

Fashioned in Love: Biblical and Theological Foundations for Inclusion

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Interests

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It is so good to be with you this evening. I would like to thank Bob Wyble, other members of the Lancaster Welcoming Dialogue Group, and Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests for sponsoring this event and for inviting me to speak. It is humbling, a bit intimidating and a great honor to be here. Thank you.

I am grateful to be in a room with folks who, like me, are passionate about the church and wanting eagerly to find a way through and beyond the impasse of human sexuality holding many of our congregations, conferences and denominations hostage. Which isn't to imply that I think sexuality in the church isn't important. It is. I want desperately to move through and beyond the impasse *well* so that we—as a redeemed community of gay and straight alike—can get about the work we're called to as Jesus-followers: bringing good news to the poor clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, welcoming the stranger, being Christ's hands and feet in the unfolding realization of God's Reign here on earth.

I am here because of a little paper I wrote, which—thanks to the vision and hard work of Carol Wise—was eventually published as a booklet by Brethren Mennonite

Council for LGBT Interests. It is available here tonight and is titled: Fashioned In Love: Biblical and Theological Foundations for Inclusion.

Some of you have already read it and others I hope will, so I can't or won't simply repeat that content for you this evening. Which left me confused for a time: What should I present if not the content that landed me this invitation? Then it occurred to me: This booklet has a companion piece that *hasn't* been written down. Or hadn't until now.

You see, I wrote this paper for a specific purpose. My congregation, Chicago Community Mennonite Church, in May of 2011, came to consensus on a statement of marriage practice that is nondiscriminatory. In other words, we now explicitly bless our pastor and other members of the congregation to provide premarital counseling and to marry *any* couple. After that joyous day full of tears and hugs and a rousing rendition of 606, I received several requests from same sex couples within the church asking me to marry them. With the church's blessing, and a clear sense of call from God, I was able to joyfully say yes. Our conference, Central District Conference, because of the stipulations in the Mennonite Church USA membership guidelines, began a process of reviewing my credentials. We had been open with the conference all along, and, in fact, the only amendment to our statement of marriage practice added during the full congregation meeting affirmed our commitment to mutual care and participation in CDC. Our conference affiliation is very important to us.

At the conclusion of my first meeting with the Ministerial Committee, the group charged with conducting the review of my credentials, one member commented that in our next conversation he'd like to hear more about my biblical and theological grounding for my nondiscriminatory practice of pastoring. And that comment sparked the writing of the paper.

So the companion piece that's never been written is the content of that first conversation. And the content of that first conversation was: a testimony of my own journey to this place of advocating for the full inclusion of those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender in the life of the church; and a testimony of the congregation's journey to that same place of welcome. This is what I will share with you this evening: a testimony; the *stories* that companion this biblical and theological work. Isn't that beautifully Anabaptist? A faith that is *lived*—in real, incarnate, human lives—and not just written about in some paper?

So, with no further ado... How did I get here? Let's begin with: Where did I start? I grew up in a Mennonite congregation between Goshen and Wakarusa Indiana where women were not welcome in leadership roles. So far as I remember, sexuality wasn't discussed at all. We weren't anywhere close to being ready for that conversation. If I had an opinion on the matter, it was assumed and largely unexpressed. This was crystallized for me in a relatively recent conversation with a family member. Some issues, he said, I can see points on both sides, but this one—human sexuality / the place of sexual minorities in the church—doesn't even need to be discussed. His position is mostly silent but immovable, and therefore not worth the time and energy to talk about or think through. So that's where I started: silent and immovable.

Then I went to Goshen College and was introduced to the conversation on human sexuality and the church. It had been happening in other parts of the church, I just hadn't yet encountered it. In my first year, I made many new friends, an unusually large percentage of them from Lancaster Mennonite High School. I ended up a Bible/Religion major by the end of my first year, but what I remember most from that first year were the dorm room conversations with those new friends and the public opinion board in the Union Building. I recall wrestling with the Bible that year, both

individually and communally; I recall praying that year; and opening—slowly, amazingly, cautiously, wonderingly—I began to discover that the biblical witness regarding human sexuality was far from as clear as I'd assumed.

In other words, I had a rare experience of beginning my own transformation on the question of sexuality and the church *first* through biblical study, prayer and conversation rather than through having a relationship with a gay person. So often, stories of transformation begin with an experience, a relationship, a family member or friend who comes out of the closet, but it was the early 90's and it wasn't nearly as safe to be out then as it is now, certainly not in a Mennonite institution. So I didn't know a gay person yet—Well I did, of course, but I didn't know it yet, or they didn't know it yet, or it wasn't safe enough to be out yet. I began my transformation through biblical study, prayer and conversation. My Bible/Religion major equipped me with additional biblical and theological tools that continued to shape my thoughts in the years to come. That was college.

After graduating from Goshen, I participated in the Intermenno program, a one-year work exchange program run by European Mennonites. I don't have any defining memories from my year in Germany and Switzerland related to this emerging transformation in me except that, more generally, it was my first experience of living an culture that was decidedly less homophobic than the U.S., and certainly less homophobic than my little rural, Mennonite corner of the U.S. I hadn't before experienced a culture pretty well free of fear regarding sexuality. It wasn't the promised land, but compared to the Mennonite culture I'd been born, bred and steeped in, it really was quite shockingly different. When cultural assumptions are proved to be just that—assumptions and not points of fact—it opens one's eyes to the ways in which, in this case, culture clouded theology. With that cultural stuff more fully stripped away, it

confirmed what I'd come to suspect and to know about the goodness—the blessedness—of a diversity of sexualities.

Back in the States, I moved to Seattle Washington. And it's there that I made my first good friends who were gay; some single and some in relationships. Here I began to forge friendships, hear stories, share lives with gay friends. I began in those years to more deeply and experientially learn the normalcy of being gay. Far from being an abomination—as my silent assumption had one time been—I could witness that being gay was both normal and natural.

It was also during those years that some of my good friends from college came out; some of whom had tried so hard to fit into the pervasive Mennonite culture with its fears, assumptions and expectations that they'd even married partners of the other sex. And I began to witness the pain, destruction, and harm done by a hostile church environment which had forced many gay people to deny the truth of who they were and conform to those external assumptions, expectations, moralities. In short, having not made space for gay people in the church, not having proclaimed that each one was truly created in the image of God, was directly leading to divorce, pain and broken relationships.

Additionally, my Seattle years gave me my first experience of a progressive Mennonite congregation that, despite my efforts to stay on the fringe and not get too involved, pulled me in, called me out, empowered me to be a leader and eventually confirmed in me a call to seminary. My time at Seattle Mennonite Church solidified my Anabaptist faith and confirmed my commitment to the Mennonite Church. I was finally in a congregation that could talk about sexuality but didn't feel any compulsion to limit discussion to that. In fact, the most rich and vibrant conversations I recall from those years were conversations about poverty and homelessness. I was finally in a

congregation that could embrace the *few* gay people who had found their way to the church but didn't stop there. In fact, the most controversial people I remember welcoming in those years were the homeless guys who would sometimes unceremoniously barge in during the middle of worship and cause a scene. And this congregation—gay and straight alike—began to imagine a homeless ministry in response to the people God was sending our way; a ministry that is now a thriving pillar of that neighborhood.

Seattle Mennonite Church, as I mentioned, sent me to seminary. At Iliff School of Theology in Denver Colorado, all assumptions I'd grown up with were fully topsy turvy. Iliff was the first faith community I'd belonged to where those with a restrictive understanding of sexuality were a small minority who felt silenced. On the one hand, having a silenced minority is never a good thing; on the other hand, what a relief! It was a relief for *all of us*, not just the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, though I'm sure the relief I experienced paled in comparison to theirs. In seminary, I had the amazing experience of being in a truly diverse community, working alongside gay and straight alike on issues of racism both within the institution and without, justice for native peoples, witnessing against war and the military industrial complex, traveling to the Middle East with Christian Peacemaker Teams to learn about the history and entrenched violence of that region. In seminary—in this richly diverse community of gay and straight together—I had the most profound experience of learning to pray. The study I'd done at Goshen College continued to be a good solid theological and biblical foundation on which I built.

That brings me to Chicago Community Mennonite Church, formerly Oak Park Mennonite Church. But before I carry on with my own story, I want to share with you the church's story. Because they had quite a story before I ever joined them.

I will speak in 'we' language though I wasn't there at the time.

In its very early years, the congregation was launched into the terrain of human sexuality by way of a real and beloved human being, Ray Showalter. In the early 80's, Ray, our congregational chair and beloved leader, was diagnosed with AIDS. It was only then that his wife, Ann, learned that he had led a hidden life as a gay man. Because it was the early 80's and treatments were almost nonexistent, Ray would be dead within months.

And so, it would be quite some time before "homosexuality" became an "issue" for our congregation because there was a man to love; a man to hear confession from; a man to forgive; and a man to walk with toward his death. And there was a woman to love; a woman to hear confession from; a woman to accompany on her journey of grief, loving, forgiving and ultimately grace.

Ann Showalter became our leader in those days, our example of Christ-like love: Ann held Ray's hand as he informed their adult children of his diagnosis, his hidden life and his true identity as a gay man; Ann welcomed Ray's friends from the gay community into their life and hospital room for his final days, not wanting to deny him his friends before his death; Ann became a trusted confidant and advocate within the gay community after Ray's death; eventually she founded an AIDS ministry in Oak Park with other members of the congregation; and at last Ann wrote a book about the whole experience titled *Touched by Grace: From Secrecy to New Life*. Ann became our leader. This is a woman who grew up Amish, so if she could journey as far as she did in one lifetime, I submit *anyone* can.

This transformation is do-able, friends. Yes, even in the span of a human lifetime. Ann returned for our 35th anniversary celebration just a few weeks ago and she is *still* leading the church with her prophetic, gentle, fierce, grace-filled wisdom.

The congregation decided in the wake of this experience with Ray and with Ann as our leader, that, if nothing else, the church shall be a place where no one needs to live a secret life, hiding such foundational pieces of one's identity; that the church, if nothing else, shall be a place where we can check our secrets at the door and enter a sanctuary of wholeness where *all* of me is welcome; where *all* of you is welcome.

Eventually an out gay man found his way to our church doors. When he requested membership, it gave us the opportunity to respond, to test how our experience with Ray would shape us. That's when we finally conducted a comprehensive study of human sexuality, reading the Bible together, praying, consulting theological and psychological resources. It was 1989 when, at the conclusion of that study, we drafted a statement. The statement was somewhat tentative— naming our lack of consensus on the Bible's witness regarding sexuality— and yet somewhat bold— naming our leading to receive gay people who seek to be Christ's faithful disciples as sisters and brothers, extending the right hand of fellowship to all who confess faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord.

This statement and the resulting practice of welcoming out gay members turned out to be too much for other congregations in Illinois Mennonite Conference. (At that time we were dually affiliated with both Illinois Mennonite Conference and Central District Conference.)

A very long and tumultuous process ensued. I will not lay bare all the details of this sordid history this evening.

Suffice it to say that many conspired to expel us, did not get the adequate votes to do so, participated in secretive backroom dealings, eventually changed the conference's constitution in order to allow for disciplinary action short of expulsion.

It was a time of great pain for our congregation as many had their expectations of Christ-like behavior within the church shattered by decidedly un-Christ-like behavior like outright lying and manipulation and mean-spiritedness.

Somewhere in the midst of what many remember as the era of inquisition, we joined the Supportive Communities Network of BMC. It was lonely on the front edge of this conversation in the church, and I think we needed to know that we weren't entirely alone. And remember: this wasn't an *issue* for us—never had been—it was *people*. It was Ray Showalter. It was Bob Buzzard, our first out gay member. It was growing numbers of other gay Mennonites who heard our story and cautiously, tentatively sought us out, wondering if perhaps there was a place in *their* church for them. It wasn't an *issue* for us. It was *people*.

Eventually, years later, new leaders of Illinois Mennonite Conference initiated reconciliation with us. They began with a letter: asking our forgiveness for the conference's behavior, and we were restored to full membership.

I entered the congregation's story at a time of peace and reconciled relationships.

As I was preparing to wrap up my seminary studies and move into church ministry, I knew that Mennonite Church USA was not at the same place I was on matters of human sexuality. I was at least vaguely clear about my position in my paperwork, and Chicago Community Mennonite Church and I found in one another a good match given, among many other things, our shared dissension on this point. Though I entered my ministry at a very different place than the official position, I felt I could commit to the Mennonite Church because overwhelmingly I *am* where the church is theologically. It is not only my ancestral home, but also my theological home. And I believed—and still believe—my dissent on this point of sexuality to be a faithful one.

I also believe that the church as a whole is on its way there. And I want to be part of that movement; I am called to be part of that movement; both in larger advocacy ways but also, and perhaps even more importantly, in small churchy ways. I am *called* to simply provide a place to land, a homecoming for those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and their allies—those who have been rejected by other parts of the church.

I am also called to be a pastor who doesn't assume that sexuality is the primary spiritual concern for every individual who identifies as gay. Ministering to gay Mennonites is an awful lot like ministering to straight Mennonites: people want to bring their faith to bear on questions such as family dynamics, vocation, dismantling oppressions, understandings about God and world, their role in witnessing politically, peacemaking, nurturing a rich spiritual life, immigration reform, living with integrity, prayer, struggles with mental health, making ethical decisions at work and home, understanding and transforming the prison system, responding to capital punishment, and on and on.

Just as few straight people ask for pastoral care around their straightness, so few gay people ask for pastoral care around their sexual identity. It simply isn't the primary spiritual concern of most gay people in the same way that sexuality isn't the primary spiritual concern of most straight people. This is the *church's* obsession, folks. This is a preoccupation of the privileged class.

For me, I have found that, pastorally, it's a very small step from understanding that people are born with a diversity of sexualities to blessing same-sex covenanting ceremonies and weddings. You can read more about all of this in my paper, but I believe our sexualities, including our orientations, to be God-ordained and divinely blessed. And while some are called to singleness and celibacy, I don't believe that any

particular orientation necessitates that call. In other words, I don't think all gay people are called to singleness and celibacy any more than I believe all straight people are called to singleness and celibacy. There's simply no correlation.

Honestly, the conversation around human sexuality in the church has become a little like women in leadership for me. At some point the truth of the Holy Spirit's call becomes so self-evident that I can hardly imagine another way.

The Spirit so clearly bears good fruit in the lives of those who identify as gay that who am I to block, deny or limit the Spirit's work? The Holy Spirit is so clearly present in gay individuals and relationships and families and in children of gay parents that I just don't have any question of its blessedness. If you need to see this, come visit us in Chicago!

I'd like to share with you my greatest pastoral sorrow; the biggest mistake of my ministry. Though it happened 8 years ago, it's still pretty raw for me. My greatest sorrow as a pastor was *not* officiating a ceremony for two young men married in my church in my first year of ministry.

I was only licensed at the time and feared that I would never be ordained if I acted outside the denomination's membership guidelines. In fact, they never even asked me to officiate. They knew the church context in which we were operating and decided to spare me from even having to make the decision.

And this alone breaks my heart: that two young men were so well schooled in the church's injustice and bigotry, had so internalized their 2nd class citizenship, that they self-censored and didn't even ask their pastor to be their pastor on one of the biggest days of their lives.

But watching them—standing alone—in front of everyone—speaking their vows to one another—I was shattered. They had an entire community surrounding them—

yes. But a minister was missing. I was missing. I was in the wrong place at that moment —not at all where I belonged. During a wedding ceremony, the minister stands with the two, creating a three, mediating and bodily representing God's presence. Lord knows that *every* marriage, if it's to be happy, healthy, God pleasing and life-giving, if it's to have a shot at surviving, *every* marriage needs community support and the blessing of God. And I left them standing alone.

And now as I watch this same couple walk through a very difficult time of divorce, it's all the more evident the mistake I made that day—the disservice *we as a church* handed them that day. That's not to say that my presence in the ceremony as their minister and officiant would have prevented the dissolution of their marriage, but they should never have been left to stand alone. I will grieve this the rest of my life. And I will not make that same mistake again.

I also want to share with you one of my greatest joys as a pastor: the responses of some of the women I have married in the past two years. One couple—two women—with 34 years of history, and a second couple—also two women—with more than 10 years of history. These four women range in age from their 50's to their 70's. Both couples, frankly, expected little change in their relationships, but they wanted legal recognition of their relationships in one case primarily because of immigration concerns and in the other case primarily because of health concerns. So they wanted and needed the legal rights a civil union or marriage could provide. Because they are women of faith, both couples decided to have a religious ceremony in addition to the legal paperwork that was so important for securing their rights to be recognized as marriage partners.

What was so amazing about the weddings for these two couples is that, though they expected little to change—one couple together for more than 10 years, the other for 34—they both reported surprising and deep healing from the ceremonies. They experienced new feelings of legitimacy they'd barely been conscious of missing before given how long they've simply tolerated 2nd, 3rd or 4th class citizenship in the world and church. They report experiencing healing from deep self-hatred and guilt for being gay that had insidiously taken up residence in their spirits and psyches given the hostility of the surrounding culture and church. Both couples report new intimacy, freedom and love in their relationships, because they've been formally wedded, had their marriage recognized before God and the community, publicly blessed. God delights in this.

God delights in covenant, fidelity, love, companionship; why wouldn't we name that, and bless *all* those who wish to name their promises before God and the community?

I am guessing that most of you are here because you have also experienced a journey of transformation regarding sexuality and the church, or because you are somewhere in the midst of that journey. You may not be where I am. I'd be surprised if we were all of one mind—but you're somewhere on the path. I know that many of you come from congregations who are also on a journey. You may be part of the leading edge in your congregation wondering how best and most faithfully to advocate for inclusion.

I first want to say to you: *this is good work; good, holy work.*

Please be encouraged in your efforts. Part of my testimony to you this evening is just how wonderful the joy and freedom is on the other side of the impasse so many churches are experiencing. It is a delight to be part of an inclusive body who gets to be

about the business of being the church in and for the world. We at Chicago Community Mennonite are no longer stuck in that conversation and the joyous freedom on the other side is amazing.

But I am sympathetic that many of you are in churches where that just isn't the case yet. And you're wondering how to begin to move more fully and faithfully in that direction. I want to offer two important words to you: one related to the Bible and the second related to unity and division in the church.

First, the Bible. If you've already read my paper, or if you will read it in the future—and I do encourage you to do so—you will see that I have not addressed any of the seven biblical passages that are often cited in discussions of “homosexuality” within the church. Seven passages from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures explicitly name and address something related to same-sex sexual relationships. Simply stated, I do not believe any of these seven passages address loving, mutual and covenanted same-sex relationships as we have come to know them in contemporary church and society. And so I dismiss those seven passages in the introduction of my paper. I got some push back on that decision. And this final version *is* edited to incorporate feedback I received from various readers. But despite push back on the decision to dismiss the big seven, ultimately I decided to stand my ground. There's literally *decades* worth of smart, faithful, wise and rigorous scholarship on those passages. *Decades worth!*

If you or your congregation are stuck there, I urge you to do the work yourself of seeking out resources and educating yourself. Do that work if it's helpful to you or your church—I engaged that literature years ago during my college days. That work has been done. It has been done over and over again. It has been done well. So please go find that stuff if that's what you need.

What I have written here is quite intentionally a new biblical and theological work. I would never write a biblical analysis of slavery only referencing those passages in the Bible that explicitly name slavery. If I did—if any of us did—we'd have some pretty troubling stuff to muddle through. Like this: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord" (Colossians 3.22, NIV). Or this: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ" (Ephesians 6.5). Slave-master as Christ?? The end result of such a project, I believe, would not accurately reflect the heart of God on the matter of slavery.

It doesn't, in fact. The church sang that little tune for more than a century before it finally figured out that God doesn't smile on humans owning, buying, trading, selling, using other humans; until the church, at long last, did a different sort of theological and biblical work. So it is with human sexuality. The time has come to move past those seven passages that have been used to clobber gay people and their allies for far too long. We have been missing the Good News forest for the Levitical trees.

If you're ready for a new approach, I am far from alone. In fact, I stand on the shoulders of many who have come before me. You can read my paper for a new approach, and you can also find many other very good resources. Church, let's stop reading the Bible the way we did when we were vocal defenders of slavery.

The Bible isn't God. The Bible reveals the heart of God, most profoundly embodied in the life and witness of Jesus.

Second, unity and division: Some of you surely fear what your advocacy, what your movement on this will mean within your congregation or conference. Some will leave perhaps. Some will at least threaten to leave. Some probably already have:

threatened or left. It is our Jesus-following focus on peace and unity that raises an acute awareness of our sorrow and pain over this leaving or potential leaving. And so, the impulse to be concerned about unity and division is a good one.

And yet. There's a silent division in our congregations and conferences already that we have tolerated for far too long. That is, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers who have already left, who continue to leave; allies who are weary of the fear, and immobility plaguing the church; the family members of those who identify as gay who find little to no real support or understanding in the church, who long for a church where their children, grandchildren, nephews, nieces, parents can be fully welcomed and affirmed not in spite of who they are but *because of* the fullness of the beautiful, blessed person God has shaped them to be—fashioned in love, as the title of my paper proclaims. This insidious silent division has been a blemish on our church for a long time and will continue to be until we open our hearts and doors to all those God has created and called blessed.

All that is to say: there is no church without division. Not in this present age, at least.

There is no pure unified church that we might cause to divide. There is a *divided* church already and we are tasked to faithfully discern what sort of division we're going to tolerate and what sort of division we can no longer abide. Some division is more silent and other division more rambunctious. But the loud division isn't any more real, any more divisive, than the silent division. All of it maims the Body of Christ. Jesus himself told us to expect this when he said that he came not to bring peace but a sword. (Incidentally, this was the lectionary passage assigned to the day when I preached my candidating sermon at Chicago Community Mennonite. So I had to preach about Jesus bringing a sword to a Mennonite congregation and they still hired

me!) Jesus was clear that his radical good news message wouldn't sound like good news to everyone—those on the top were bound for a topple; Jesus was clear that his good news message would cause division. We've known this all along.

I don't mean to minimize the pain of losing church members, the sorrow in facing those sisters and brothers who threaten to leave, but without apology I *do* mean to relativize it. Carrying on with business as usual, getting stuck in the same old arguments, kowtowing to threats, and giving such incredible power to our fears is *also* painful. And it *also* leads to leaving—silent leaving—and to division in the Body of Christ. People are already leaving.

And it's not just those who identify as gay along with their ostracized family members and allies who are leaving, it's also an entire generation of young adults. Mennonite World Review published an article in their October 14, 2013 issue featuring the growing demographic of Mennonite young adults in urban centers who don't regularly attend church. Our denominational moderator, Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, traveled to Pittsburgh to facilitate a conversation with young adults about the church. She heard the same message that I hear from the many young adults in my congregation: the church's position on human sexuality is a deal breaker for the emerging generation. 28-year-old Jennifer Ruth, member of Pittsburgh Mennonite, said to Elizabeth Soto Albrecht: "We're not an officially welcoming church [to gays and lesbians], and that's one reason young adults don't come... A lot of people our age are just tired of the issue and want to move on, and our church is just starting to deal with it." In other words, our young adults are simply not willing to tolerate the silent divisions we've been tolerating for far too long. They're not willing. And they're leaving.

I again testify to the joy and freedom that Christ gives on the other side of this debate.

We at Chicago Community Mennonite Church—a vibrant congregation of gay and straight alike—get to talk about relating with integrity to the neighborhood within which we worship; we get to talk about advocating for immigrant justice, discerning together what it means to be an immigrant welcoming congregation; we get to serve together, harvesting blueberries for Rehoboth Mennonite Church and Camp, leading hymn sings for a low income retirement community in our neighborhood, community gardening and fixing up a home in need of repairs; we get to discuss faith formation for our younger ones and our more mature ones alike. We don't waste any precious energy debating sexuality and I can't tell you what a relief it is.

I also come proclaiming the good news that the arc of history bends toward justice and it is bending, sisters and brothers.

Every day it bends a bit more. My congregation and I are no longer at the frightening front edge of this conversation within the church. We are now part of a growing, vibrant, resilient network of welcoming churches. The time is *now* to take a stand for justice. Because human lives are at stake.

At stake is whether one of my best friends in all the world can ever be fully loved by her Lancaster county Mennonite parents. When parents choose fear and brokenness over their own daughter, the gospel of Jesus Christ has *not* been preached. Human lives are at stake. The soul of the church itself is at stake. Now is the time for justice.

I'm not talking about merely a quiet kindness and a whispered welcome—I know you, Mennonites. I know how you love to be quietly kind. That's not what I'm talking about here. I'm talking about risky and bold moves—a willingness to name the spiritual violence the church has perpetrated against our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers, a willingness to repent and seek reconciliation by

creating communities of justice and intolerance of anything short of full and wholehearted welcome.

I urge you to reach out to Carol Wise and the Supportive Communities Network of BMC. I and others are beginning to envision a ministry of partnering congregations who have already gone through a process of becoming publically affirming with those who are in various stages of the process. This is another deeply Anabaptist move: to walk alongside one another as we strive to follow Jesus more faithfully in actually *being* communities of grace, joy and peace where God's healing and hope flow through us to all the world.

May it be so.

I'd like to move now toward table conversations. In preparation for those table discussions, I want to say this: As is probably clear from my talk this evening, it is difficult for me to think about human sexuality as a mere issue when I know the faces, the stories, the beautiful, gifted, Spirit-inspired people who represent what, for others, may simply be an "issue." Our congregation would be a spiritually poorer place without the active participation of LGBT people.

Like Peter and his fellow circumcised believers in the book of Acts, "astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles," we have found we cannot withhold baptism in the name of Jesus the Christ for all who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have (Acts 10). Since we began this practice some time ago, we are, frankly, no longer "astounded" that the Holy Spirit falls on gay and straight alike, single and partnered alike. We have come to expect it. And we are richly blessed by the gifts of all. The Spirit has made the way clear to us by the good fruits that we together bear (Matthew 7).

So we're going to start with stories, not an issue. I invite you to go around the table, each of you sharing one story. Tell one piece of your own testimony. Without outing someone against their wishes, please share a story of your relationship with someone who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, and how you have experienced transformation through that relationship, how that relationship or person has helped you move along your journey. If you don't have a story like this, please simply pass and listen to those who do. This is not a time to detail your own views or beliefs. Once the whole way around the table with just stories.

Then, and *only* if you get around the table with stories, *then* take turns sharing a brief snapshot from your own congregational context.

Share:

- where is your congregation now?
- what is your vision of where it should go?
- what is your number one obstacle in realizing that vision?
- what is your number one resource?

Open for Q&A

- questions for me related to presentation this evening
- reflections from table conversations

1 Genesis 19:1-11, Judges 19:22-30, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:24-27, I Corinthians 6:9-11, I Timothy 1:9-10.

2 <http://www.mennoworld.org/2013/10/14/young-adults-city-not-church/> (retrieved November 14, 2013).