be sent to the BMC office at P.O. Box 6300, Minneapolis, MN 55406. Thank you for your generous support all year long!

It is one of those memorable winter days in Minnesota when the cold Arctic air has descended south, bringing with it wind chills that threaten frostbite after mere minutes of exposure. It's too cold to form clouds and snow, so the skies are a lovely blue and the sun is shining in a manner that is both inviting and brutally deceptive.

It is hard to imagine being homeless during winter in Minnesota, or for that matter, anywhere else in the U.S. or Canada, as each region has its own climatic challenges. Yet the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that the number of homeless and runaway youth ranges from 575,000 to 1.6 million per year.¹ In Canada, the Public Health Agency estimates that 150,000 youth live on the streets on any given day.² And of these homeless youth, research in both Canada and the U.S. indicates that 20-40% of them identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (lgbt), a disturbingly disproportionate number when compared with the 3-5% of the population that identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

It should come as no surprise that most youth are



A UNIQUE TRIBE

Carol Wise

homeless because of family conflict. For lgbt youth, the conflict is often ignited or exacerbated by the discovery of the individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. Studies indicate that fully one-third of all lgbt youth are assaulted by a parent or other family member as a result of disclosing their sexual orientation. When youth are on the street, they are easy victims, vulnerable to crime, depression, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, exploitation from adults, and dangerous weather conditions.

Although we like to think of ourselves as a unique tribe, there is nothing particularly unique about Mennonites and Brethren when it comes to rejecting young lgbt family members. The chronicles of BMC are filled with stories of betrayal, rejection, violence, fear, abandonment, and loss. In actuality or metaphorically, many Brethren and Mennonite lgbt individuals have experi-

enced homelessness. Many of us are resilient and have created lives of dignity and joy for ourselves. Others of us continue to struggle with the scars and residue of our experience. Most of us muddle somewhere in the middle. But what we all carry is a deep desire that lgbt youth experience a kinder, more loving and welcoming church and family than many of us have known.

To reach this goal, BMC has launched two major efforts. The first is the *Toward a Welcoming and Inclusive Church* trainings that will be offered for the next three years in various regions. These trainings will help develop the skills, knowledge, and support necessary to create positive and lasting change within our congregations and families. The second effort is the development of resources for high school youth who are lgbt or questioning, their parents, and the youth group advisors who guide them. In the spring,

Maggie Miller, BMC's Kaleidoscope Coordinator, will be traveling to meet with youth group advisors in order to help them understand issues facing lgbt youth and offer ways to be a positive influence and support.

We are excited about these opportunities to significantly improve the life experience for the next generation of Brethren and Mennonite lgbt youth, their families, and those who love them. During these cool winter months, we invite you to do your part to alleviate youth pain and maybe even homelessness by participating in a welcoming training, educating your congregation's youth advisor, reaching out to a struggling youth, or continuing to raise your voice in holy support so that youth know they are not alone. It can make a cold world just a little bit warmer. •

i All US statistics from Ray, N (2006) Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless.

ii Public Health Agency of Canada (2006) Street youth in Canada: Findings from enhanced surveillance of Canadian street youth, 1999-2003.

Progressive Brethren Summit Meeting

Under the banner *Faithful and Just: Progressive Brethren Speak*, over 150 people are expected to gather for the first event explicitly for Progressive Brethren. The gathering will be held November 7-9, 2008, in Indianapolis, Indiana. Planners expect over 150 persons to attend this first general gathering

of persons who see themselves as "progressive" and currently, or formerly, participating in the Church of the Brethren.

The event will address four major topic areas related to a progressive expression: A Challenged Church, A Grounded Church, A Welcoming Church and A Courageous Church, with

plenty of break out sessions, workshops, worship, music, and opportunities for conversation.

The weekend will be hosted by the Northview Church of the Brethren and is sponsored by Voices for an Open Spirit (VOS), Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests (BMC), Women's Caucus, Christian Community and by a number of congregations and individuals. Regist-

ration materials will be available after April 15. For more information, contact Ken Kline Smeltzer at bksmeltz@comcast.net or Carol Wise, cwise@bmcclgbt.org. •

If you'd like to see us address a particular topic in Outspoken, or if you are interested in writing for Outspoken, we'd like to hear from you! Send your ideas and thoughts to bmceditor@hotmail.com.

Dialogue. Perhaps you have experienced it.

I was moving through life just fine. Ken and I and our friend Randy were making progress on the Vermont cottage. We were dreaming big dreams to make it a place for gay spiritual reflection—and some gay spiritual sex. Like a patriarch, Ken had raised stones to mark the yard. And Randy, like an apostle, had broken down the “dividing wall of hostility” between the living and dining rooms. We had even put in a labyrinth.

Back in Philadelphia, I had been struggling with some health problems, a few hospitalizations, some troubling, unexplained anemia—but we were handling it. I was able to juggle my job responsibilities, my health issues, and my church duties (relatively few at the time).

Then, in the partly-cyber, partly-in-the-flesh community I belong to, named MennoNeighbors, someone posted a link to the *DreamSeeker Magazine* Winter 2006 issue. Its theme? “Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality.”

(Insert giant spiritual sucking sound here!)

Instantly I was once again drawn into the dreaded “loving dialogue,” and I began pointing out the usual power and privilege issues. (All the authors in that “genuine conversation” had been straight.) Soon Michael King, the editor, was asking me to write a responding chapter in his book based on the issue. The book got published (*Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality*, Cascadia, 2007). It was full of all the old arguments, and many remarkably new ones, regarding the proper place and behavior of lgbt people and the political niceties of churchly

inclusion and exclusion. It included gay and lesbian voices. Even some church leaders took great strides forward.

And I felt more hopeless than ever.

If loving dialogue is so loving, why do I end up hating it? Why do I second guess and question myself every time I get sucked into it? I let myself get spiritually sucker-punched. Maybe because what the institution defines as “loving dialogue” is inherently condescending. By entering the dialogue, I accept the implicit proposition that our human worth and our status as children of God are questionable and must be proven.

Every time I point out what “Paul really meant” or expose the stupidity of those creation-equals-heterosexuality arguments, I unconsciously agree to the notion that straight people have the prerogative to twist Scripture into their image and to twist us to fit. So my job becomes convincing them to twist it in ways we can live with.

When I present evidence of the hypocrisy, unfair power structures, and patterns of privilege in the institutional church, I buy into the assumption that straight people rightly possess the power to judge who we are, what place we have in the church, and what our “lifestyle” ought to look like. I become merely a supplicant before their bench.

So I am done with dialogue!

From now on, my conversations must grow from a foundational truth: We are all equally children of God. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, straight, and otherwise-defined—we are all equal siblings in God’s family. In the church we are all equal members of the body of Christ.

Those are not debatable questions. They are *settled reality*.

We are all equally children of God; so any discussion of sexual morality first assumes that sex, pleasure, and desire are good for *all* God’s children. We are all meant to express our sexual lives in ways that honor the image of God within us. Where sex is concerned, we journey together

lings.

Mohandas Gandhi famously said, “We must be the change we wish to see in the world.” Although he was not a Christian, he gets closer than most to following what Jesus teaches regarding the realm of God. Reign of God? Kingdom of heaven? I personally like the wording in the Gospel of John:

DONE WITH DIALOGUE

John Linscheid

to discover the ways of living sexually that bless us personally, bless each other, and bless our community.

Jesus is the *way*, the *truth*, and the *life*. Our *journeys* must be *authentic* in the manner in which we *live* them. I want to live the way, the truth and the life—not argue about whether I should be given an opportunity to experience them in the first place. These gifts are no one but God’s to give.

So I leave the institution’s “loving dialogue” behind. I want to leave behind even my little lectures to “them” about “their” straight power and privilege. I want to stop pointing out “their” sins. I do not even want to play the youth-suicide card or hit “them” over the head with the damage caused by forcing same-sex oriented people into heterosexual marriages. My personal favorite was detailing leaders’ failures to live up to their own ideals: enough of that! We are all equally children of God and equal members of the body of Christ. I must quit running guilt trips on my spiritual sib-

“eternal life.” For Jesus, eternal life is not just a future reality. It is not life *after* death. It is not even some hope to work toward someday. For Jesus, eternal life is a present reality. It is life lived from God’s perspective. It is a new community and a new world order breaking in. It lovingly—and persistently—lives side-by-side with the old reality. Steadily it grows, crowding out the old empires. Eternal life means being the life by which God re-creates the world.

Even in confrontations, Jesus did not “dialogue with” Caesar’s representatives or the Temple authorities. He did not wait until he could convince them to change the way they ran the social, political, and religious structure of their day. He started a community of disciples living differently—living eternal life now.

Many of us who are gay, lesbian, straight, allied, transgender, and otherwise-defined are already living eternal life now. Look at the BMC web site. It is not oriented toward saving an old church, but toward nurtur-

(continued on page 10)

*A picture of the labyrinth may be found by clicking “The Labyrinth” link on the left side of the page at www.seas.upenn.edu/~linsch/JLpage.htm.

WHY I CHOSE BMC

Maggie Miller

After making the decision to leave my comfortable life in Goshen, Indiana, for a year of volunteering with BMC in Minnesota, I hoped I had made the right decision. The move to Minneapolis was a big enough change, but re-immersing myself in the Church of the Brethren and Mennonite communities would take even more adjustment. Having grown up in the Church of the Brethren, I felt I knew my fair share about the church and its members. Yet I was eager to learn more. I saw little hope, however, for lgbt acceptance within the church I knew.

Sadly, before I got to Manchester College, I wasn't even aware there were lgbt youth in the Church of the Brethren. This demographic was a secret I came to uncover—and rejoice in—only through subsequent interactions on a Brethren college campus. Discovering them was a true blessing for me, and I was able to continue my own coming out because of their support. With this in mind, I came to BMC determined to help make life easier for other young lgbt Brethren and Mennonite individuals.

However, since starting to look deeper into the beliefs of the Church of the Brethren and Mennonite Church, I have found numerous instances of

what I see as “false” support for lgbt individuals. I regret not having read statements regarding homosexuality from the Church of the Brethren and Mennonite Church earlier in my life. It would have helped during my college years to know that the Church of the Brethren proclaims that it will “extend its Christ-like comfort and grace to homosexual and bisexual persons by advocating the right of homosexuals to jobs, housing, and legal justice,” as claimed in its 1983 Statement.

Unfortunately, the Church so far lacks any action to reinforce claims such as these. During my first year at Manchester College, when hate crimes and other challenging events threatened my and my friends' well-being, this “Christ-like comfort and grace” would have come in handy.

In my work with BMC, I hear of young lgbt members of the Church of the Brethren who are increasingly pulling away from the church, and I cannot help but think, “Well, why not?” These individuals are bombarded with the Church's contradictory message that young people truly make a difference in the church, and yet lgbt persons are an undesirable burden. Forcing young people to ignore their lgbt identity in order to fit in with the church is



BMC Volunteer Maggie Miller (center) gathered with other long-term volunteers at the United Church of Christ Partners in Service retreat on the Isle of Palms, South Carolina. The UCC and Lutheran Volunteer Corps have been sponsors of BMC as a volunteer placement site. BVS and MVS have yet to lend their support.

an offensive reality occurring in far too many Brethren and Mennonite churches today. The church that abandons its lgbt youth is ignoring a creative, energetic population that possesses many gifts the church sorely needs.

Today we seem to be on the brink of a movement within the Church of the Brethren and Mennonite Church in which young lgbt people and their allies are personally and publicly questioning (and even at times rejecting) their faith traditions because of the way those traditions deni-

grate lgbt individuals. If the lgbt community continues to be subject to the dichotomy of personal support and public shame from fellow members of the Church of the Brethren and Mennonite Church, I fear youth will be a majority of those choosing to leave the church. I have always been proud of the Church of the Brethren and admire the Mennonite Church for the value they place on listening to our youth. For the sake of the future, it is time that the church took that value more seriously. •

Many Stories, One Voice Conference

The Institute of Welcoming Resources, of which BMC is a member, announces Many Stories, One Voice, an ecumenical conference to celebrate and further the welcoming movement. Scheduled for September 4-7 in New Orleans, Louisiana, the conference will gather individuals across racial, theological and cultural lines for celebration, inspiration, community-building, and to plan actions that will further the welcoming movement. An opportunity to participate in a flood-related service project in New Orleans through RainbowCorps, a program of More Light Presbyterians, is also available two days prior to the conference start. For more information about these exciting events, contact the BMC office or go to the website of the Institute for Welcoming Resources at www.welcomingresources.org.

Maggie Miller is the Kaleidoscope Coordinator for BMC. She grew up in Northern Indiana and graduated from Manchester College in 2006 with a degree in Sociology and Gender Studies.



Learning to trust the experience of one's own embodied self is more difficult for some than others, particularly when there is ongoing negative cultural feedback. But despite being wounded by communities of faith and family members, many within the lgbt community "know what they know," that God is abundantly present in each and every one.

It was during the Love Feast observance within our small gathering of lgbt and straight allies when the reading of the traditional words "this is my body" was interpreted in the uniquely Brethren way of embodying the community of faith. I stood speechless and amazed by the power of those words for the inclusiveness of Christ's Body. How we have treated the Body of Christ over the 300 years of our Church of the Brethren history reflects some remarkable stories of empowerment as well as some less-than-loving moments of disease and dis-memberment. But in our seeing and hearing over the course of Church of the Brethren history, we know what we know: that most of our congregations are still not safe places for lgbt "Brethren"; that ministry gifts among lgbt "Brethren" are not affirmed; that reasonable requests by BMC for display space at Annual Conference continue to be denied; and that a provision from the 1983 paper on human sexuality that calls for ongoing dialogue has been effectively shut down.

Nevertheless, I read with much interest the January 2008 issue of "Messenger" to relearn the beginnings of our denominational history. As I reread the story of the first baptism, I noted that it was a stroke of genius to not disclose the name of the person baptizing Alexander Mack in the Eder River. While I am

KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW

Martha J. Shaak

"See what you see, hear what you hear, and know what you know."

aware that the imaginative drawings of this event show two men in the water, my mind's eye pictures a woman exercising this ministry function, because when straws are drawn, 3 women out of 7 persons (Alexander would have been exempt from the draw) are pretty good odds. This re-imagining would place a woman acting as first pastor in this newly formed organizational experiment of the church. Think how the inclusive definition for the word "Brethren" supports this possibility. But, we know what we know. Denominational history bears out the diminished standing of women, especially women clergy, in many Church of the Brethren congregations.

There are other retrograde experiences. One, which came to me through the stories of my great-grandparents and grandparents, gave voice to the difficulties of whites washing the feet of blacks in some of our churches south of the Mason-Dixon Line. That then led to the building of "separate-but-equal" churches. As a child visiting in both these churches, I saw what I saw: that the church buildings were anything but equal. I trust that new consciousness-raising of our multi-culturality will call us to truly turn away from our exclusive behaviors. Again, we know what we know: that as the Body of Christ, when we deny or diminish others, we deny and diminish Christ himself.

It has been a disappointment

to follow the history of BMC's requests to the Program and Arrangements Committee for display space at Annual Conference and their consistent denial, despite the 1983 Annual Conference call for study and dialogue as the denomination's approach to "clarifying the church's response to homosexual persons." It is probably fair to say that shutting down dialogue and denying BMC exhibit space will not lead to any clarification; it certainly will and does diminish the Body of Christ.

Throughout our history, the Church of the Brethren has struggled with issues of how to be a just community within an unjust culture. In that history, our members have variously called upon scripture both to support and oppose sexist oppression of women in the church, racial segregation, and a repressive heterosexism. Currently, we also need to sort through our position on illegal immigrants, the xenophobic response and what to do with the foreigners in our midst. If we have learned anything from our communitarian exegetical process, it is that we "Brethren" cannot completely agree on what the bible says. We can't even agreeably disagree. So if we are the People of the Book we claim to be, how can we employ the Jubilee vision as an "interpretive framework" to gain clarity on the church's response to homosexual persons? It might be helpful for us to consider a time

in Israel's history that is parallel to our situation in the Church of the Brethren.

As we celebrate 300 years, we look back on the rich traditions and history of our denomination and count them as blessing, but we also raise questions about what it all means today and what our contemporary "Brethren-Christian" response should be to a changing culture both inside and outside the church. Following the exile, Israel was in need of re-envisioning itself. Was it time to hold fast to the old ways even though as a Persian province they would be exposed to dangerous foreign influences? Some said "yes" and claimed that God's law called them to purity, holiness, and separation from the world. Others agreed that it was time to welcome the strangers in their midst, living into God's call for them to be a blessing to the nations.

The prophetic word from Isaiah for this time was "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths...I will give in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who...hold fast my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (Isaiah 56:1-7)

Frederick J. Gaiser, Old Testament Professor at Luther Seminary of St. Paul, unpacks the text along these lines of thought: Isaiah threw open the doors setting himself against bib-
(Continued on pg. 10)

CONNECTING FAMILIES

Who are we?

Ruth and Jay Martin

At the 1988 BMC Convention in Toronto, several attendees started talking about the powerful effect BMC had on their lgbt childrens' lives. Recognizing the need for a support group of parents with lgbt children, these parents formed the nucleus of a new planning committee for the first gathering of Brethren and Mennonite parents and supportive persons that came to be known as Connecting Families.

The first Connecting Families gathering was held at Laurelville Mennonite Church Center in southwestern Pennsylvania. The gathering was held

Connecting Families provides support for families with lgbt members.

annually at Laurelville for several years until a church staff member, uncomfortable with the group, caused the Laurelville Center to stop allowing Connecting Families to meet there.

Since the beginning, the focus of Connecting Families has been to be a support network for Brethren and Mennonite persons committed to providing mutual support for families with lgbt members. Supportive persons from other denominations have also become involved with Connecting Families and have found in it a supportive, accepting refuge.

Connecting Families intentionally respects the various places attendees are in their spiritual journey and in their pilgrimage of understanding lgbt issues. The gatherings are created to be a safe, non-judg-

mental place for all to speak or to remain silent, and confidentiality is respected for attendees who feel they require it.

As a group, Connecting Families finds ways to engage and educate Brethren and Mennonites so they can understand and accept families with lgbt members. Each weekend Connecting Families converges, a different resource person is selected to provide education and inspiration. Over the years these people have included therapists, pastors, theologians, and professors. These weekends also include time for families to present their experiences of learning about and becoming comfortable with their lgbt family member. These welcome times of sharing are an integral part of Connecting Families.

The annual retreats of Connecting Families offer opportunities to share, meet others, be together as a family, and to worship. Participants include parents, lgbt individuals and couples, siblings, children, spouses, friends, and other supportive persons. These retreats can sometimes feel like a family reunion as attendees frequently re-connect with long time friends and meet new ones.

Some of the more compelling reasons attendees appreciate gatherings include being part of a supportive community for a weekend, renewing friendships, making new friends, and worshipping together. There is also the special joy of seeing parents who attend for the first time feel accepted by the group and leave the weekend with confidence and peace. Seeing that transformation, from the

(“Welcoming” cont. from pg. 1)

tatively scheduled for 2008, with the potential of others being added:

June 6-8 in LaVerne, California
September 19-21 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

October in Goshen, Indiana

November in Washington, D.C.

The training has been designed specifically with congregations and their leaders in mind. You will explore topics which will help you to become a more effective leader in working with congregations on issues related to human sexuality and gender identity for the purpose of helping a congregation discern God's call to become more welcoming and inclusive, particularly of lgbt persons.

The training is supported by a grant from the Arcus Foundation to a coalition of the Affirming Disciples Alliance Inc. (GLAD—Christian

Church: Disciples of Christ); Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists (AWAB—American Baptist Convention & Alliance of Baptists); Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Interests (BMC); and Welcoming Community Network (WCN—Community of Christ). However, anyone from another denomination is welcome.

Registration and additional information related to the trainings is posted on the Institute for Welcoming Resources website (IWR is an ecumenical group of which BMC is a member) at www.welcomingresources.org. Click on National Field Organizer Trainings—Toward a Welcoming Church. Registration forms and information are also available on the BMC website, www.bmcglbt.org. •



BMC Canadians from Winnipeg joined the Minneapolis Welcoming Church Training in February 2008. Front (left to right)—Kristen Freed, Val Warkentin. Back (left to right)—Melody Chepil, Eric Stutzman, Ervin Warkentin, Jacob Quiring, Matt Wiebe

time of arrival to the time good-byes are said, makes Connecting Families a valuable part of so many lives. •

Jay and Ruth Martin have lived in Lancaster PA, for the past 20 years and are active members at Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster. They have been closely

associated with BMC since its inception. Jay recently retired from the Philadelphia Museum of Art where he was Conservation Administrator. Ruth worked in nursing supervisory and administrative roles. Their story is included in Roberta Kreider's book, "Together in Love." They continue to work to find ways to include and support lgbt persons.

MEET ME ON THE MOUNTAIN

Shawn Kirchner

Inspired by the film “Brokeback Mountain,” *Meet Me on the Mountain* features original country and bluegrass songs by BMCer Shawn Kirchner and performed by top Los Angeles musicians. Combining the brilliance of bluegrass and the soulfulness of country, Kirchner’s music follows the heart-breaking movie’s story line of a relationship between two men in the American West.



Meet Me on the Mountain was a two-year project of composer Kirchner, who also performs on the CD. “I was blown away by the power of that movie,” says Shawn, who responded musically by penning the album’s songs. “It was a first for me in several ways—my first time writing country and bluegrass songs and my first

time writing songs for characters other than myself.”

For the CD, Michael Geiger brought together a diverse group of musicians to record the album. The band includes fiddler Gabe Witcher (who played on the “Brokeback Mountain” soundtrack), star session player George Doering on guitar, Dave Stone on bass, and the legendary Tommy Morgan, who played on such famous tracks as the Carpenter’s “Rainy Days & Mondays”, and Paul Simon’s “The Boxer,” on harmonica.

“I’m very excited to share this project,” Shawn says, “Which was truly a labor of love for all involved.” •

Why the Church NEEDS LGBT People!

Mark your calendars for the Connecting Families Weekend on April 18–20, 2008! This year’s gathering will take place at the Antiochian Villiage in Bolivar, Pennsylvania. The theme is “Welcome Home: Why the Church Needs Sexual Minorities—a Biblical and Pastoral Vision for a Way Forward,” and features Weldon Nisly, pastor of the Seattle Mennonite Church, as the resource person.

Connecting Families welcomes families, friends, and supporters of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, as well as lgbt persons themselves. The weekend is intended to be a safe, relaxing weekend for sharing stories and common concerns regarding sexual orientation issues as they affect our families, friends, churches, and ourselves.

For more information about the weekend, contact the BMC office for Rose and Bob Moyer. A brochure and registration form can be downloaded from the BMC website at www.bmclgbt.org.

Guest speaker Weldon Nisly is a pastor of Seattle Mennonite Church, a Benedictine Oblate, and founding member of a Mennonite-Catholic group called Bridgefolk. He was a member of a Seattle Interfaith Peace Delegation to Israel and Palestine in January 2008

BMC Happenings

Congratulations to Dean-Stephen Kauffman of Lincoln City, Oregon, for being named the Coastal AIDS Network Volunteer of the Year. Stephen was also reelected to a two year term on the Board of Directors of the National Head Start Association (NHSA), and can occasionally be spotted walking the halls of Congress in Washington, DC, advocating for Head Start.

Sharon and Calvin Neufeldt were married on September 22, 2007 in Kingston, Ontario before a gathering of affirming family & friends. BMC’s Shannon Neufeldt presided over the ceremony and delivered an outstanding service, while Svinda Heinrichs offered a powerful performance of music. The couple would like to thank the BMC community for the use of the famous BMC Ontario quilt at the wedding and for the ongoing support that has been such a meaningful part of their relationship.



Celeste Kennel-Shank earned a master’s degree in reporting and writing from the Medill School of Journalism in Evanston, Illinois, in August 2007. In January she began putting her training to use as assistant editor of *Mennonite Weekly Review*, which is based in Newton, Kansas. She will work from Chicago, where she lives with her partner, Josiah Groff. They will celebrate their first anniversary of marriage on June 16.

Jacob Kraybill received second place in Goshen College’s annual “C. Henry Smith Peace Oratorical Contest” for his speech titled “Unpacking the Issues: Gay Marriage in America.” The contest was established in 1974 in honor of Smith and his academic contribution as a Mennonite historian and professor at Goshen College and Bluffton (Ohio) College. To see a clip of Jack Kraybill giving his speech, visit this month’s “Outspoken links” at www.bmclgbt.org.

Outspoken is always accepting announcements for the “Happenings” column for upcoming editions. Please send any events, announcements, achievements, photos, etc. to bmceditor@hotmail.com.

What does BMC mean to you?

Outspoken would like to hear stories about how BMC has affected your life for an upcoming article. We’re looking for stories about how BMC changed your life, helped you through challenging times, or made a difference to you or someone you know. Please send your BMC stories to bmceditor@hotmail.com, with “BMC stories” in the subject heading. Feel free to attach digital photos if you are so inclined!

ing a new realm of God among us.

At Germantown Mennonite Church where I attend, and other congregations like it, gay-straight distinctions no longer apply. If someone raises the issue, eyes roll. Been there; done that; got over it.

More than a decade ago, Ken and I led a few retreats on the theme "Rites of the Gay Male Spirit." We left apologetics behind and through ritual and reflection invited gay men to rediscover the image of God within them. At one event, seven mud-covered, naked men spontaneously danced up from a pond like re-created Adams in a new Eden.

From now on, I want to dance out of that mud rather than get stuck in the muck of the institution's pointless debate. Striving to prove our worth and acceptability exhausts me. I used to think I could do both—dance in God's light and dialogue with the devil's darkness. But the dialogue just sucks the dance out of me. No more.

I have been addicted to the dialogue for a long time. It gave me a rush—but it cannot feed

my soul. Old habits die hard and I may find myself backsliding from time to time. But I will leave the dialogue behind.

I want to reawaken to that New Creation that I sensed in those workshops that Ken and I once led. This year, when Randy, Ken, some friends, and I gather at our Vermont cottage, I want to hear how gay life is becoming eternal life for each of them. I want to find out what God is teaching them in their sex and sexuality and everyday lives.

When I return to Philadelphia, I want to continue to live the truth of my own gay existence. I want to witness my lesbian, bisexual, straight, transgender, and otherwise-defined friends living their truth around me. No more dialogue. No more defining things by two-sided discussion. I hunger for mutually curious and encouraging conversations. Let us explore, at new depths, the way God is working in and among us.

I want to dance beyond the old divisions. I want to dance the way and the truth with *all* my sisters and brothers and siblings. I want to live eternal life right now. •

John Linscheid and Ken White, his partner of twenty-five years, are active members of Philadelphia's Germantown Mennonite Church. Together with their friend Randy Newswanger, they are exploring queer spirituality, sexuality, and community.

Kaleidoscope Coordinator Position

Applications are now being accepted for the Kaleidoscope Coordinator Position at BMC. This is a volunteer position whose responsibilities include coordinating support and advocacy outreach to Mennonite and Brethren LGBT youth and young adults, empowering LGBT organizing on college campuses, developing program and resources for high school youth and youth advisors, and assisting with general office work. This offers a wonderful opportunity to travel, promote justice, and make a difference in the world. Room and board, a monthly stipend and health insurance are provided. The position will be available in September, 2008. Contact Carol Wise at bmc@bmclgbt.org.

lical legislation that argued otherwise. Like Jesus' famous construction, "You have heard it said, but I say to you," Isaiah speaks with authority to radically reinterpret or even abrogate a previous divine word. The Eunuchs who were previously denied admittance into the assembly of the Lord (Deuteronomy 32:1 and Leviticus 21:18-20) were now welcomed and given an everlasting name that was considered better than sons and daughters. Was this a suggestion for each person to do their own thing? That anything goes? Absolutely not! The promise in its new, life-giving radicality remains steadfastly within God's established covenant with Israel. "Maintain justice and do what is right." (Isaiah 56:1) Eunuchs and foreigners are to observe Torah and confess their faith just like other Israelites. The prophet provides us with a relevant metaphor, an interpretive framework, to move us beyond legalities and rules to a new perspective of divine grace as gift. What a wonderful way to re-imagine the inclusive nature of God's Kin-dom!

Gaiser further makes the point that, "in the eyes of the prophet, it is not a matter of eunuchs and foreigners being allowed into a community that is whole in itself and now condescends to let in some who are not like them. Rather, God is gathering others to the outcasts of Israel. The Israelites can accept the inclusion of others because they know themselves to be outcasts and sinners, welcome in God's house, because of who God is and what God has done, not because of their own righteousness. There is no 'we' who magnanimously admit 'them'; there is a community of outcasts who together recognize their common need of unde-

served grace."

So for us, what might a reversal of dispossession look like in the Jubilee year of 2008? How might the Church of the Brethren hear the words of Isaiah and understand the context of post exilic Israel? When earlier understandings might now stand in the way of God's vision for our future, might God be calling the church to a new understanding and a new vision? Here is my partial prayer list for the Church of the Brethren in this Jubilee Year:

- Restoration of human worth and dignity for all persons
- Restoration of all voices that have been silenced
- Symbolic return of real estate upon which the LGBT exhibit space might rest
- Call for a healing of the denominational Body, celebrating the diversity that is the Body
- Divest ourselves from the role of judge, instead proclaiming the Year of the Lord
- Recognition that important action has to occur in the places of power from within our denomination—in Jubilee, it is the rich and powerful who return worth to the marginalized and diminished

Surely you can add to this prayer list from your own experience, for each of us knows what we know. But as Don Kraybill reminds us, "It is not enough to sit and ponder the Jubilee's theological beauty. We must act." •

Martha J. Shaak, of Myerstown, PA, is an ordained Church of the Brethren minister from the Atlantic Northeast District and a graduate of the TRIM program.

(“Reading” cont. from pg. 1)

and who seeks its highest good through me.

I first studied Genesis 19 not out of love for the text but out of a drive to survive. Though the story doesn’t have a thing to do with committed relationships like mine with my partner Mike, it speaks very powerfully to me as a person of privilege in America.

In the story, angels who look like men show up at Lot’s house in Sodom, and Lot does what is required by his faith and the rules of community; he takes them in and feeds them. As they are eating, there comes a loud knock on the door. When Lot goes out, he sees the men of the city standing around his house.

“Bring those guys out here,” they say, “so we may know them.” Scholars have argued about the Hebrew for “know” used here, but the context makes it clear that the men of Sodom intended to use one of the oldest tools of war to make sure those visitors to their city—and anyone else like them—knew they were not welcome. They intended to rape them in public.

There’s a story that is almost the mirror image of this in Judges 19–20, only the city is called Gibeah. Same scenario—strangers are taken in by the householder and the men of the city show up demanding that they be turned over to them. The householder refuses, but does precisely what Lot did—he offers his daughter to the men.

Unlike the men of Sodom, the men of Gibeah accept the householder’s daughter, and they rape her until she dies. They throw her dead body up on the steps. The householder cuts her up in twelve pieces and mails one piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. The tribes are so incensed at this horrible act of injustice that they dispatch twelve armies to wipe Gibeah off the map.

The sin of Sodom is not homosexuality, and the sin of Gibeah is not heterosexuality. Their sin was the same: gross mistreatment of the stranger, the person not known or understood, and the horrid use of rape as an act of war. These were hate crimes, crimes perpetrated in order to send a message to everyone remotely like the victims—you are not welcome. And for these sins, Sodom and Gibeah were removed from the earth, but not from our history.

Sometimes it’s hard to take the Holiness Code of Leviticus 18 and 19 seriously. Are you going to give up eating shrimp and pork, wearing wool coats with cotton pants, and playing football in order to prove you’re a good person? All those things are on the list of proscriptions that includes me lying with a man as with a woman.

There are a lot of people who want me to live up to the Holiness Code, and I understand why. I understand the desire to live as a reflection of the love of God in a world that wallows in

the dark misery of sin. I hear the teacher’s command to the Israelites wandering in the desert to set themselves apart from the idol worshippers by not wearing the kinds of clothes the Canaanites wore, by not eating the local foods, or touching the dead skins of the unclean pigs that must have seemed nasty, abominable to sheep herders. And I surely understand a rule against copulating with homeless boys taken in as temple prostitutes by the priests. Good children of Abraham that we are, we wouldn’t want to do the things that might cause us to be mistaken for those who recognized any God other than the one true God.

What I don’t understand is what any of that has to do with my love for my partner.

Most of the denominations that purport to represent Christ are in thrall of a great idol called the unity of the Church. They are heaping before it the bodies and souls of your lesbian and gay sisters and brothers in an attempt to satisfy what cannot be sated. While over and around us weeps the God who requires only justice and mercy as acceptable sacrifices.

I turned to Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians.

Ancient Rome was full of temples to fertility gods and goddesses. In those temples, priests copulated with adolescents in hopes of ensuring good harvests and growth in populations threatened by disease and war. The lives, the feelings, and well-being of individual children were sacrificed for what was perceived to be the common good, and in the process it became a commonplace of the priestly life to take part in orgies that, if they were not good for the children, were pleasurable indeed for the adults. To leave that part of the story out of our study of Romans 1 is intellectually lazy

and spiritually life-threatening for our lesbian and gay neighbors. But explanation of Paul’s writings in that context, though scary and provocative, offers us the chance to speak words of real hope and reconciliation to a nation obsessed with sex and talking about sex in every venue except church.

How badly America needs to hear the message of hope through Christ expressed in I Corinthians 6 and I Timothy 1! As Mel White has written, “Paul shouts across the distance, ‘You are breaking God’s heart by the way you are treating one another.’”

I pray the church won’t fail to preach those sermons and share those insights in Sunday school and in home Bible study. At the same time I pray the church will help people understand that those texts don’t say a word about my loving relationship with Mike.

I know how much easier it is let people think the Sodom story is about people like me when it’s really about empire and war and a lot of things ministers don’t want to talk about when they make their living in small towns in the Heartland.

I know that since 90% of pedophiles are men who abuse girls, and that since it is our neighbors who make pornography one of the largest industries in America, it is easier to let folks think Paul was only worried about homosexuality.

But I must finally be true to my calling and ask us to live deeply in the texts that are before us. I urge us to be true to those texts and to live into our tasks as pastors and teachers, because the stakes are high. Our neighbors are desperate for guidance, and if we fail to teach them what these troubling texts are really about there will surely be others willing to do the job in order to accomplish their own ends. •



Harry Knox, a graduate of Lancaster Theological Seminary, is director of the Religion and Faith Program of the Human Rights Campaign Foundation in Washington, DC.

This article was excerpted from Mr. Knox’s opening remarks for a debate with Dr. Michael Brown in Charlotte, North Carolina, on February 14, 2008. For the full transcript, click the “Outspoken” link at bmcgbt.org.

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



*BMC
Remembers
Lawrence King*

Carol Wise

On February 12, Lawrence King, a young 15 year old junior high student from Oxnard, California, was shot in his school's computer lab, and later died. Larry, who identified as gay and sometimes dressed in a "feminine" manner, was killed by a 14 year old classmate who apparently was so abhorred that Larry had asked him to be his valentine that he brought a gun to school, entered the classroom, and shot Larry in the head. The killing is being considered a hate crime by law enforcement officials.

Lawrence King, his assailant, and the thousands of young lgbt kids who have just gotten the message to be very careful about coming out or displaying any type of gender non-conformity, are all victims of a tragic homophobia. As a community, BMC expresses our sorrow, wishes Lawrence the peace that was denied him in life, and calls upon all of us to work for an end to the violence and harassment that lgbt students regularly experience at school. •

BMC List

BMCList is an unmonitored listserv that is a resource of the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests (BMC). Many opinions are expressed in BMC Link postings; however, no one posting represents the views of BMC, the BMC Staff, or the Board of Directors. BMC provides this cyberspace for LGBT persons and their supporters. The hope is that conversations on the Link will be respectful and honest with a sense of heartfelt concern and care. To join, see the detailed instructions or send a blank email to bmclist-subscribe@yahoo.com.

UPCOMING EVENTS

April 18-20, 2008
Connecting Families Weekend
Antiochian Villiage
Bolivar, Pennsylvania

Delegate Assembly and
Summit 08
Winnipeg, Manitoba

June 6-8, 2008
Welcoming Church Training
La Verne, California
More to come!

July 12-15, 2008
Church of the Brethren
Annual Conference
Richmond, Virginia

July 7-10, 2008
Mennonite Church Canada

October 10-12, 2008
BMC Gathering
Pokagon State Park, Indiana

For more information on these events, or to place your own "Upcoming Event," contact BMC at bmc@bmcglbt.org or call (612) 343-2060.