

POINTING A DIRECTION ON HOMOSEXUALITY

Over the years the Mennonite Church has faced many disagreements, some of which we learned to live with and some of which created irreconcilable separations. Anabaptism began as a group of dissenters in the church and over the years we have had significant disagreements about such things as: mode of baptism; secret societies; dress codes; participation in war; women in ministry; divorce and remarriage. How we interpret the Bible is often behind our points of difference.

In the fall of 2001, the Executive Board of MCEC initiated a Season of Discernment to look at the disagreements we currently face over issues surrounding homosexuality. While this discernment is continuing, the following statement is an attempt to describe where we are in our process and to point a direction for MCEC and its congregations.

A. Points of Reference: The MCEC Executive Board recognizes that:

1. All people, regardless of their sexual orientation, are of sacred worth and equally loved by God. At the same time, all people share in the brokenness of humanity. In the context of the church we are called to find wholeness in relationship with Jesus and in Christian community.
2. Sexuality is a good gift blessed by God. However, we live in a highly sexualized culture where sexual innuendo and promiscuity are pervasive. We acknowledge that marital infidelity and extramarital sexual activity are present in our churches. The church needs to speak to many issues surrounding human sexuality.
3. There is strong disagreement at all levels in MCEC on the matter of homosexuality. We have disagreements within our congregations, among our pastors, and we are not in agreement as an Executive Board. Collectively we are not in a place to be able to say, “. . . *it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. . .*” (Acts 15:28).

B. Our present reality in MCEC:

1. We are sisters and brothers in Christ who desire to live together in love and unity. As we get to know, on a personal level, those with whom we find ourselves in disagreement, we often find they too are striving to live in faithfulness.
2. As a delegate body, MCEC continues to affirm and uphold the Confession of Faith and the church statements¹ regarding sexuality, while at the same time recognizing the continued need for respectful dialogue.
3. Not everyone agrees with the church statements regarding homosexuality and not everyone agrees with how we live together when we disagree. One issue is the degree to which we can allow room for dissenting views.

¹ *Resolution on Human Sexuality* (Saskatoon, 1986); *A Call to Affirmation, Confession, and Covenant Regarding Human Sexuality* (Purdue, 1987); *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Article 19, 1995); *Resolution on the Issue of Homosexuality* (Stratford, 1998).

4. MCEC congregations are at different places in accepting gays and lesbians in the congregation. Some believe God is calling them to include homosexual persons in the congregation, while others understand homosexuality to be outside of God's will.
5. There are gay and lesbian members and adherents in our MCEC congregations. These people are our children, parents, siblings and friends. We strongly believe our collective conviction is to be informed by our compassion and our collective compassion by our conviction.
6. Our congregations have not always been compassionate towards gays and lesbians among us. There has been hurt and there is need for confession and forgiveness. As we continue on a path of discerning God's will, we need to practice forbearance with each other and avoid hurtful comments, actions and policies that condemn and reject others.

C. Implications:

1. At this time the Executive Board continues to affirm an earlier recommendation not to exclude congregations that have gay and lesbian members or who do not fully support the statements of the church on homosexuality. MCEC remains committed to remaining in dialogue with individuals and congregations supporting the inclusion of gays and lesbians. Rather than investing energy in maintaining the boundaries of who is "in" and who is "out," we call all people to renewed commitment to Jesus as Lord and Saviour, along with a commitment to be renewed by the study of scripture under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.
2. We expect the conference, congregations and pastors to "affirm and uphold" the official position of the church as found in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. We understand this to mean that pastors credentialed by MCEC will not perform same-sex marriages or bless same-sex unions, and MCEC will not credential non-celibate gays and lesbians as pastors.
3. In order to move forward as a conference, we need to allow space for differences on this issue. We believe God is calling us to find our place of meeting in Christ rather than with those who agree with us in order to stand against those who disagree with us.

D. Creating Safe Space for Dialogue: In order for respectful dialogue to continue there must be a sense of safe and sacred space. Without such space, no God-honouring solution to the division we experience on homosexuality will be found. It is essential that we commit ourselves to:

1. Provide safe space for persons struggling with questions of orientation and sexuality.
2. Stop the painful exclusion homosexual persons often experience. Anything that perpetrates hatred or violence has no place in the church.
3. Stop the politicized maneuvering at either end of the spectrum to silence voices of disagreement. The church will be healthier if all points of view can be openly heard. Among the voices that deserve to be heard are, for example: homosexual persons who choose to remain celibate for the sake of Christian conviction; homosexual persons who are in heterosexual marriages and wish to remain there; those who support change ministries; those who see homosexuality as a sin; those who celebrate homosexuality as part of God's creation; and those who want gays and lesbians included as part of our community.
4. Keep the matter of homosexuality in perspective; other important issues require the attention of the church. While we continue to discern how we relate on the matter of homosexuality, the mission of the church must go on.
5. Seek to discern God's will and faithfully walk in that path. The reality is that these paths are not the same for all. We affirm the congregation as the primary body for discernment on issues of faith and life.

E. Shared Commitments and Affirmations:

1. That we renew our common commitment of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, according to the light of Scripture and through the Holy Spirit, and that we call for the same commitment on the part of those who disagree with us.
2. That we encourage one another in becoming “communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world.”
3. That we encourage each other to uphold the biblical call to faithfulness, chastity and self-discipline in all sexual relationships; and that we mutually encourage each other to find healing for our broken humanity in Jesus Christ.
4. That we continue in dialogue on matters where we disagree, that we call upon our leaders to facilitate such dialogue, and that we commit ourselves to participate in, rather than derail such dialogue.
5. That we urge individuals and congregations when they make decisions and take actions to strive to enhance rather than hinder the unity to which Christ calls us.

The Executive Board

February 25, 2004