

Supportive Communities Network Presentation to Leadership Team
January 12, 2017

1) Opening Statement

Brian Flory, Beacon Heights COB, Fort Wayne, IN

Thank you for meeting with us today. The seven of us represent a small portion of the larger group of the Supportive Communities Network of BMC. We are a growing movement of churches, universities, and church groups within the COB who believe that the gospel value of inclusion provides one way for the church to offer the message of Christ at its best, and in my humble opinion, contain some of the best and brightest clergy leaders in our denomination.

As I begin my remarks, allow me to note that our group clearly understands that the task set before the Leadership Team is broader than the matter of marriage equality and LGBTQ sexuality. We also note an obvious reality – that since the motion was adopted in response to the query on same sex weddings, there are many who will read whatever recommendation you bring, and Annual Conference ultimately adopts, through that lens.

Several months ago, our organization drafted an open letter and guiding principles to share with you. These documents were the ones that prompted your kind invitation to meet. It was our hope that these two documents would serve to help you in two ways; first, to understand more about our concerns and us; second it is also our earnest hope that these documents would provide additional information for reflection and discernment as you go about the work assigned to you by the Greensboro Annual Conference.

To my first point, as I observe the happenings of District and Annual Conference and engage in conversation with people in various parts of the denomination, I believe that there is a wide misunderstanding of what progressive Brethren believe, and more specifically, Brethren who are pastors or members of SCN communities believe. We are not here simply because we believe in the inherent goodness of LGBTQ sexuality. We are here because the core of our faith in Christ and our COB tradition has led us to these beliefs. It is our hope that our time together will serve to clarify our views for you, both from these two documents, as well as our presentation today.

To my second point, by initiating this conversation through the two documents, it is our intent to help you understand that SCN communities are committed to a broader way of doing church that actually offers a way forward for the denomination. Because that is the larger question we face – how are we going to live together? And more specifically, are we going to choose to stay

together or are we going to choose to separate? It will be a choice, by all of us. None of this is being done to us and it cannot be done for us. If it's going to work, we all have to find ways to make it work.

SCN communities recognize that there are churches, perhaps even a majority in the COB, who would never become open and affirming, much less support marriage equality. Yet we question whether those same churches would also recognize the ways in which efforts to enforce uniformity is damaging to the denominational body, as well as the many ways in which this drive to purity has wrought considerable harm and has marginalized many in the minority of the church – not just persons of LGBTQ identity, but also women and persons of non-white skin tone.

Indeed, in its efforts to bring the whole church to the center and to hold the church together over the past forty years, the denomination has repeatedly sacrificed the needs of faithful church members of LGBTQ identity and other marginalized persons in order for the church to insure that the already comfortable do not feel discomforted. When the church makes the marginalized into the 'other,' it is not being faithful to the call of Christ and it misses opportunities to celebrate the faithful ministry that is happening in our churches.

2) **BMC Oral History Project Film:** *Speaking Out – Baltimore*. Available at www.bmclgbt.org.

3) **A Call to Transparency**

Joanna Willoughby, Common Spirit COB, Grand Rapids, MI

We do not come to this table with out in fear or in secret. We are a network of supportive communities, not an organization run by a board. We have a responsibility to share our conversation with your widely and without filter. Those of us here are just a few of the many people and organizations who are part of SCN. We function through regular conference calls. SCN and BMC have developed resources that have come through reading scripture, prayer and personal stories of brothers and sisters who are living and working in this Body of Christ. We want you to use us as a resource.

The vast majority of conversations about matters of LGBTQ people have happened behind closed doors and without their input. The answer to this query must be transparent. We do not want confusion about the process similar to what we saw on the conference floor this year regarding On Earth Peace's statement of inclusion, the statement "A Way Forward," meetings afterward and then the queries that came in 2016.

We hope you share this conversation widely and look to embracing the Supportive Communities Network as a resource that is ready to help move this denomination forward.

4) Unity Comes Through Right Relationship

Kurt Borgmann, North Manchester COB, North Manchester, IN

I want to talk a little about the ideal of unity because it seems to me that the church has often offered unity as a guiding principle or a central value for our denominational life together, and not that unity isn't an important value, but I think it has often been misapplied in the service of church preservation.

So maybe the first thing to note is that unity is not the same thing as uniformity. And unity, while a high value, is not more important than the value of diversity -- nor is it the opposite of diversity.

Unity, we would argue, does not come through "sameness" but through right relationship. Unity comes when we are drawn together, not when we are forced together and certainly not when we push to the margins those we deem as "different."

Unity does not come from eliminating certain persons or categories of persons from our company so that sameness or agreement or familiarity can win the day.

If the false unity of sameness among people in terms of ideas or appearance or theology or sexual identity or whatever measure is being used at the moment to differentiate those of privilege from those on the margins -- if that false unity is what we decide is necessary in order to preserve the church, than we are not interested in that. We do not support that.

True unity can only be built through being in right and renewed relationship with one another. And that circle of relationship, that invitation to relationship, has to include everyone. And that means we have to be willing to encounter and connect with "the other."

Sometimes we have heard the language of unity and in fact what is being talked about is actually somebody's idea of purity and I think we have to be careful with our language and honest with what we mean when we say certain things. So I would encourage us to be on the lookout for purity ideals cloaked in unity language, and I would hope we would call for people to be honest about what they mean when they use the language of unity, and to be reflective about what their motives might be.

Our priority isn't unity as purity, or sameness, or preservation of privilege -- even if it seems to some that that those are the best means of "preserving" our church. Instead, the progressive priority for faithfulness and transformation lies in our relationships with those who have too long been categorized as "other" or unacceptable or less than by the church.

We want those who have often been deemed "other" to be included and respected and valued in the church. Being in such relationships, rather than endangering us, will transform us into the true body of Christ.

5) Faithful to God's Call: Marriage Directives

Rob Miller, Northview COB, Indianapolis, IN

First, thank you again for having us, I always enjoy coming to Elgin for the connection it allows me to feel with the larger church. And in case you forgot, I'm Rob, and I pastor the Northview congregation in Indianapolis, and I've been invited to reflect on marriage directives with you.

I imagine you've probably heard talk about these marriage directives, and you've probably heard why they're bad for our denomination, or how they're a rejection of Brethren values, or how they're a refusal to comply with our official Brethren position. But I assure you this is not what marriage directives are about.

And so I'd like you to think for a moment, how a marriage directive might be helpful for some congregations and their pastors.

Now let me back up a few years, because you have to know that I did not come to my convictions lightly.

I'm one of those cradle Brethren, who's been around the church for a while, and I thought I had a pretty complete picture of what my beloved CoB was about. Then, just about the time I first felt this tug toward ministry, someone who was like a brother and spiritual mentor to me began to openly discuss his same gender attractions. And it thrust me into this place of both anguish and searching for the appropriate response toward this person I loved so dearly.

I prayed daily that God would lead me toward some light, but nothing definitive seemed to come. And after months of praying, and reading, and studying my Bible, I finally determined that I had to go with love. And I still remember my prayer as I came to the end of this struggle, I prayed, "God, forgive me if I offend you in the path I have to follow." That's when it happened.

Now I would imagine that each of us in some way have had one of those God moments, when, after really struggling with something, God finally breaks through and shows you a way forward. It's that voice that's less audible than it is a sort of movement within, an unbinding, a breaking open. And what that voice said to me loud and clear was, "You could never offend me." And ever since then my calling has been clear.

What I hope you can hear me saying, is that I simply can't do anything else but follow what I wholeheartedly believe to be God's calling on my life.

And what that means for me is that, if, for following my convictions, my ordination and credentials within the CoB must be revoked, I get that, but I can't change my calling. This, to me, is not a matter of who's right and who's wrong, it's a matter of ministering to the people God has called me to serve. To do otherwise, in my heart and in my mind, is to reject God's call.

And that's where the marriage directive comes in.

Because my congregation shares my heartfelt convictions, they have a covenant with me that if my credentials are revoked for marrying two people, they will continue to employ me as their pastor.

That means my two boys, 11 and 15, don't have to worry about having to change schools because I have to find another job.

It means my wife, who loves her job as an organ transplant social worker, doesn't have to worry about having to relocate for me to find employment.

And as a family, it means not having to give up the congregation we love, just because we don't always see eye to eye with the rest of the denomination.

Another thing our marriage directive states is that I get to follow whatever pre-marital process I choose, and I promise you mine is pretty rigorous. And, it gives me the right to NOT marry any couple I don't think is serious enough about the commitment they're about to enter into.

Furthermore, this document has actually brought my congregation and myself even closer together knowing that we stand in solidarity whatever may be determined by Annual Conference. I can't explain to you how freeing that has been, and how it has virtually eliminated the underlying fear that exists within many progressive congregations. All of which has freed us up to minister with even greater clarity to this often disrespected and underprivileged community.

And for the people in my congregation who have been waiting years to find something like full inclusion and full rights within the church, they've expressed to me that this is what the beloved community is supposed to look like.

Now maybe you agree with me, and maybe you don't. I recognize you can't really say because you have to tow the party line. I get that. And I recognize that not everyone shares the same convictions as I have, and I wouldn't ask for them to. Rather, I believe

that we're all called to unique ministries with unique individuals, who are searching for a connection to God, and no calling is exactly the same.

Which is why our marriage directive lays out a plan for our congregation, counting the cost, and being willing to accept any punishments or retributions that the denomination sees fit to carry out. But we believe it stands squarely within our Brethren ethos, that we are called to stand firm in our convictions, despite what persecutions we may have to face..

6) Not Our Best: Punishments and Scapegoats

Carol Wise, BMC, Minneapolis, MN

The Anabaptist side of our denominational formation included an insistence upon a religious purity and conformity, both personal and communal, which sometimes expressed itself in punitive and harsh ways. While such conformity may have functioned to protect the community from its fears about outside or internal hostilities, it often became an end unto itself, a means to express power or to control others.

We have seen spates of this push for conformity and purity throughout our Brethren history. I suggest that they have not represented our finest moments. History, psychology, sociology and many biblical stories teach us that punitive actions are almost always damaging to relationships in the short term, and generally ineffective in the long term.

Our denominations' paper, *Statement on Peacemaking*, highlights the destruction to peace that fear and hostility foster: "Just as peace is broken when injustice and unrighteousness reign, so peace is threatened when fear and hostility exercise control. " The paper challenges us to "live creatively in hope" rather than "obeying the fear that constricts our hearts."

The past several decades have witnessed a trend towards a greater legalism and insistence upon conformity within our denomination. Paradoxically, this attempt to strengthen AC by insisting upon the rigorous enforcement of **particular** statements, has served to weaken the validity and value of AC overall. What to me has been lost in the process is the wisdom of AC. It is wisdom – Sophia, the Spirit – that brings unity; not intimidation or fear or threats.

I do not think that we can punish or scapegoat our way out of the challenges that face us as a denomination. Dwight Eisenhower said, "The search for a scapegoat is the easiest of all hunting expeditions." Targeting lgbtq people and supportive pastors, or expelling On Earth Peace, is not going to save us. We can do better.

7) Inconsistent Responses to AC Statements: A Case for Consistency

Enten Eller, Ambler COB, Ambler, PA; Living Stream COB, Wenatchee, WA

Two very different facets: both compliance with, and enforcement of, AC policies and positions has been greatly inconsistent. Forbearance has been demanded on many, but a strong drive for conformity on a few.

(Why I am in a position to speak to this... I've been a part of ten different districts, and served in pastoral roles in seven of those... and so I've been privileged more than most to experience the breadth of the Brethren.)

Obvious Examples of Inconsistency of Compliance:

- ▶ Women in ministry, including ordination and leadership
- ▶ Divorce and Remarriage
- ▶ Peace position and Military Service
- ▶ Flags in sanctuaries...

Less Obvious Examples of Inconsistency of Compliance:

- ▶ District and Denominational Support
 - Breaking covenant with wider church
 - Expect services from district/denom, and expect power, but no support (ANE=23%)
 - No pay, no vote? "No representation without taxation" :-)
- ▶ Congregational Ethics Study by congregations
 - Very very disappointing this year
- ▶ Women in leadership/training
 - Disrespect or refusal to take courses from female teachers of BTS/BAML/SVMC
 - Disrespect for female students in classes

In most all of these cases, there is a strong call for forbearance, and following conscience... individuals and congregations are allowed to follow AC positions, or not, without consequences, without (much) prejudice, without any implications.

Yet, when it comes to controversial issues such as same-sex relationships/covenants/marriage, there are great inconsistencies as to how district are responding and enforcing.

- ▶ Same-sex marriage in Shenandoah district: minister loses ordination
- ▶ Same-sex marriage in Mid-Atlantic district: minister gets letter in file, no other consequences
- ▶ Same-sex marriage in {-----} district: district trying to ignore, swept under rug
- ▶ Same-sex marriage in Pacific Northwest district, even of a minister: union is celebrated

Yet if ordination is for the entire denomination, even though held by the district, how can one district remove that ordination for all districts? (One DE from mid-west: "How dare they take

away the ordination of one of my ministers?”)

Case in Point: In my own life, I currently serve as pastor in two different congregations, one in ANE, the other in PNWD. Those two districts are at the opposite ends of the geographical spectrum... and theologically as well. If something I am requested to do in the service of the church in one district is considered worthy of stripping my ordination by the district of the other church, or vice-versa, how am I to minister? Why should my geographic location determine what is acceptable? How can the church allow incredibly punitive action in some places, while practicing forbearance in others?

Simply pointing out, there is a great fallacy in just letting districts decide their own polity. Even congregations within districts have differing views and character, and so part of the consistency needed must be broader than just leaving it up to districts to decide.

(Wiggle room... forbearance... seems one of the only ways to reach some measure of consistency of enforcement. As stated earlier, unity comes not through uniformity [consistency of belief], but through relationship [consistency of forbearance].)

In summary... cannot risk being sidetracked by any individual issue or statement of AC.

- ▶ If broad task before the AC Leadership Team is how wider church (dist/cong/individuals) response to AC statements in our life together as a church,
- ▶ then our response must be consistent, taking into account all these situations and more.

The drive to uniformity is perhaps the greatest inconsistency that we have seen.

8) A Call to End Sacred Violence

Carol Wise, BMC, Minneapolis, MN

Broad Street Mennonite Church is a small congregation in Harrisonburg, Virginia whose plain and unassuming building belies a fascinating history. The congregation has been disciplined or admonished by their Virginia Mennonite Conference at least three times in its 80-year history. The first was because the congregation shared the communion cup between white and African American members, in blatant violation of the Conferences' policy of the segregation of sacraments by race. The second was because the congregation called a woman from their midst to the ministry. In addition to admonishing the congregation, the Conference refused to acknowledge her call. The third "offense" was in 2012 when the congregation agreed to open their building to two women to celebrate their love and commitment to one another in a service of union. For this, the congregation was expelled from the Conference.

Of course, Brethren are not Mennonites. Yet we share similar tales of stumbling and harm. I personally know an inter-racial couple who could not get married in the sanctuary of her Brethren church. The struggles of women remain a sore spot. And, of course, LGBTQ people, among the most scrutinized and scorned within our denomination's history, continue to bear the brunt of targeted fear and hostility.

At their best, Annual Conference Statements and decisions have illuminated the wisdom and guidance of the Scriptures and the insights of the larger community as the church has encountered new situations and challenges. The plethora of statements is both an indicator of historical challenges and of the struggle of competing claims and diverse understandings of what God may be calling us to do and to be at a particular time and place. These struggles do not evaporate upon a majority vote, which is why Brethren have "affirmed the value of the continued existence of diversity in our communion, emphasizing unity and love rather than judgment and rejection." (1979 Biblical Inspiration and Authority.) More recently, the language of forbearance has been used to reflect a practice whereby, "We accept Annual Conference positions as invitations to agree rather than mandates to obey." Brethren are encouraged to "love and care for each other before we are called to correct one another." (2008 Resolution Urging Forbearance)

An awareness of the limitations of our thinking is probably wise because we know from some of the confessional content of various statements throughout our history that the church has not always practiced the love, justice, and healing grace that characterized the ministry of Jesus. (I think, for example, of the 1970 *Resolution on Equality for Women*, 1991 *Statement on Brethren and Black Americans*, 1994 paper *Community: A Tribe of Many Feathers*, 2007 *Becoming a Multi-Ethnic Church*, 2015 *Christian Minority Communities*, etc.)

Indeed, far too many times we have reflected the prejudices and insensitivity of the privileged, and hurt whole groups of people by rejecting their gifts, dismissing their cries for justice, diminishing their humanity, or ignoring their situations. Often in our statements, we have expressed regret at not knowing or understanding the harm that we were doing. However, there is a piece of this that feels disingenuous to me. After all, usually all we had to do was to simply ask those most affected: What did it feel like to be served communion in a different cup? What has it meant to have your call to ministry scorned? What is it like to be heralded as an abomination or worse?

So let me speak to that as a member of the LGBTQ community. For me, far too often my time in the Church of the Brethren has felt like a profound and extensive experience of sacred violence that has taken from me a piece of my soul that I know I can never reclaim. It marks me. Theophus Smith from Emory University calls sacred violence a destructive force that understands itself as salvific or saving. It targets and sanctions some of us for destruction in the name of God, or for the sake of righteousness or purity.

It is time to end this violence, not to extend it to those whose decency and compassion have led them to stand with the LGBTQ community in solidarity, ministry, and care. You have been offered a unique opportunity by the church to set a different course. For the sake of LGBTQ people and those not yet born – and we will continue to be born – I pray that you reach for the best of our tradition and move to end the systemic violence that has characterized our denomination for far too long:

- Simply transferring its centrality to the districts will not solve anything.
- Continuing to scapegoat LGBTQ people will not spare us from conflict.
- Enacting punitive regulations and threats will not heal us.

What we have been doing has not worked. It is time for a new vision. Towards that goal, we pledge our support and fervent effort.