

THE RIGHT TO BE SPIRITUAL

Honoring a Ravenous Spirit

Patricia Nell Warren

The other day, a young lesbian sent me an email about her struggle to reconcile her love of God with her love of women. She felt lost, totally confused. The only “spiritual people” that she knew were church folks who hate homosexuals.

After I answered her, I got to thinking about all the “rights” being argued today. The right to marry. The right to attend school in safety. The right to express yourself. The

Many gay people have ravenous spirits because they have been rejected by so many religions.

right to have rights. But how about the right to be spiritual?

After coming out in 1974 and publishing my first novels about gay life, the questions rankled deeper yet. Why do same-sex attractions persist in spite of the efforts by some religions to stamp out homosexuals? I became convinced that religion (as jury-rigged by homophobic Western males) would never meet my spiritual

needs. Religion didn’t matter anyway. I was out, and my new self-honesty was enough, wasn’t it? So I buried that young spiritual part of myself, only to discover as the ’80s neared, that it was still there and had gotten strangely sad and sick. Writing got hard, and I didn’t have much to say.

The discovery shocked me into re-confronting the old questions.

Unfortunately, our notions of what is “spiritual” are shaped by culture, politics, and the media. In the ’50s, “spiritual” was radio broadcasts by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen and bestselling books by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. By the late ’60s, “spirit” wore beads and peace buttons in pop music and film. By the ’70s and ’80s, news shows and cable made their big break into power. Today, as TV virtually rules our lives, the most muscular spiritual presence is the born-again variety.

For many Americans, “spiritual” has become more and more identified with a strident,

controlling brand of media Protestantism. Many, like my young correspondent, feel forced to deny their need for spiritual healing because of this scary association.

Yet ultra-right-wing Protestants are not the only ones who would say that we must pray their way. The sermonizing spir-

it of our times has infected other belief systems as well. In recent years, some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people have felt unwelcome in so many denominations that they began investigating the spiritual ways of native peoples. And though some native cul-

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Artist Rodney Harder



Hosts Kelli Beingsesser and Gail Newell

Fresno Hosts BMC Fundraiser

Art aficionados from the Mennonite Brethren community in Fresno, California, snapped up the paintings of New York artist Rodney Harder, raising over \$10,000 last October for BMC. The fundraiser, held at the home of Gail Newell and Kelli Beingsesser, was the second such event for BMC in 2006 in which the art of Mr. Harder was the main draw. Earlier in the year Harder’s art brought in over \$3,000 at a BMC fundraiser in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The evening event was attended by BMC Executive Director Carol Wise, from Minneapolis, Minnesota, and BMC Board President Zandra Wagoner, from Claremont, California, as well as Harder and his partner Tony Gray, from New
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Living With the Questions

Randall Friesen

Twice recently I was asked questions, provocative ones, by people very dear to me: Why do I care so much about the Mennonite church when it doesn't seem to want me? and Based on my sexual orientation, how could I possibly believe I am a Christian? Could these people be right? Am I ridiculous to want to be part of a church that doesn't seem to want me? Does being gay preclude me from being a Christian? *Are they right?*

One gift of being gay is the unique opportunity we get to question aspects of our lives we would never consider questioning were we straight. With those questions come answers that often lead us to greater ways of thinking and richer opportunities. Questions about how we love and build family have given us the chance to create unique and rewarding relationships. Questions of sin and spirituality have allowed us to express our holiness in deeply creative and fulfilling ways.

So I ask myself: Why do I care so much about being Mennonite? and Am I a Christian?

I had been away at college for a few years when I attended an MCC Sale and Quilt Auction in Fresno, California. As I walked into the auditorium filled with smells of Mennonite foods from my childhood, shouts of the auction, and colors of the quilts, I realized that these were my people. It may not have been a theological connec-

tion, but it was a cultural one. Here was a place I *belonged*. No matter what I do or where I go, I am a Mennonite, and these are my people.

So I claim my Mennonite heritage; the food, the music, the people, the language. As a church, they may decide to keep me at bay or to ignore me or "discern" me into a stupor, but they cannot take away my Mennonite card!

Many gay/lesbian Brethren and Mennonites who were born into this culture continue to crave it deeply, even as they distance themselves from it. They may become Episcopalians or MCCers or metaphysicians or even "un-churched," but the DNA does not forget. And it is groups like BMC that create valuable points of convergence, places where we all—churched and unchurched—can revel in fellowship.

As for the question of my Christianity, that may take more contemplation. I never used to doubt my Christianity, and I've always valued my spiritual sensibility and relationship with God. But with so many Christians telling me I cannot be a Christian and a church that doesn't seem to be able to decide how to deal with me, I will probably continue grappling with this question. The beauty is that the more I question, the stronger my convictions and the more I learn. Who knows where I'll end up, but it will be a paradise, I'm sure!

Letters to the Editor

I wanted to compliment the newsletter staff for its fine August publication. The newsletter is pleasing to the eye and contains some very worthwhile information. The editorial, *First Do No Harm*, was excellent. Within the context that you work, your approach to scripture is appropriate and necessary if the various denominations are to move forward with any sort of inclusiveness. I appreciate the work you do for the lgbt community within the ecclesiastical confines of Anabaptist traditions. If Jesus of Nazareth were present today, he would be at your office, helping stuff envelopes. Carry on the good work.

Mike Short

Thanks for the excellent newspaper that just arrived in my office. It is very well done and very informative for those who consider lgbt issues as important within our faith traditions. Keep up the good work.

In all reports that I have seen of the BMC witness at [Church of the Brethren Annual] Conference, our office is not included as one who participated by closing our exhibit area. We did indeed do this, and we will continue to offer support to BMC as we are able.

Phil Jones, Director

Brethren Witness/Washington Office

You are doing a great job with *Outspoken!* I am glad to see the emphasis on encouraging gays, lesbians, and transgenders to claim their places in the Church.

Whether we are gay or non-gay, our stories are important. Listening with love and care to each other empowers us to live with joy and with gratitude to our Creator who has called all divine creation "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

For too long, the voices of our glbt brothers and sisters have remained silent in order to accommodate the phobias and prejudice of dominant people. Too often we allow our lights to be snuffed out by the opinions of others. I pray that *Outspoken* will give new courage and hope to all who work and long for the day of full inclusion.

Roberta Showalter Kreider

I picked up a copy of the March issue of *Outspoken* and really enjoyed the articles of John Linscheid as well as Melanie Morrison. How often does *Outspoken* appear? I would like to receive the issues in the large print. Does this paper also appear on the web site?

Jacob T. Friesen

Editor: Outspoken is distributed three times a year, through subscription and online. Though we do not offer a large-type edition, downloading the newsletter from the website would allow you to increase the size for easier readability. For more information about Outspoken, visit www.bmcglbt.org or contact the BMC office in Minneapolis at 612-343-2060.

Several hundred lgbt and allied people gathered in Toronto at the end of July to worship, learn, reflect and have fun together. *Together in Toronto* was a collaborative effort between BMC, Lutherans Concerned North America, and Affirm United of the United Church of Canada.

Lively workshops, engaging speakers, awesome musicians, moving worship experiences and lots of playtime, all made for a great conference experience. Some afternoon time was spent in denominational meetings. BMC devoted one afternoon to a town meeting that featured the presentation of a new mission and vision statement. The next



Being Together in Toronto 2006 Convention Report

years of service to BMC, and Shannon Neufeld and the many BMC Canadians who worked on the conference were recognized for all of their hard work.

Irene Monroe, a plenary speaker from Harvard University, challenged us to move across boundaries and deal seriously with issues of race, sex, and class. "United we can stand as a prophetic people, but divided we fall as petty people," she said.

Martin Brokenleg from the Vancouver School of Theology described the four human needs that we need to help create for each other: to know we are significant, to feel

competent, to have personal power, and to feel a sense of our own virtue. He offered encouragement in the struggle and suggested that God's greatest act

is the fact that gay people have any faith at all.

BMC was well represented by Anita Fast, President of BMC Canada, who reflected on a hermeneutics of foolishness, and by Katie Hochstedler, who challenged participants to actively work for change within the church. In

addition, Svinda Heinrichs offered her talents as a musician; Will Burnfield and Harry Wiebe led a group of lgbt families; Victor and Rebecca Fast met with allies; and Tim Dueck, Mike Lee Poy, Maggie Perquin, Katie Hochstedler and Carol Wise each led a workshop; and Ralph McFadden provided chaplaincy services. Shannon Neufeld, Thom Brown, Jay Thiessen, Mike Lee Poy, Svinda Heinrichs, Jane Reble, Will Burnfield, and Paul Hawkins all had major conference planning roles.

The aliveness of a vibrant city and the passion of the gathered community made for a terrific experience. A special

thanks to Shannon and Jay for their massive efforts in making it possible! •



Ralph McFadden and Jim Vaughn

afternoon was spent celebrating BMC's thirty years of existence and bidding on auction items. Greg Lichti was honored for his



Maggie Perquin and Kirsten Freed

Brethren Test Congregational Disciplining

The South/Central District of the Church of the Brethren broke with decades, perhaps several hundred years, of church practice and polity in order to punish any congregation that "allows a same sex covenant service on church property or with the assistance of church ministerial leadership." At a special district meeting in October, delegates voted for sanctions that

include a three-year moratorium upon the congregation's participation in elected or appointed district positions, including seating delegates at district conference.

The action was in response to district tension with the Manchester Church of the Brethren, a publicly affirming congregation that is a member of the Supportive Communities Network

(SCN). Interestingly, the district's action is itself out of harmony with the denomination's 2004 Statement on Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions. Before passing the denominational statement in 2004, delegates at Annual Conference specifically removed a recommendation that included the sanctioning of congregations. •

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.bmclgbt.org and click on "Donate Now." Contributions may also be sent to the BMC office at PO Box 6300, Minneapolis, MN 55406. Thank you for your generous support all year long!

A Happy Anniversary

Cindy Lapp

Twenty years ago, on June 22, 1986, the Hyattsville Mennonite Church officially welcomed Jim Derstine, the first openly gay member. That decision was the culmination of a six-month study about sexuality, an intense process that included guest speakers on the biological, psychological, emotional, biblical, and theological perspectives. There were sermons, lectures, small group discussions, panels, reports, and extended adult education and worship times. Sally White remembers that “the church was always filled and persons struggled to understand how God creates us in such fearful, wonderful, and different ways.”

The story is well told in the recent 50th-anniversary book, *Taking Root in Strange Soil* by Gene Miller, much of it told in Jim Derstine’s own words. Jim says that at the end of the meeting where he was inducted into membership:

Marian Franz slipped a note to me, penned on the back of a sheet containing the evening’s agenda saying “Someday, (thank God) we will look back on this evening and wonder at our narrowness back in 1986 that has put

you through the trauma and stress leading up to your membership. The Church in past years struggled with the question of slavery and whether or not women could vote (or preach). Thanks for your patience. It’s a Christian model. I love you. It’s an honor that you chose us and welcome us also.” After adjournment I was warmly greeted by many present, including those who I believe could not in good conscience vote in favor of my membership. I had felt God’s presence in me and in the spirit of the meeting.

The statement that was affirmed and that led to Jim’s membership was like many church statements; with a nod to the left and a nod to the right (though they were not so far apart in those days). Strangely enough there is no mention of gay and lesbian sexuality. While twenty years later we might laugh at this “non-statement” as one person called it in 1986, it does contain a truth to which we cling.

On some of these questions and choices we are not (or not yet) in full agreement. Our basic covenant of faith impels us, when there are differences, to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” and to labor together “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:3,13) We are resolved in

this spirit to go forward.

This commitment to moving forward in unity has a price. We have not all moved together. Some have chosen to leave over the years. Allegheny Conference, for example, did not make this commitment to move together with us. This was a congregational commitment we made, sadly not one that extended beyond our walls.

As a welcoming congregation we will always have new issues to approach and new people to meet and understand. The issue of sexuality has been only one of many issues with which the congregation is working. Over the years we have come to understand this as less an issue of sexuality and more an issue about hospitality. And so we continue to open our doors to the homeless and hungry, those seeking political asylum, those who do not have a community with which to worship, and many more.

In 2006, there are only a handful of people left in the congregation that attended that historic meeting twenty years ago. While the congregation may be a very different group of people, our welcome feels stronger than ever these days. It is with joy that we celebrate this anniversary of opening our doors and membership roles for the past 20 years. What will we celebrate in 2026? •

Cindy Lapp is currently pastor of Hyattsville (Maryland) Mennonite Church.

Church of the Brethren Annual Conference

BMC, Womaen’s Caucus, and Voices for an Open Spirit (VOS) submitted a joint application for exhibit space at the 2007 Church of the Brethren Annual Conference. The letter to the Program and Arrangements Committee read, “The over twenty-year exclusion of BMC from official booth space has limited the denominational discernment process and has effectively denied the deep-felt Christian convictions of the many members and supporters of BMC...If you find that you cannot grant BMC an exhibitor’s booth, then VOS and Womaen’s Caucus will not be able to accept individual booths.”

BMC thanks Caucus and VOS for their willingness to risk privilege (VOS and Caucus have both enjoyed booth space in past years) in order to stand in solidarity with their LGBT sisters and brothers. Decisions related to exhibit space have not yet been announced.

The Program and Arrangements Committee ignored the joint application and elected to reject a BMC booth, but offered booth space to VOC and Caucus. Citing conscience, both VOS and Caucus declined the privilege.

Local Event Grants Available

BMC wants to help you to get active. The Community, Outreach, Resources, and Education Committee (CORE) of the BMC board is offering Local Event Grants to encourage you to plan and host activities in your area. If there is a workshop, conference, concert, play, or lecture happening in your area that other BMCers might want to attend, we can help you plan and promote it. If you want to plan a camping trip, retreat, book or discussion group, workshop/training, potluck, knitting circle, fundraiser, or any other gathering for BMCers in your area, we can assist. Call us or email a proposal 4-6 weeks in advance and we can offer ideas, a little seed money, and let others know about it. If you want to plan something but need more ideas, contact the BMC office.

A PECULIAR PEOPLE

Queer Christianity and the Foolishness of God

Anita Fast

The early Anabaptist movement—considered the radical fringe of the Protestant Reformation in 16th century Europe—understood that a Christian calling was a call to live an alternative to the mainstream culture, an alternative which may indeed be threatening to the social order. For them, the Christian life meant living by rules other than those the world provided, a conviction which ultimately found expression in tightly knit, often sectarian communities distinguished by adult baptism, a refusal to swear oaths, and the rejection of the sword. Submission to worldly authorities was encouraged only insofar as it did not contradict obedience to God. Their vision was that of a visible church of committed disciples who took seriously their regeneration in Christ. In many ways, this put them outside of what was considered acceptable, and led to years of brutal persecution and martyrdom.

Even as their presence became tolerated by certain countries, they rarely assimilated into mainstream Christendom, and became known as the

“peculiar people”—a label they willingly accepted and which certain Anabaptist groups, such as the Amish, still carry. However, being peculiar need not only be limited to those who are living sectarian lives but may take many forms.

Contemporary Mennonites have in many respects integrated into society, yet most continue to understand the Anabaptist vision as one which ultimately challenges the trappings of this world. In both scholastic and general Mennonite sentiment, the idea of the church as an alternative society remains a regulative principle of Mennonite theology and identity.

This has not, in most cases, resulted in communities willing to challenge the mainstream addiction to hetero-normativity, but it does provide a strong foundation on which to build a queer theology which continues to take the radical claims of the gospel seriously.

I believe that the Bible itself calls all of us to be queer and that, by queering the Bible, the Bible in turn queers us. We begin by looking at some key New Testament scripture which

supports what I call a “hermeneutics of foolishness”—an interpretive lens which looks to the places of scandal and degradation as sites of God’s revelation and presence, and questions the ways human discourse define reality.

The Scriptural Basis for a Hermeneutics of Foolishness

“Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but for those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Cor. 1:20-26)

In this biblical passage, Paul sets up a contrast between God and the word of the cross on one hand, and the wisdom of the world on the other hand. That the cross appears to be an unlikely place for the power and wisdom of God to be revealed is only because God’s wisdom is not of this world, but appears to be foolish to those who continue to live with the eyes of the old creation. In Paul’s second let-

ter to the Corinthians, he emphasizes that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17) As such, those living “in Christ” are part of that new creation and are called to live with the knowledge that the powers defeated by God’s act no longer rule the world.

Although Paul did not go this far, by implication his teaching leads us to question the world’s wisdom about sexuality and gender. In fact, Paul did begin to see the implications in his letter to the Galatians where he states that “In Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female...” (Gal. 3:28) Indeed, taking some of Paul’s teachings to their logical conclusion, we find that we are able to use Paul “against Paul,” so-to-speak!

A hermeneutics of foolishness looks to the places in the Christian gospel where worldly power and knowledge are put into constant crisis.

In the New Testament gospels, we read about how demons are the first ones to recognize Jesus and the Christ while the disciples walk around confused. We listen to the teachings of a rabbi who preaches about an upside-down kingdom where the first will be last and the last, first; who eats with out-

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Anita Fast studied theology at the Vancouver School of Theology, where she is now Registrar. Her thesis work explored the development of a Queer Theology from an Anabaptist/Mennonite perspective. She is finishing up her 4th year on the Board of the Brethren/Mennonite Council of LGBT Interests just in time for her and her partner, Kelly, to welcome the birth of her first child.

Often people invite me to a church where, although the mindset may be less of a literalist approach, it is not exactly what we as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people might refer to as “open and affirming” or “welcoming.” Adhering to the more conservative aspects of Christian theology, the general consensus among the congregation is that while they extend an invitation to people of all sexual orientations, they do not approve of those who have chosen to embrace their sexuality as a gift of God rather than perceive it as a weakness for which they are in need of forgiveness.

I responded to one of these invitations recently with a polite, “No, thank you,” and the person inviting me asked why. I responded that I was very comfortable in my own church.

They responded with the comment, “I think you’d feel comfortable; we’re actually pretty tolerant of gays and bisexuals and those with alternative lifestyles.”

I asked what was meant by “tolerant.”

They responded, “Well, all of us are sinners anyway, so who is to judge who is the worse sinner?”

I responded that, “I don’t want to attend a church where I am ‘tolerated.’ In the church I belong to I am not ‘tolerated’ but accepted and affirmed as a unique creation of God.”

This led to them saying, “Oh, so you just want a church that helps you to feel justified in your sins?”

About that time I saw where the conversation was leading and said, “I do not feel comfortable attending a church that calls something natural for me a sin, regardless of whether they welcome me inside or not,” and politely excused myself.

Beyond Tolerance

John H. Campbell

What is the difference between “tolerance” and “acceptance?” When I hear the word “tolerance” the impression it conveys is “I don’t like you, but I feel obligated to be nice to you and make you feel welcome, because it’s the right thing to do. I cannot stand certain things about you and feel that those things elevate me to a level superior to yours. But, to keep the peace, I will put up with you.”

“Acceptance” elicits a very different and far more positive response. It says to me, “You are different from me, and though there are things I may not understand, I see you as a child of God and equal to me. Though I may not be like you,

attempt to make them feel distant from God. It is a phrase that essentially implies that a lgbt person is unacceptable to God and, therefore, an unworthy candidate to be a true follower of Christ. I see no “love,” least of all the kind of unconditional love I equate with and feel from God or read in the words of Jesus.

Consider the intent of conservative and fundamentalist Christians with their phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin.” The “love” of the first part is meant to soften the blow of the “hate” in the second. Anytime I hear this phrase, I hear the subtext “I love you, but I’m not so sure that God does,” or “I love you, but you disgust me,” or

*Whatever your course may be,
it is time to choose it, and it is time to follow it.
What is it that you are called to do
as a faithful child of God?*

I support your rights, feelings, and identity as much as I would my own.” In response to the question “What Would Jesus Do?” I feel he would choose the latter as the more loving option.

To tell another that their very nature (which includes their sexual orientation or sexuality) is inherently sinful and therefore “against God” has nothing to do with what Jesus meant by “love.” Though Christians who spout the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” may in fact mean well, in most cases they use the phrase as a very cleverly disguised way to preach intolerance and homophobia.

This phrase seems used to deliberately create internalized shame within lgbt people in an

even, “I love you, but you’re still going to hell.” Many times it is an apologetic—someone saying, “Hey, I love you but the Bible and my church says I can’t approve of you, so I must add this ‘hate’ part to make sure I’m right with God.” At its worst, I have heard those who utter it seem to do so with an attitude of obligation to remain consistent with the loving nature of Jesus while clinging to their own personal hate for the lgbt person. In other words, “I hate you for who you are, but Jesus says I have to love and not hate, so I will add ‘love’ to the phrase to cover up that fact.” But is love out of obligation rather than sincerity really “love”? Would someone say, “I love my

wife/husband, but I hate who he/she is because I don’t understand him/her?” I don’t think so.

There is a direct relationship between non-understanding, fear, and hatred. We often hate those things that we fear, and we often fear that which we do not understand. Most people fear lgbt people because they do not understand what it is to be a lgbt individual. They hear the false rumors spread of us being child molesters or promiscuous. That we are out to “recruit the children.” They hear that we are somehow “psychologically damaged goods” and that our sexual orientation or sexuality is a manifestation of something “wrong” internally. They hear that we tear apart families. That we make unwanted sexual advances. And, in extreme cases, they believe we are going to cause genocide to occur in the human race. Yet the facts prove all of these to be false ideas of a fearful person.

“Love the sinner hate the sin” perpetuates the idea that we deserve to be called “sinners,” because we live in a way that is true to ourselves. The only difference in those who say “God hates lgbt people and finds them an abomination” and “love the sinner, hate the sin” is that the former is outright rejection and the latter is an attempt at tolerance. The latter also perpetuates the outright condemnation and personal, non-Biblical prejudice while being able to hide behind the all too common defense of those who do not take ownership of their prejudice by saying, “The Bible says you’re a sinner, not me. The Bible says I am supposed to love you, but I cannot love what you do” and placing the Bible in a place above the unconditionally Loving nature of God we found in Jesus. And often it is used as a “stealth”

means to get Christians who have lgbt loved ones into a congregation where the teaching is that those who they love and accept as lgbt are in reality being condemned without outright saying it.

But, real love, love that comes from God, is a true feeling, not an obligatory disclaimer to attract more sensitive churchgoers who may have lgbt friends and family. And saying, “we love you, but we hate what you do, and God is not pleased with you,” only serves to keep the glorious realm of God’s love for us, just as we are, hidden from lgbt people who embrace their sexuality while honestly seeking God.

The Christian church has in many respects come a long, long way in manifesting God’s love on an even deeper level, lessening discrimination based on gender and race. Yet, discrimination based on sexual orientation and sexuality in general remains one of the final barriers to the way Jesus would want the church to be. Until there is a move beyond mere tolerance to acceptance of all people, I sometimes feel that His spirit feels a great sadness at the fact that many are being made to feel devalued just because some are allowing fear, not understanding, to keep some out of knowing God’s kingdom.

The effort at tolerance in the statement “love the sinner but hate the sin,” is not acceptance. My sexuality is a part of who I am, and although it may be different, the honest and ethical way I choose to express it is not a “sin” to be hated. While tolerance is a step, it falls sinfully short of the spirit of unconditional love Jesus was all about and that God seeks to bless all of us with. •

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BMC Mission and Vision Statements

Mission Statement

The mission of BMC is to cultivate an inclusive church and society, and to care for the Mennonite and Brethren lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and allied community.

Vision Statement

For our community we will:

- Visibly advocate for justice on behalf of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (lgbt) people;
- Reach out to lgbt persons and allies who share a connection with Mennonite and Church of the Brethren heritages;
- Provide opportunities for lgbt persons and allies to nurture relationships, celebrate community, and build networks of solidarity, empowerment, support, and care;
- Provide intentional support and advocacy for lgbt youth and young adults;
- Connect people with lgbt-positive theological and spiritual resources;
- Empower individuals and groups to advocate for justice and work for change;
- Acknowledge the limitations of our worldviews, and commit to broadening our understanding and appreciation of human diversity.

For the church we will:

- Be a persistent voice for an open and inclusive church;
- Call congregations to be actively open and inclusive communities;
- Hold denominational leadership accountable to their denomination’s vision of social justice, expecting fairplay, honesty, integrity, risk, and courage;
- Develop denominationally sensitive theological, biblical, and spiritual resources;
- Provide educational opportunities for our denominations and related educational institutions.

For society we will:

- Participate in the broader social justice movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people by building alliances with other religious and secular organizations who share similar concerns;
- Responsibly advocate for religious practices and policies that support democratic visions and an inclusive society;
- Intentionally connect our experiences of injustice with other forms of social discrimination and commit ourselves to resist oppression in all its forms.

Three-Year Goals

2007–2009

- Each year identify one region to strengthen local networks through BMC education, fundraising, advocacy, and support.
- Develop resources that address changing needs of lgbt and allied youth, young adults, and their families.
- Develop a diverse funding base where 50% of the budget is pre-committed and sustains a 4% annual growth.
- Increase SCN communities by 10% annually.
- By 2009, 75% of SCN communities will annually report an activity that supported the mission of BMC.
- Partner with at least 3 non-Brethren/Mennonite organizations committed to lgbt justice.
- In each of the three denominations, cultivate at least one new relationship with a group that has not had a history of supporting lgbt justice.

On Mennonite Acceptance

Jeanne Clark

I think Mennonites are in somewhat of a state of flux. Although I am not highly connected to the broader church, I can speak for my congregation's experience. What I share is from my perspective of having been on our church board during the difficult time we had.

My congregation, Chicago Community Mennonite Church, formerly Oak Park Mennonite, was disciplined in the mid-1990s. We lost our right to vote on the conference level (Illinois Mennonite Conference). It was a terribly damaging experience for our congregation. We survived, in part because of God's love and mercy, and also because the General Conference continued to support and welcome us.

A number of years ago, our congregation began a process of quiet reconciliation. Then, a year or two ago, the conference voted to reinstate us to full voting membership—with no change in our policy of accepting anyone who is a Christian, who seeks to be Mennonite and to follow Jesus (or something to that effect).

I think there were a number of changes that allowed this to happen. I think the battle with our congregation and a number of other congregations did some significant damage to the Illinois conference. I know some of what went on in some congregations in order to force the vote had

some negative repercussions. At some point Illinois Mennonite Conference had a change of leadership. I'm not entirely sure all of what happened, except to say that at least one minister who had worked hard against us, has become a friend. I know our pastor at the time, Phil Waite, worked very hard at building bridges in his wonderfully loving and diplomatic way.

I think that congregations and ministers who read the Bible for what it means to them in the moment may continue to be against lgbt issues because the Bible was translated from a very different language and culture than ours. I think anyone who really studies Greek, Hebrew, and ancient Jewish culture, and anyone who makes even a cursory attempt to keep up with modern Biblical scholarship will begin to have at least a softening of heart and mind. At least I hope so.

I think the next big issue will be lgbt marriage. It's already on the table, because if we really love and accept lgbt folks, they should have the same rights and protections as straight folk. We either accept them (us/me!) or we don't. Accepting lgbt folk as members but not offering marriage is a tepid response.

I hope this helps. It is from a limited perspective. I'm sure people who are closer to denomination leadership will see it differently, at least somewhat. •

(“Fresno Benefit” cont. from page 1)



Display of original watercolor series created for BMC fundraiser.

York City, and *Outspoken* editor Randall Friesen and his partner Chay Yew, from Los Angeles. Much of the evening was underwritten by members of the College Community MB Church, currently undergoing a “discernment process” regarding the acceptance and welcoming of gay and lesbian people into its community.

The evening, attended by over 150 supporters of BMC, was notable for being the first time the California Mennonite Brethren community has hosted an event for BMC. Guests strolled the Newell/Beingesser

estate to view the more than forty original watercolor paintings available for sale or silent auction, helping themselves to a full buffet dinner and wine bar, and dining under the stars in the spacious backyard.

Midway through the evening, Gail and Kelli welcomed the guests to their home. Rodney Harder, a Fresno native, thanked all who attended, and Carol Wise spoke briefly on the work of BMC and expressed gratitude for the sponsorships and cooperation of the Fresno Mennonite Brethren community. •

Coming Out Strong

New BMC Video

For the past eight months, Eric Kanagy from Goshen, Indiana, has been collecting stories from individuals connected with BMC. These interviews have been developed into a new DVD titled *Coming Out Strong* that is now available from BMC.

Six Mennonite and Brethren individuals from both Canada and the US reflect on their lives as lgbt people within the BMC community, and one parent offers her perspective on what it means to be part of BMC. This is a wonderful resource for congregations, Sunday school classes, youth groups, parents, individuals just coming out, or anyone who would like to learn more about what it means to be part of the BMC lgbtq community.

You can preview the interviews from *Coming Out Strong* at the www.bmcclgbt.org. To purchase a copy, contact the BMC office. BMC is asking for \$5 to assist with shipping and production costs.

Transforming Faith

A Transgender Witness

LaVonne Blowers

After attending a two-day conference last October in Corvallis, Oregon, called *Transforming Faith: A Transgender Witness*, I learned that:

- People with gender identity variations can be found in every socioeconomic group;
- Gender identity issues usually emerge before puberty for genetic males and throughout the life cycle for genetic females;
- Individuals with gender identity issues are no more likely to exhibit mental disorders than the general population;
- Gender identity, whether normal or divergent, appears to be irreversibly fixed by the time the child begins school;
- There are no known “cures” for GID;
- Gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct but interrelated aspects of an individual’s character;
- Diverse gender identity is expressed across a wide spectrum of behaviors, including cross-dressing, drag, transsexualism, androgyny, bi-gender, transgenderism, third gender, she-male, etc. A transgender

individual through a lifetime may express several of these identities.

Transforming Faith was intended for those interested in inclusive ministry and was presented by The Community of Welcoming Congregations, The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry, and The Religion and Faith Program of the Human Rights Campaign. Its goals were to educate, inspire, nurture, and celebrate the gifts of transgender persons within and among communities of faith. As a non-lgbt person, I came away from the conference more aware of transgendered folks and with a passion to be more involved in inclusive ministry.

The conference presented speakers such as Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, a workshop presented by the Northwest Gender Alliance, and a documentary “Call Me Malcolm” with a discussion by Rev. Malcolm Himschoot himself. I participated in wonderful discussions and friendships which

formed around meal times.

More Light Presbyterians, a ministry of the Presbyterian Church USA, has published information on becoming acquainted with the transgender individual. I found this to be the core of my understanding of transgendered persons.

Throughout the weekend, I met and talked with several transgendered people, including Susan whom I sat with at dinner. Susan was personable and fun to visit with. She had just finished her ordination in the Methodist Church and was in the process of looking for a ministerial job.

Members of the Northwest Gender Alliance shared their own personal stories of how God and faith impacted their lives and how it helped or hindered coming to terms with being transgendered. Brenda shared her experiences in the office and found a surprisingly positive attitude with her male dominated workplace during “her change.” She said, “I am the same person, my wrapper just changed.”

Charles/Sheryl was a cross dresser who loved each of his/her genders and felt each was a best friend to the other. He said, “With Sheryl, I am true to myself. With Charles, I am true to myself. This is a part of my complexity.”

Another statement that stayed with me was, “My body is a pallet, and I can do what I want with it as long as I don’t hurt anybody.” Linda was a cross-dresser who was not interested in physically changing genders at this time. She was married and had a fami-

ly, loved his wife, and had a landscaping job where he was happy to be male. But at other times, she just wanted to be female and was content to be both genders he/she felt led to be.

I was charmed by these people who had varying experiences of acceptance within their own families. They were honest and sincere, and just wanted to be accepted for the way they were. I instantly felt a fondness and wished I had more time to get to know them. I certainly have a better understanding and perception now when I see transgender and cross-dressers in public.

Transsexuals experience great stress during and immediately after gender transition. This is understandable considering that the larger community treats them with scorn and hate. Most unfortunate is that this often happens in the very faith communities from which they were raised. Not only does this deprive them of offering their considerable spiritual gifts to their communities, but also deprives their communities of the rich insight transgender can offer.

The documentary “Call me Malcolm” enlightened me to this. Malcolm’s journey took time, but to help others, he conversed with school teachers, high school and college friends, pastor, and family over several years time to gently help them adjust to his change.

I am grateful for *Transforming Faith*. Each new learning experience gives me energy to work toward a welcoming community in my own congregation. •

The Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender Ally College Conference February 16-18, 2007

Calling all BMC college and university students in the Midwest! The University of Minnesota will be hosting the 2007 Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender Ally College Conference (MBLGTACC) in February in Minneapolis. College and University students are encouraged to attend this invigorating and informative annual conference. BMC is happy to host any Brethren or Mennonite student interested in participating, and willing to assist with registration costs. Start planning now to bring yourself and your college lgbt group to Minneapolis for a great conference.

LaVonne Blowers is a nurse in Portland, Oregon, where she lives with her husband Joe. Active in the Portland Mennonite Church, LaVonne has a son, Seth, and a daughter, Carrie, partnered with Marjorie.



(“Right” from page 1)

tures are more open-minded about homosexuality, even here we sometimes encounter an “ouchy-ness” about who decides who has the right to what.

Many gay people have ravenous spirits because they have been rejected by so many religions. They responded to these rejections by creating their own churches and spiritual practices. In the early '70s, I remember my emotions when visiting the Church of the Beloved Disciple, a tiny Gothic marvel with stained-glass windows in downtown New York City. I could feel the hunger that created this

desert when he met an old Bedouin praying at a tiny mountain spring. Exhausted by the carnage and hardships of desert war, by the spiritual denial and devastation that he had experienced as a well-born closet case in British society, he heard the old man's words with searing clarity: “The love is of God, and from God, and towards God.”

Yet, however deeply we gay people may feel our spiritual challenges, we have had a severe image problem. The media never shows us at prayer! If it did, the public would have a radically different perception of us. Indeed, we are the only minority in America who are perceived

healing by painting golden Buddhas. I wish they could see the 15-year-old drag queen, dressed in her best, drawing herself up to her full height and telling me with great dignity, “I've realized that I am a very sacred thing.”

No wonder my young correspondent feels “lost.”

A dangerous journey faces her as she struggles to separate what is “spiritual” from what is “political.” But she has a right to make that journey.

A spirit is standard equipment for every human, along with a body, emotions, and a mind. And that spirit hungers to be nourished as much as body, mind, and emotion do. Vision isn't a special gift given to an elite few. Nor is it something that you automatically get by joining a church or going to a sweat lodge. Young people hunger for spiritual growth as much as they do for sexual growth. This is how the cultists of every variety get their hooks into kids—by pandering to kids' need to belong, to feel the first rushes of vision.

Having rights may be a collective concept, but each of us gets—or doesn't get—our rights

as an individual. Like snowflakes, no two human spirits are alike; and, like a snowflake, each spirit follows its own unique course as it rides the winds of storm. Spiritual challenge is terrifying precisely because it is personal and lonely. Yet we homosexuals have a right even to this stark and extreme testing because it can tell us who we really are.

Today every human spirit faces the challenge of breaking through that wall of media images that money and politics have built around us. Beyond that wall is a vast vista of possibility. Prayer can heal anyone, regardless of gender, race, ethnic background, or sexual orientation. Even atheists could be said to pray when they talk to themselves about their lives; their very denial that a deity exists must be ringed round by a sacred fire of protection for their right to deny. No one achieves anything positive in life without some kind of conviction about one's own destiny.

I hope the young woman who wrote me can give herself that right to celebrate and heal her own spirit. Isn't that what “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” really means? •

Gay and lesbian people have had a severe image problem.

The media never shows us at prayer!

place of prayer and the rage that gay people could not pray openly in “real” cathedrals. Gay-created spiritual movements are many—global growth of the Metropolitan Community Church has been paralleled by growing gay New Ageism, complete with gay men pounding on drums and lesbians working with crystals.

In gay literature, few scenes of spiritual awakening are as intense as the one in T.E. Lawrence's memoir *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, as he tells of that moment in the Middle Eastern

by the media as having no spiritual life whatever. I wish news cameras would catch the glow on a lesbian ex-nun's face as she speaks of Mary, whom she still loves and holds high as a luminous ideal of powerful woman.

If only a nationwide TV audience had a closeup on a 16-year-old Latina lesbian's earnest eyes as she told me, “It was my faith in God that helped me get out of gang life and stop drinking and doing drugs.” I wish they could see the 17-year-old prostitute, a Thai immigrant, express his yearning for self-respect and



Patricia Nell Warren's most celebrated novel, *The Front Runner*, has sold an estimated ten million copies worldwide and been translated into ten languages. In 1994, Warren completed its sequel, *Harlan's Race*, and in 1997 released *Billy's Boy*, the third book in *The Front Runner* series. Now a popular columnist, Warren writes about gay pioneers in sports history for *Outsports.com* and on the politics of AIDS and public health in *A&U Magazine*.

Live Out the Call

Those who yearn for a church that is genuinely welcoming of lgbt people and who seek company for this justice journey are invited to gather in San Francisco to share in a conference entitled *For Just Such a Time: Living Out the Call*. The conference will focus upon the dynamics of resistance and faith as they are expressed in the book of Esther. It promises to be rich in worship, insight, laughter, and hope.

The event will begin Saturday morning, June 30, and conclude with lunch on Sunday, July 1. Transportation options for the Mennonite Church USA Assembly in San Jose will be made available. The co-sponsorship of BMC, SCN, First Mennonite Church of San Francisco, and MennoNeighbors offers a depth of talent and resources that will be well utilized. Information related to the conference will be available at www.bmclgbt.org.

(“Peculiar” from page 5)

casts and casts out the powerful; who redefines the transcendence of God by embodying God’s immanence; and who ultimately questions humanity’s addiction to violence through a commitment to love and non-violence even unto a brutal death on a Roman cross.

All of these themes in scripture manifest this God whose power is manifest in weakness and whose wisdom is truly hidden in the foolish. As such, we might learn to look for God in the fools and the foolishness of this world and in those who, like the gender transgressor, call into question the solidity of identity and raise questions about cultural assumptions and assertions about the appropriate roles we must play.

A hermeneutics of foolishness reveals the fluidity, the temporality, and the ultimate absurdity of the categories human wisdom creates to order our society.



Jim, Joe and best man, Doug

James Snelling and **Joe Ernst** of Torrance, California, celebrated their holy union at their son’s home in Portland, Oregon, on September 10th. The Rev. Sylvia Egan (UCC) and Rev. Kerby Lauderdale (COB) officiated. The majority of their children, spouses, grandchildren, and friends witnessed this glorious occasion.

Having a hermeneutics of foolishness as the lens with which we view the world challenges us to live in the knowledge that the powers that govern the world are not definitive. Institutions such as marriage; liberal doctrines of the true/inner self; discourses about what a true woman, a true man, or a good citizen is; cultural definitions of what it means to be successful, free, or powerful; all fall under the critical eye of a hermeneutics of foolishness which is necessarily critical of all human knowledge claims (including and perhaps especially those made about God).

In the very conceptual apparatus of a point of view, there are implicit power dynamics at work. Regardless of what our human perspective is, our categories of male and female are non-categories in God’s eyes. “Hetero-sexuality” is revealed as yet another power relation of the old creation from which we are freed—not to become “homosexuals,” but to live lives for God regardless of what sort of human relational configurations are in power or vogue at the time.

A hermeneutics of foolishness does not look to the Bible for a template of human sexuality, but looks at how the scripture reveals ways in which the reign of God is ushered in through human relationships and situations which would be considered immoral, despicable, or “queer”—either in their original historical context or in our own.

For example, Sarah engaged in the common cultural practice of giving one of her servants,

Hagar, to her husband Abraham so that a son might be born into the family. The same sort of scenario takes place between Jacob, his two wives, and two concubines. Although our modern western culture would not seek to emulate these relationships, God uses them to further the work of God in the world.

Even in the New Testament we find reference to ways God works through relationships that society deems illegitimate. In Matthew’s genealogy, you’ll notice that the list noting male ancestry names four women—Tamar, who seduced her father-in-law in order to get pregnant; Rahab, the prostitute; Ruth the foreigner; and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, who was caught in a web of adultery and murder with King David.

Even more profound than the fact that women are mentioned at all, is the fact that what is common to all these women is their involvement in extraordinary or irregular sexual unions which were scandalous to outsiders. Could the point of Matthew be to point out that, in spite of Jesus’ own scandalous birth to an unwed mother, God has worked before and is working still within relationships which society deems illegitimate? All of these families are a far cry from what conservative Christianity wants to call the “traditional family,” yet the con-

cern of God is never to streamline such queerness into some irreducible norm, but rather to work within all of the many fallible human attempts to live relationally in our world.

When modern questions of sexuality and gender are removed from our examination of biblical relational configurations, we find a vast array of situations in which God was present and active in places where a human, variable, and perishable morality found them unacceptable; we see a family which is mutable, which changes over time and place, and which is ultimately at risk of becoming an idol should it usurp the place of Christ in our lives. •

A queer Christianity...

- is one in which we are all called to live as the odd ones, the peculiar people—unafraid of being called foolish by the wisdom of our age;
- does not seek to make the peculiar “normal,” but rather questions the category of “normal” all together and invites people into the challenge of creating new ways of relating and new possibilities for community;
- follows Jesus the Fool, who flexes the rules, challenges the boundaries of a group, and refutes the categories which define, separate, and oppress people (in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female);
- does not merely echo the values and virtues of decent people, but calls them to rethink from scratch many basic assumptions about God and matters “religious”;
- is a threat to society in so far as society chooses death over life; cruelty, violence, and oppression over love, peace, and justice.

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Simple, Basic Rights

Miriam, Vancouver, Wash.

Shelley and I have been together for more than four years. We were “legally” married in the state of Oregon for a short period of time in 2004. But because our marriage is no longer considered a legal binding contract, we are not afforded the same rights as married heterosexual couples. [Editor’s note: For six weeks in Spring 2004, officials in Multnomah County, Ore., issued marriage licenses to same-sex couples. The Oregon Supreme Court invalidated these licenses in 2005.]

In the past year, Shelley and I have both undergone major surgical procedures, but because we are not allowed to utilize the Family and Medical Leave Act, we have both struggled with obtaining time off from work to care for each other.

When Shelley underwent surgery, I asked my boss if I could take the day off to drive her to the hospital and wait while she had surgery. His response was, “Doesn’t she have friends or a neighbor who can take her?” I had to argue the fact that she was my partner and I considered her my family, and therefore expected the same rights that were afforded the other married couples in the office. He reluctantly allowed me the time off, mainly because he didn’t feel like a lawsuit.

Gay and lesbian couples are asking for simple, basic rights that are afforded to all citizens of the United States.

I can’t wait for the day when equal rights will be had by all Americans.

“The suffering that gay and lesbian people have endured at the hands of religion is incalculable, but they can look expectantly to the future for vindication. Scientific facts, after all, are a stubborn thing. Even our religious beliefs must finally yield to them as the church in its battle with Galileo ultimately realized. But for religion, the future might be ominous. Watching the growing conflict between medical science and religion over homosexuality is like watching a train wreck from a distance. You can see it coming for miles and sense the inevitable conclusion, but you’re powerless to stop it. The more church leaders dig in their heels, the worse it’s likely to be.”

Oliver “Buzz” Thomas is a Baptist minister and author of an upcoming book, 10 Things Your Minister Wants to Tell You (But Can’t Because He Needs the Job).

Upcoming Events

February 16-18

*Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay
Transgender Ally College
Conference
Minneapolis, Minnesota*

March 3-5

*BMC Board Meeting
Assembly Mennonite Church
Goshen, Indiana*

April 20-22

*Connecting Families Retreat
Antiochian Village, Pennsylvania*

June 30-July 1

*First Mennonite Church of
San Francisco Conference
San Francisco, California*

More info at www.bmclgbt.org.