



DOING PROCESS WELL: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MENNONITE CONGREGATIONS

BMC is occasionally challenged to offer a vision of what a denominational or congregational process that has integrity and meaning might entail as it relates to the church's relationship with its lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (lgbt) members. While it is not our role to establish a detailed process, there are important factors that are relevant to the conversation that this paper will detail.

It is unfortunate that many congregations and/or church leaders are reluctant to engage the issues related to lgbt justice, because this offers an opportunity for growth and understanding that the church ignores at its own peril. The world is changing and we are not in the same position that we were in twenty or even ten years ago. The stereotypes, misinformation and lack of knowledge that distorted many people's view of lgbt people are no longer applicable and increasingly socially unacceptable, particularly by younger generations who have more experience with lgbt peers. Clear and open minds are essential if the church is to be at all relevant, and it is the responsibility of denominational and congregational leaders to model what a faithful and compassionate response entails. Towards that end, the following observations and recommendations are offered:

I. Science and Research

Within the past several decades, sociological, psychological, biological, physiological, genetic, and anthropological research has greatly enhanced our knowledge about the lives, health and experience of lgbt people. We have learned things that we did not know before, with most of it contradicting negative beliefs about lgbt lives. For example:

- A designation of homosexuality as a mental illness has been discredited by all reputable professional mental health organizations and associations. There is no correlation between a homosexual orientation and an experience of abuse, neglect, or bad parenting as a child.
- Beliefs that lesbian and gay adults are not fit parents have no empirical foundation. Indeed, a recent study of 256 lesbian and gay parent families found that, in contrast to patterns characterizing the majority of heterosexual American parents, very few lesbian and gay parents reported any use of physical punishment as a disciplinary technique. (American Psychological Association).

- There is no scientific evidence linking gay identity and pedophilia (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto).
- Recent studies suggest that sexual orientation has a genetic or biological component and is probably determined before birth (American Psychological Association).
- No scientific evidence exists to support the effectiveness of any therapies that attempt to convert one from a homosexual to a heterosexual orientation or vice-versa (American Psychiatric Association).

Despite the evidence, within the church lgbt people must frequently defend themselves against charges that are irrational, ill-informed, hurtful and unfounded. Because perceptions and attitudes within the church have been distorted by negative stereotypes and gross inaccuracies that remain persistent, a responsible process should include a strong educational component.

It would be helpful if leadership offered relevant and reliable materials and resources to aid in the promotion of an informed and trustworthy conversation. In addition to providing factual data, it is imperative that leadership actively challenge opinions that are based upon inaccurate stereotypes, misinformation, or ill-informed assumptions. This significantly alters the boundaries of the “dialogue” and means that church leadership, instead of just lgbt people, bear some of the onus of correcting false assertions and confronting misleading stereotypes. BMC can be a resource in recommending and procuring reliable and responsible materials.

II. Generational Differences are Significant

In any era there are significant generational differences in attitudes and understandings, and this era is no exception:

A 2001 survey by Christian Community looked at differences in perspectives between young adults (age 19-35) and older adults (>36) within 610 mainline Protestant congregations.¹ They discovered that:

- 81% of young adults did not view homosexuality as a sin. 28% of older adults agreed.
- 93% of young adults felt that talking about sexual issues and concerns is a good and appropriate thing to do in church. 39% of older adults agreed.
- 87% of young adults stated that they “withheld their beliefs and opinions a significant amount of the time because they knew older members would disapprove of their views, especially regarding sexuality.”

Similarly, a more recent survey by the Barna Research Group found that 91% of young adults outside the church say that “anti-homosexual” accurately describes Christianity today. The vast majority characterizes Christians as judgmental and hypocritical, and report being “embarrassed by the church’s treatment of gays and lesbians.”²

These statistics highlight the importance of establishing an environment that facilitates a more democratic conversation that includes the voices of young adults. Given that the Perdue Statement was written when many of the church's young adults were children or not yet born, the input of younger generations is sorely missing. This is unfortunate because they represent a generation that has been raised with a greater awareness of LGBT people and have formed their opinions based upon real rather than imagined experiences. This means that they may actually be far more knowledgeable than those who have dominated the conversation to date.

In his first year as the General Secretary of Mennonite Church Canada, Jack Suderman traveled to every MCC congregation in the country in order to listen to member's dreams and concerns related to the church. He detailed his observations, insights and reflections in a book entitled, *God's People Now* (Winnipeg: Harold Press, 2007). Noting an aging church that is simultaneously concerned about the survival of the church yet suspicious of change, one of the things that Suderman suggests as a result of his travel experience is that it is time for older adults to relinquish their hold and allow young adults access to church space, a recommendation with merit. In order to make this happen, greater sensitivity and creativity in terms of how the conversation is conducted is necessary. For example, this may mean:

- Breaking up into generational groups for conversation.
- Openly acknowledging that young adults are reluctant to speak candidly in a mixed generational group because they fear judgment.
- Providing for alternative means of expression (i.e. the composition of a written statement from young adults).
- Providing more opportunities for personal sharing rather than encouraging theological or Biblical debates that tend to favor older and more educated members.
- Managing the dialogue so that young voices are heard with the same frequency (if not more) as older voices.
- Modeling leadership that is comfortable talking about sexuality and sexual issues.
- Utilizing young adults in the planning and leadership.
- Protecting the conversational space from those who would bully, threaten or make attempts to silence others, etc.

III. The Bible

A tremendous amount of Biblical scholarship has occurred since the passing of the denominational papers related to human sexuality; scholarship that defies easy answers to questions of sexual morality, orientation and sin. Rather than dismissing or ignoring such work,

the church could benefit from a serious conversation about the nature of Biblical studies and the kinds of analyses, approaches and perspectives that give rise to a variety of interpretations and understanding of the Biblical texts that might relate to this topic.

Dale Martin, professor of religious studies at Yale University, suggests (correctly, I think), that we need to take more responsibility for the very human work of reading and interpreting the Bible. He reminds us that “readers make sense of texts; texts do not dispense their meaning, nor is meaning dependent on authorial intention.”³ Martin encourages the church to take Scripture seriously by clarifying our assumptions, taking responsibility for our interpretations, and boldly utilizing our imaginations. He writes, “We may avoid living in our own Christian bubble and simply reinforcing our already held beliefs and prejudices not by seeking a source for knowledge in the independent meaning of the text, but by listening to one another and even to others outside Christianity. We allow others to challenge our reading. We work ourselves to see Scripture always anew. We profit from our imaginations and the imaginations of other human readers, and we trust in the providence of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to shake us out of Christian complacency.”⁴

It does not serve the church well to be satisfied with emphatic declarations of Biblical “truth” that allow for no dissenting opinions or conversation. While the statement, “because the Bible says so” may seem definitive and authoritative, it usually reflects much more about the speaker and her/his own biases than it does about the Bible. We should be wary about encouraging or accepting such self serving and unhelpful pronouncements.

Here is what we would encourage;

- A repudiation of tactics that use the Bible as a means to an already determined end and/or prohibits conversation or dissention.
- The development of materials that enable a more honest engagement with Biblical texts and themes. Other denominations have risen to this challenge and have produced materials that are worthy of emulation.⁵
- Engage our trained scholars in this conversation/exploration and utilize their leadership and assistance in guiding the church through a responsible conversation about human sexuality and its Biblical, theological, ethical and practical implications.

IV. How “The Issue” is Framed Matters

Many within the church have understood “the issue of homosexuality” as a task that involves assessing the inherent value and basic humanity of LGBT people in order to determine an “appropriate” response of benevolence, rejection or condemnation. The assumptions involved in this process are not only distasteful but increasingly irrelevant, falling in the same categories as pressing historical concerns (Biblically justified) over whether native people had souls, whether those of African descent were fully human, whether women were capable of being educated, or whether the skull size of Jews correlated with an innate inferior intellect. We now know that

these concerns reflected unjust systems of privilege, ignorance and oppression whose overt expression we now rightly and rigorously reject. It should be the same with any discussion regarding the fundamental character and worth of lgbt people.

What has been noticeably lacking in this “dialogue” is a critical scrutiny about the behaviors and attitudes of the institutional church and its non-lgbt members. Interestingly, the Purdue Statement itself states, “we confess our fear and repent of our absence of love toward those with a different sexual orientation and of our lack of understanding for their struggle to find a place in society and in church.” Yet this aspect has been ignored, dismissed or openly defied. Instead, the vast responsibility for vulnerability that any responsible dialogue requires has been carried almost solely by lgbt people.

Questions that could guide a more responsible and comprehensive conversation include the following:

- What are the fears that I as an individual bring to this conversation? Where did those fears come from? What continues to shape them?
- What specific incidences can I name where I have not been very loving towards a person who is lgbt?
- How has our individual and communal fear affected the decisions, attitudes and behavior of the church and negatively impacted the ability of lgbt people to find a place in society and in the church?
- What have I done to grow in my understanding about the lives of lgbt people? What have my efforts taught me? What do I still need to learn?
- How might the church’s behavior towards lgbt people have impacted the soul and witness of the institution that we call the church? How might this correspond with our understanding about the gospel message?

What we are calling for is a framework that shares a more mutual vulnerability and is rooted in an attitude of grace and openness rather than judgment and fear. Genuine dialogue is difficult enough when participants have differing amounts of power, but is particularly ineffective in a situation where the threat of punishment looms large, or when the burden is overwhelmingly upon one partner in the conversation to defend or explain. For these reasons, it is time to announce a moratorium on any kind of punitive action that has been taken and/or threatened towards congregations or individuals who, in good faith and conscience, affirm lgbt people. The BMC resource, *Fair Play* establishes guidelines for a respectful dialogue that remain as relevant today as they were ten years ago when they were developed. Copies of this resource may be obtained from the BMC office.

V. All Things Being Equal...All Things Are Not Equal

Several years ago, *Time* magazine sported a cover with a picture of the fence where college student Matthew Shepard was hung and left to die after he was brutally attacked for being gay. The cover included an inset of a smiling Shepard and a story headline that read: *The War Over Gays*.⁶ Scholars Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini comment that, given Shepard's horrendous death as well as the violence that is daily inflicted upon gay and lesbian people, a more accurate title would read, *The War On Gays*. They suggest that the less explicit title was used because it masks the uncomfortable reality that, while most Americans sit idly by, a particular group of people are regularly singled out and targeted for violence, discrimination, and even death just for who they are.⁷

Similarly, church leaders often frame "the issue of homosexuality" as being a conflict between lgbt people (especially activists) on one side, and those who are adamantly opposed to them on the other. Often there is an implication that the "church" in general, and church leaders in particular, are innocent bystanders that have been unfairly caught in the middle of this nasty conflict. To quote Jacobsen and Pellegrini:

As presented by *Time*, the combatants in the "war" are those who hate and fight against gays and those who fight back against this hatred. Notably absent or at least removed to a safe distance from this opposition between those who hate and those who are hated is *Time's* idealized average, ordinary, and tolerant American. Strikingly, then, to be hated can place you in the same position as those who hate. If you fight back against that hate (particularly if you organize with others against hatred) you too become a combatant in the "war." You are no longer "innocent," you are an agitator, a crusader, a fighter, and, as such, you fall outside the boundaries of the American "general public." In this "war," the only innocents are those who stand to the side – outside, above, or "over" the fray.⁸

These insights expose the limitations and dangers of a process that begins with an assumption that the "problem" is the result of extremists on two opposing, conflicting sides. To address this misrepresentation, a responsible process would:

- Acknowledge that this is about more than two "sides" of equal power who disagree. Discuss the role of power and its ethical implications. Question the assumption that the "church" is a neutral party.
- Explore what it might mean for the church to address "the issue of homosexuality" as a problem of injustice rather than a problem of extremism or conflict. Or put another way, what would it mean for the church if we understood the "issue" to be the construction of unjust and violent social hierarchies rather than whether individuals hate anyone?⁹
- Realize that the voice and experience of lgbt people has been silenced and under-represented. For this reason, any process with integrity needs to have lgbt people involved in its planning and execution.

- Focus upon education and resist the impulse to hold crossfire type debates that reflect a misrepresentation of the “issue.” Could we ever imagine asking a Jewish person to defend her/himself against a white supremacist? Yet we often put lgbt people in this same position.

VI. Remember it's Real Lives

The conversation as it has been conducted in the church has tended to identify lgbt people as the “other” that is to be feared, evaluated, judged, scrutinized, ostracized and ultimately banished. Non-lgbt people often feel free to express a full range of opinions about who lgbt people are, what makes us this way, whether we are sinful or evil, whether we should be ordained or allowed membership, permitted a booth at Assembly, and even whether we are sick or depraved. These attitudes and their expressive behaviors can take a toll on the spiritual, emotional and physical well being of even the most self confident and healthy lgbt people; and indeed, they have.

A seasoned member of the BMC community is fond of stating that this conversation is a lot like a pig and a chicken discussing ham and eggs for breakfast – one is committed, the other involved. The experience of being the target of debate, plus the reality that any decision a congregation or church makes in this conversation will have the most direct and immediate impact upon lgbt people, makes this a particularly vulnerable and delicate challenge for lgbt people. A good process must be sensitive to the unique strain and scrutiny that is placed upon lgbt people, and at the very least, take extra steps to extend care and support.

VII. Some Final Thoughts

It is ultimately the responsibility of the denominational board and staff to determine a church-wide process. In this endeavor, a process that would offer integrity and hope would be one that:

- Hears all generational voices, but pays particular attention to the voice of young adults.
- Demands a shared vulnerability in the conversation.
- Is educational, drawing from resources that include the social and natural sciences.
- Utilizes BMC as a resource rather than viewing it as an adversary.
- Aggressively challenges inaccurate stereotypes and negative characterizations.
- Has lgbt people involved in all aspects of the process.
- Is careful about how “the issue” is framed and resists efforts to make the church a neutral bystander in a conflict between “special interests” or “advocates.”

- Begins from a place of grace and anticipation for what God can do, and is already doing among us.
- Pays careful attention to the human costs, particularly of those most marginalized.

The South African theologian David Field offers the insight that theology “is a pilgrimage to the margins” that begins, “when we recognize and take responsibility for our complicity in the forces that abandon, oppress, and exclude.”¹⁰ Our Anabaptist history offers an opportunity to understand these words in a way that moves beyond a mere intellectual exercise. It is our hope that a church process will call forth the best of who we are as a people and offer an expression of a Christian faith that is profoundly merciful, just and kind. Towards that end, BMC pledges its support.

ENDNOTES

¹ Steve Clapp, *Silent and Undecided Friends* (Fort Wayne: LifeQuest Publications, 2008).

² David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

³ Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analyses and Proposal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)

⁴ Martin, p. 53.

⁵ One example is a handbook produced by a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Discernment Committee and edited by William Paulsell entitled, *Listening to the Spirit: A Handbook for Discernment* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).

⁶ *Time Magazine*, October 26, 1998.

⁷ Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (NY: New York University Press, 2003), p. 53-55.

⁸ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, p. 55. In the Church of the Brethren and Mennonite Church, the terms “advocate” and “special interest” are frequently used to discredit the efforts of lgbt people to organize or speak out against discrimination and violence.

⁹ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, p. 58.

¹⁰ David N. Field “On (Re) Centering the Margins: A Euro-African Perspective on the Option for the Poor” in *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.59.