

# **D**reamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



## ***Special Issue: Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality***

**Homosexuality and the Bible:  
A Case Study in the Use of the Bible for Ethics**

Loren L. Johns

**Consensus and Creed**

Everett J. Thomas

**To Guide Our Feet: Pastoral Action in Impossible Times**

Weldon D. Nisly

**Pandora's Box or Fibber Magee's Closet?**

C. Norman Kraus

**Challenges of "Crosscultural" Communication:  
A Response to C. Norman Kraus**

John D. Roth

**Rules Help Discernment**

Everett J. Thomas

**We've Come This Far by Faith**

Mary H. Schertz

***and much more***

---

**Winter 2006**

Volume 6, Number 1; ISSN 1546-4172

# Editorial Introduction: Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality

First a word of explanation to the many readers of *DreamSeeker Magazine* who are not Anabaptist-Mennonites: This is a particularly inhouse issue! I hope that won't be overly off-putting, but I want to recognize it upfront as part of stressing that the vision for *DSM* very much includes welcoming and serving readers from a broad range of communities and perspectives.

But now the topic is homosexuality, and Mennonites are barely managing to discuss this inflammatory issue within inhouse circles, much less take into account and appreciate the viewpoints of those in the larger Christian community and beyond. For example, much of how homosexuality is being handled within Mennonite Church USA (the denomination to which all the writers in this issue belong) involves the specifics of denominational statements, history, policies, and institutional structures.

This is why, rather than force artificial breadth of style on the writers, in editing this issue I tolerated more inhouse writing than normal. I hope those of you from other communities will be willing to wade through and possibly learn from how Mennonites are wrestling with this issue—provided it's clear we'll aim to move back to less inhouse processing in coming issues.

**So what better case study. . . than to invite both Weldon and those who had disciplined him into sharing the blood, sweat, and tears of their stands. . .**

Now to how the Winter 2006 issue of *DSM* came to be. This special issue was not originally supposed to exist. The idea was to incorporate, within an otherwise standard collection of *DSM* articles on various topics, two or three articles on homosexuality, one by Weldon Nisly and one or two by the denominational officials who suspended his ministerial credentials for performing a same-sex ceremony.

I had devoted my dissertation, which became *Fractured Dance: Gadamer and a Mennonite Conflict Over Homosexuality* (Pandora Press U.S., 2001), to study of and reporting on how Mennonites have been able—and perhaps more often unable—to understand each other across differences when discussing homosexuality. This has kept me ever interested in what we can learn from how we think and talk about this issue.

So what better case study, I thought, than to invite both Weldon and those who had disciplined him into sharing the blood, sweat, and tears of their stands, so that even if we disagreed with one or the other, we could begin to grasp the journeys of integrity that had led to such different decisions.

I was delighted to receive quick confirmation of interest from Weldon and eventually his article, now published here. I hope regardless of

## Editor

Michael A. King

## Assistant Editor

Renee Gehman

## Editorial Council

David Graybill, Daniel Hertzler, Kristina M. King, Richard A. Kauffman, Paul M. Schrock

## Columnists or Regular Contributors

Renee Gehman, Deborah Good, David B. Greiser, Daniel Hertzler, Michael A. King, Noël R. King, Mark R. Wenger

## Publication, Printing, and Design

Cascadia Publishing House

## Advertising

Michael A. King

## Contact

126 Klingerman Road  
Telford, PA 18969  
1-215-723-9125

[DSM@cascadiapublishinghouse.com](mailto:DSM@cascadiapublishinghouse.com)

## Submissions

Occasional unsolicited submissions accepted, 750-1500 words, returned only with SASE. Letters invited

## Subscriptions

Standard rates in U.S.  
\$14.95/yr. in US, automatic  
Jan. renewals, cancel any time.  
Single copy: \$3.75

## Free online:

[www.CascadiaPublishingHouse.com/dsm](http://www.CascadiaPublishingHouse.com/dsm)

*DreamSeeker Magazine* is published quarterly in spring, summer, fall, winter.

Copyright © 2005  
ISSN: 1546-4172 (paper)  
ISSN: 1548-1719 (online)

# IN THIS ISSUE

Winter 2006, Volume 6, Number 1

## Editorial Introduction: Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality

Michael A. King

## Homosexuality and the Bible: A Case Study in the Use of the Bible for Ethics

Loren L. Johns

## Consensus and Creed

Everett J. Thomas

## To Guide Our Feet: Pastoral Action in Impossible Times

Weldon D. Nisly

## Pandora's Box or Fibber Magee's Closet?

C. Norman Kraus

## Challenges of "Crosscultural" Communication: A Response to C. Norman Kraus

John D. Roth

## Rules Help Discernment

Everett J. Thomas

## We've Come This Far by Faith

Mary H. Schertz

## Seeing from Where I Stand

Ruth S. Weaver

## For Neither Heterosexuality Nor Homosexuality Is Anything

Paul M. Lederach

## Heterosexual Relationships Remain the Norm

Marlin Jeschke

## For a Sexual Discernment to Come

Gerald Biesecker-Mast

## Responses

Weldon D. Nisly, Ruth S. Weaver,  
C. Norman Kraus

9

12

14

20

28

32

34

39

42

47

51

59

perspective, readers may be able at least to agree that Weldon has offered a passionate, thought-provoking, and stirring statement of his position and how and why he has come to hold it. Whether one sees Weldon's stand as one of willful rebellion, faithful dissent, or a mix, I hope many of us may agree that Weldon's readiness to practice what he so eloquently preaches deserves serious engagement.

Meanwhile I was disappointed that all the key denominational decision-makers involved in the decision to suspend Weldon's credentials felt unable to proceed.

Now what? The vision was never simply to publish—and by doing so implicitly affirm—only Weldon's perspective. Rather, the hope was to catalyze a genuine conversation, from multiple points of view, within which authors modeled ability to respect and learn from each other even in disagreement.

**M**y own history had shaped that vision and affected the shape this issue of *DSM* finally took. In the 1980s, as pastor at Germantown Mennonite Church (GMC), I found myself at a juncture similar to Weldon's. The congregation and I had reached consensus that GMC should consider accepting gay and lesbian members because the risk of clouding the gospel by too quickly rejecting categories of people as sinners was greater than the risk of offering too much grace.

However, it soon became clear that this stand could lead to catastrophic conflict with Franconia Conference (FC), one of the denomi-

national bodies to which we were accountable. I was among the many at GMC who came to feel we must explore ways for GMC to offer grace while remaining accountable to and learning from the more traditional FC stand.

I remember taking a long walk during which I realized that I was at roughly the juncture Weldon more recently reached—but didn't have the clarity of call to move forward outside of accountability to Franconia.

I also remember one of the most painful conversations I've had with a congregant. When he learned of my decision, he told me that, like Moses, I was too flawed to lead the people all the way to the Promised Land.

It took me years—and I'm still mid-journey—to work through what my call was if not to step off the precipice and lead self or congregation into excommunication from the denomination (as did happen to GMC in 1997, eight years after I left). My human frailties ever cloud my ability to be sure I've heard the call correctly, so I keep listening to the voice of the Spirit and refining my understandings, but the clearest sense I've been able to get is that *my call is to support genuine conversations across differences*.

So I'm not Weldon, as I might have been. Nor am I a denominational official disciplining pastors like Weldon. Instead I'm an editor dreaming of ways we might do better, amid our bitter battles, at hearing each other—and as a result mutually growing in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of truth.

This is why I couldn't simply publish Weldon's story and imply he had walked the right path, whereas any who disagreed were walking a wrong path. So when those who had disciplined him declined to tell their stories, I cast around for other ways to make Weldon's story part of a larger discussion that (1) held his type of perspective accountable to other perspectives yet (2) also invited those who disagree with Weldon to take seriously that there may be something to learn from a courageous pastor willing to pay such a price for his convictions.

**T**he result is this special issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*, devoted to a conversation on homosexuality. Is the conversation genuine? The reader will have to decide.

My own evaluation is that it could have been even more genuine. The writers tend to do what we all, including myself, do: take a stand and aim to make it persuasive. This is one key move in genuine conversation, as I understand it: to make as clear as I can why I hold this position and why you might find in it treasure to value in your own quest for truth.

But I'd wish for even more evidence of writers able to make the other core move I see as characterizing genuine conversation. This is to see the value in the other's view and to grow in my own understandings by incorporating as much of the other's perspective as I can without losing the

integrity of my own convictions. Also many writers have been reluctant to engage Weldon directly, regardless of their perspective.

Still I at least spy welcome instances of ability to grow in understandings, as I'll address soon in commenting on what I see in each article. And I hope the very act of asking these multiple understandings to jostle against each other between the covers of this one issue

of *DSM* at least points to what can happen if we start to talk across our differences and not just to people who think like we do.

**B**efore turning to the articles themselves, I want to offer a challenge based on what I learned from trying to put this issue together: *Let's work harder in the Mennonite church to provide safe spaces for genuine conversations about homosexuality or other controversial issues*.

I say this because I was troubled to learn how wary people are of speaking on homosexuality. I began to sense that wariness in the responses of the officials who had disciplined Weldon. Their reasons for not writing I can respect and understand. I might well be equally unwilling to write my story if in their shoes. Still I was saddened to encounter their belief that it would do neither them nor their denomination any good to share the flesh-and-blood journeys that led to their decision.

Then I was saddened again by the reactions of many authors I contacted

**Let's work harder . . . to provide safe spaces for genuine conversations about homosexuality or other controversial issues.**

as potential contributors to this special issue. Again and again they declined to appear in print on grounds that it would be too damaging to them or others. These authors, noted leaders and scholars of both genders, were frequently themselves saddened by the inability to comment they were relaying, because it was at a conscious price to their own souls.

Such reactions seem to hint at how terribly the church cramps some of its leaders by implying or even stating that good leaders are those who don't rock the boat, don't stir things up, emphasize peace and harmony—and leave the wrestlings on the really painful issues to others, maybe the retired pastors or theologians.

Now the stereotype might be that such leaders are radicals keeping undercover the lack of support for denominational teachings that might damage their careers. Maybe in some instances this is true.

Yet I experienced matters as more complex. The very act of wanting to discuss homosexuality tends to be viewed as radical—why do you want to talk about it if not to change things? Thus if genuine conversation was the goal, I had to make sure many conservative writers were represented. But I found I had to approach writers I saw as more traditional by about a three-to-one ratio to ensure their views were reasonably present. Despite the fact that they would be speaking with and not against the grain of current Mennonite teachings, they were reluctant to speak up.

Why? Partly, I believe, because in fact some may see little value in open-

ing up a discussion they think should stay closed—since the church has already arrived at the right position. But also partly because they didn't want to be mired in the swamp of charges and counter-charges they too felt they'd begin to drown in if they put their views on record.

My challenge to those who want the discussion on homosexuality to stay closed, whether for reasons of theology or not getting in trouble, is three-fold:

First, will this in the end work? The issue is still alive among us. It's not going away. I won't be surprised if at some point it resurges with new intensity partly because the church has not found ways to routinize discussion of homosexuality instead of making it taboo. Making it taboo then gives it the energy of the forbidden. And that energy is not put to redemptive use but driven underground, where it may at some point lead to unpredictable and explosive effects.

Second, does refusal to converse, even if one believes the church has already found its final stand, fit the teachings of Scripture? "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence," teaches 1 Peter 15-16.

Third, does not engaging in conversation actually place the Mennonite church in violation of its own formal commitment to continue a dialogue on homosexuality?

**A**nd this takes me at last to comment on the articles in this issue of *DSM*,

because Loren Johns, both in the reprint of his article included here and in a range of additional materials available on his website, helps highlight the full range of what formal Mennonite statements on homosexuality call for. The teaching position of the Mennonite Church USA (and Canada), as Loren rightly highlights, is that full expression of sexuality is reserved for heterosexual marriage. But that same teaching position also clearly calls for ongoing loving dialogue—or the type of genuine conversation I'm looking for.

I was startled when, as part of reviewing Loren's article, I went back to the original wording of a key statement shaping the teaching position of MC USA. (The statement, adopted at Purdue, Indiana, in 1987 by one denominational stream, is similar to a 1996 Saskatoon, SK statement of another denominational stream. The streams have since merged to become MC USA and Mennonite Church Canada.) I was startled to see how clearly it calls for ongoing conversation amid awareness that more truth is yet to be discerned.

After teaching that sexual expression belongs in heterosexual marriage, the Purdue statement says this:

We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ, recognizing that we are all sinners in need

of God's grace and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance. We promise compassion and prayer for each other that distrustful, broken, and sinful relationships may experience

God's healing.

We covenant with each other to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other. As a part of the nurture of individuals and congregations we will promote con-

gregational study of the complex issues of sexuality, through Bible study and the use of materials such as *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*.

*DreamSeeker Magazine* is one small outlet for conversation and discernment. As a private entrepreneurial venture, it has no formal standing in denominational structures. Still I hope this special issue exemplifies what it can look like to take seriously that "we covenant with each other to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other."

Then we move on to an article that does perhaps have something closer to formal denominational standing, an editorial by Everett Thomas, editor of *The Mennonite*, the official denominational magazine of MC USA. Along with Loren's article, Everett's is

**I hope this special issue exemplifies what it can look like to take seriously that "we covenant with each other to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other."**

included because it helps set the stage for the conversation that follows.

The key contribution I see Everett as making is this: He highlights the complexities involved in adopting and experiencing as a living document a confession of faith. He helps us grasp that the current *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* reflects “both eternal creed and carefully crafted consensus.”

As I fallibly interpret this, Everett means that Mennonites need to respect the *Confession* as the best statement Mennonites currently have regarding how the will of God and the teachings of Christ and Scripture are implemented in the church. Thus no individual Mennonite or congregation dare flippantly disregard the *Confession*’s teachings.

Still the document is a human one, reflecting the particular times and people shaping it; thus over time there will be continuing growth in understanding that will lead some day to fresh consensus and a new confession, as has happened often before in Mennonite history.

As relates to homosexuality, then, today’s church consensus reflected in the *Confession*, along with such related statements as Purdue/Saskatoon, must be honored as articulating the teaching position of the church today. At the same time, there is space for provisional and informal conversation regarding how the passing of time and ongoing hearing of the Holy Spirit may shape the emerging consensus of future generations.

The hope is for the conversation here to unfold within those parame-

ters, meaning (1) in respect for the current teaching position of the church and (2) in awareness that we must ponder generation by generation what the Spirit is teaching us today—otherwise we would all still be practicing our Christianity as if in a first-century (or earlier) time bubble.

**T**hat leads naturally into what C. Norman Kraus wants to do, which is to confront what we do when in fact we don’t live and think precisely as biblical writers did yet want to be shaped by their understandings and teachings. As Norman puts it, “The problematic is not so much one of historical and philological investigation as of authentic contextual application to vastly different cultures today.”

I take him to mean that, among challenges of taking the Bible seriously millennia after it was written, are these: (1) how we avoid being sidetracked by details of biblical cultural practices that may no longer be meaningful in our changed times so we can (2) emphasize receiving guidance from the core values of the biblical writers, whatever the details of any implementation.

Thus for example Norman wonders, What if the key issue isn’t precisely which gender is doing the sexual behaving but rather whether the behavior fulfills the core scriptural expectations that such expression will be loving and faithful rather than promiscuous or exploitative?

But lest anyone be lulled into unthinking agreement with Norman’s insights, John Roth raises concerns. These emerged because, to Norman’s

credit, Norman solicited them. Then I proposed publication of John’s reply. I did so not to demolish Norman—who in turn has raised concerns about John’s critique in a further response to John—but because publishing the two pieces together helps show what bringing different viewpoints into direct contact can look like.

As I review Norman versus John, I’m reminded that if core ingredients of genuine conversation include persuasively articulating one’s own case along with learning from the other’s case, any writing—including my own—will be open to critique. Because who can know precisely what the right steps are when we enter that complex and delicate dance of aiming simultaneously to honor our own and another’s perspective.

Turning to the specifics of John’s critique, first John does make a commendable effort to note how, even if primarily in disagreement, he can learn from Norman. Then he moves to the worries. For one, is Norman wanting the other to hear him empathetically without doing unto others what he wants done to himself? Given my own emphasis on genuine conversation, I believe John rightly wants to make sure the call to listen is intended for oneself, not just the other.

Then John also wonders, When is enough enough? When can the church say it has spoken on an issue,

and expect those who disagree to cease their dissent?

Here his thinking dovetails with views of Everett Thomas in his second reprinted editorial on “Rules Help Discernment.” Everett in fact celebrates that the church is working well, because it kept its rules clearly in view when faced with Weldon’s case and so

was able efficiently and commendably to suspend his credentials.

I see both John’s and Everett’s points. As a pastor, I weary of second- and third-guessing after I’ve done the best I know to reach wise discernment on a congregational issue. Yet I fear they could also be read as suggesting

that even such a conversation as this one unfolding in *DSM* is somehow disloyal to the denomination.

And I worry that they make no clear provision for faithful dissent. When I review church history, I see a perennial mix of fallibility and faithfulness. Repeatedly the church heads blindly and even willfully down what turns out in hindsight to have been a wrong path. Then repeatedly it turns out that at least some dissenters were so dogged because they were rightly seeing that God was calling the church a different way.

Given such history, I hope we can balance wanting church teachings to command respect with recognizing that dissenters from such teachings

**Repeatedly the church heads blindly and even willfully down what turns out in hindsight to have been a wrong path. Then repeatedly it turns out that at least some dissenters were so dogged because they were rightly seeing that God was calling the church a different way.**

may (1) be willfully rebellious but may also (2) be the prophets of the truth the rest of us can't yet see.

Next come Mary Schertz, Paul Lederach, and Ruth Weaver. I'll say little about them because I've already said it in so many other ways as part of exploring the nature of genuine conversation. I'll simply risk favoritism by noting that I see them as powerfully exemplifying the effects of engaging in such conversation. As they each report, their views continue to change and grow as they seek to take seriously even perspectives with which they once disagreed.

Then just as Paul Lederach's final words are ringing spine-tinglingly forth—"In Christ Jesus neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality counts for anything"—here comes Marlin Jeschke, who has devoted much of his equally long life to thinking through and publishing wise writings on a variety of matters often related to church discipline. The conclusion Marlin's life and thought have brought him to is that "heterosexual relationships constitute the norm."

I worry that Marlin reaches this conclusion without confronting as fully as Paul Lederach and other writers in this issue that whatever one considers the norm, reality has a way of being more complicated than the norm. We risk simply reaffirming norms rather than finding creative new tools for engaging those aspects

of reality that don't fit norms. Confronting what doesn't fit the heterosexuality norm is how Paul Lederach reaches such a daring paraphrase of Galatians.

On the other hand, I flinch from the conclusion of some that we know enough about human sexuality to decide in a few short years that a norm widely affirmed by most civilizations and religions throughout human history should just be jettisoned. I at least was unaware of homosexuality as a significant issue until I was already, in the 1970s, a young adult. Now I'm aging quickly but still middle-aged. Is that brief span, during which the core of public debate over homosexuality emerged, long enough for us to gain sufficient wisdom to overturn heterosexuality as norm?

That day may come, yet I suspect we need to test far longer than we have what it will do to marriages, families, children, and the entire human race if we simply jettison the norm. Marlin helps us remember why we need to take the time to discern wisely.

Finally Gerald Biesecker-Mast offers his "deconstructive" commentary on the entire range of writings and finds not only on the lines of what is said but between the lines of what is not said much to ponder, much to question, much to be grateful for as he helps us imagine our way toward "a coming body" that in Christ is neither male nor female.

## Homosexuality and the Bible

### *A Case Study in the Use of the Bible for Ethics*

Loren L. Johns

*This article is reprinted, slightly modified, from an Internet version found at <http://www.ambs.edu/LJohns/Homosexuality.htm>. There Johns also provides a chart that (1) helpfully overviews Scripture passages with a bearing on homosexuality and (2) summarizes the various interpretations of such texts.*

### Introduction

Although my attempt here has been to represent fairly and honestly the best arguments on both sides of this issue, I would like to say at the outset how I personally approach this matter. This issue has proved to be one of the more intractable issues the Mennonite church has faced. Official church documents *clearly call for celibacy* on the part of gays and lesbians while also calling the church *to remain in loving dialogue* as we continue to study the Bible on this issue.

Unfortunately, the clarity of each call has been obscured by the presence of the other. Meanwhile, loving dialogue on this issue has become increasingly rare in the Mennonite church even though the Purdue and



Saskatoon statements call for it. May God have mercy on us!

I believe that individual church members must recognize and honor the authority of church discernment (Matt. 18:15-20) even as the church humbly admits its limited capacity to understand God's will on this side of heaven. I take seriously the importance of careful ethical discernment by the church on such a matter, as well as the authority of such discernment made. I accept and support Article 19 in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, where it says:

We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. Christian marriage is a mutual relationship in Christ, a covenant made in the context of the church. According to Scripture, right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship. Marriage is meant for sexual intimacy, companionship, and the birth and nurture of children.

I am not an advocate for the "gay agenda." I do not find the term very useful. In the secular press, it usually means advocating for gay rights without imposing the "burden" of ethical or religious considerations. I do not support that agenda. Others use the phrase "gay agenda" to refer to the full blessing of gay or lesbian marriages without regard for the wisdom of the church on the matter. I am not there either.

I take seriously and support the

1986 Saskatoon and 1987 Purdue statements, including their call for careful Bible study and loving dialogue. "Loving dialogue" has sometimes been used as a smokescreen or an excuse for ignoring the call to celibacy.

**The church has benefited little from the efforts of both extremist conservatives and of extremist liberals. . . .**

I do not use it in that way; I *mean* loving dialogue.

If "gay agenda" means paying careful enough attention to the homosexuality issue to keep reading the Bible together, or if it means caring genuinely for the gays and lesbians among us, rather than avoiding the issue, then I am an advocate for gays and lesbians in that sense. The possibility of any real loving dialogue in the church has become increasingly difficult in recent years, but I want to stand *with* rather than *over against* the church in its ethical discernment.

I believe the church has benefited little from the efforts of both extremist conservatives and of extremist liberals in this area in recent years. Some conservatives have wrongly (in my opinion) blacklisted certain individuals and congregations for contributing to the dialogue on this issue, and some liberals have wrongly (in my opinion) taken far too lightly the discernment of the church in calling for celibacy on the part of gays and lesbians. Further, many have confused the ethical agenda (the task of making moral judgments) with the pastoral agenda (responding redemptively to gays and lesbians, based on such moral judgments).

I continue to hope that God will yet bring healing to the Mennonite church on this issue. God cannot have

been glorified by the blood-letting we have seen. But I am not yet ready to become cynical. If I were, I would simply remove this web page and withdraw from any attempt to speak to the church on this issue.

Speaking out on the matter is politically risky, no matter what one says. But I am unwilling to allow reactionaries—conservative or liberal—to set the tone or the rules by which the matter is discussed. I do not believe the church can afford such withdrawal. I trust the grace of God and of the church to protect from attacks of others those who truly wish to know the mind of Christ on this matter.

There is admittedly little room for naïveté on this matter; the matter is far too volatile. But the church cannot afford to let discussion on this matter be hijacked by a few individuals who are driven more than they know by fear, insecurity, or a will to power. On that I must take a stand with conviction, and I believe other seasoned leaders in the church need to do so as well. I offer my web page as a resource to build up the church and help it in the ongoing loving dialogue to which we committed ourselves in 1986 and 1987.

Despite many unanswered questions about homosexuality, several points do seem reasonably clear. It seems to me that the Purdue and Saskatoon documents agree explicitly or implicitly about these points:

1. There is a key difference between homosexuality as an *orientation* versus as a *lifestyle*. Homosexuality as an *orientation* is not and cannot be wrong—it just is; at issue is whether gays and lesbians should be celibate or

may express their sexuality within a loving, committed relationship;

2. Gays and lesbians deserve as much love and respect as do heterosexuals, and that means listening and loving before passing judgment; gay-bashing in word or deed is clearly wrong for anyone who wishes to identify with Jesus;

3. Although related, ethical discernment and pastoral care are also separate issues: Christians need to consider the ethical propriety of homosexual marriages so that they can know *how to be redemptive*. While it may be true that one should hate the sin and love the sinner, such a statement does not contribute much to ethical discernment in the church;

4. Christian ethics is for Christians: ethical discernment and discipling (based on biblical principles) are appropriate primarily among people who claim to follow Jesus. It doesn't make much sense to ask, "What is God's will for people who have chosen not to submit to God's will?"

5. Such ethical discernment properly belongs with the Christian community as a whole, not the Christian individual by himself or herself.

Straight Christians should welcome the help of both (1) gays and lesbians and (2) social scientists in addressing this issue, even though Christians cannot give to others their responsibility for discerning God's will in light of Scripture, tradition, and science.

—Loren L. Johns, Elkhart, Indiana, is Dean, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

## Consensus and Creed

Everett J. Thomas

**E**aster Sunday calls us once again to confess the central truth of our faith, that Jesus Christ is Lord. Although we may debate other elements of our faith, this creed first guided early Anabaptists and is the core of Mennonite discipleship around the world today.

But the status of other parts of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* appears to be unclear to many members of Mennonite Church USA. That has created persistent debate about the authority of the *Confession of Faith* itself in these first years of our new denomination.

Each side in this debate occasionally caricatures the other. Some imply that others misuse the confession of faith as a litmus test for correct belief. We claim that such use of the document reduces it to a “creed.” The appellation is usually meant derisively, as if the document is misused as some kind of church law.

On the other hand, some imply that others view the *Confession of Faith* as little more than the opinion of the majority at one moment in history. We claim that such a view of the document empties it of any real authority and allows church members to decide what of the document fits their personal beliefs today.

Both caricatures are wrong and unfair. The *Confession of Faith* is both eternal creed and carefully crafted consensus.

How we view the confession is the source issue from which many other controversies derive. Membership issues (who can be a member of the church and who decides), academic freedom, abortion, women in ministry, and pacifism are some recent issues to which the *Confession of Faith* has been applied.

There is irony in this simmering debate about the authority of our confession. One survey showed that while 84 percent of us consider Scripture as the most important source of authority in our congregation, only two percent hold “creeds, doctrines, and traditions” as the most important authority—the same importance attributed to human reasoning and understanding. The Holy Spirit, however, was cited by 11 percent as the second-most important authority (*Faith Communities Today*, 2000).

So why all the energy around how we view the *Confession of Faith*? One clue is in the confession itself. The introduction explains that the current confession was adopted as our “statement of faith for teaching and nurture in the life of the church.”

**S**o here is a modest proposal for partisans on each side of the debate.

For those who worry that the truths in the confession are not being earnestly taught by others: Talk only about how the church can help those with genuine questions toward faith in Christ. Explain how the church can

create a nurturing space for genuine exploration. Talk about grace.

For those who worry that the confession is being used by others as a graceless litmus test of right belief: Explain how the church can be clear about the cost of discipleship when inviting unbelievers to faith. Talk about truth.

Each of us on either side of this debate begins from a laudable point, of course. Those who want the confession to provide certainties are worried that our church is sliding away from biblical truth and too easily accommodates the sins of our culture. Those who want less rigidity in the way we hold church beliefs worry that sharp boundaries will leave us devoid of grace in the mysterious process by which God’s Spirit moves in the hearts and minds of believers and unbelievers alike.

Scripture speaks here as John 1:17b reminds us that “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

There is grace in consensus; there is truth in creed. This Easter season we declare with absolute conviction that Jesus is Lord. When we do so, we also affirm that grace and truth are both essentials of Jesus’ lordship. As subjects of this Lord, we are called to search our hearts and consider whether we genuinely care about the essential that seems most important to other sisters and brothers whose confession of faith we share.

—Everett J. Thomas is editor of *The Mennonite, MC USA denominational magazine*, where this editorial first appeared on April 15, 2003.



# To Guide Our Feet

## Pastoral Action in Impossible Times

Weldon D. Nisly

*By the tender mercy of our God  
the dawn from on high will  
break upon us  
to give light to those who sit in  
darkness and in the  
shadow of death,  
To guide our feet into the way  
of peace. —Luke 1:78-79 NRSV*

**T**he question was both loaded and straightforward: “What do you think the Bible says about homosexuality and what would you do about it if you were pastor of this church?”

The query did not surprise me, but I did not expect it to be the first question in that 1995 interview when Seattle Mennonite Church was assessing my call to be their pastor. I laughed and lamented, “Homosexuality is the most divisive, destructive, and impossible issue in the church. It will not be resolved in my ministry lifetime. Neither will it go away. I doubt if Seattle Mennonite Church would exist if it were not in some way inclusive. I also doubt SMC will find con-

sensus on it. I am not sure I could be a pastor of a congregation that is not in some sense inclusive.

*The pastoral task, as I see it, is to be inclusive without letting homosexuality be the defining, consuming, or dividing issue of the church.* My desire is to live out this task as faithfully as I can without fear or shrinking from whatever God sets before us.”

In my decade as pastor at SMC, various members have shared with me their delight or distress at our being too inclusive or not inclusive enough. Occasionally we have sent someone to Brethren Mennonite Council or Supportive Congregations Network meetings. We expressed written opposition to the statement on homosexuality included in the 2001 Membership Guidelines of the Mennonite Church USA. Even as we have never sought consensus on homosexuality, we have lived with an implicit inclusion and more recently an explicit blessing for members in same-gender relationships.

### The Pastoral Task Takes on a New Reality

Three years ago, one of our SMC lesbian couples shared with me their commitment to each other for life and asked me to walk this journey with them. I said I would do so in prayerful discernment, trusting God to lead us each step of the way. I also said it would be an impossible journey but that “nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

Over the next couple of years, this premarriage journey with two women was consistent with—yet different

from—all other premarital preparations I have led as a pastor. We often asked each other what we sensed God was doing in our lives on the journey. I shared with the couple my process of discernment with various church leaders. They assured me they would understand if I decided I could not perform their marriage.

We grappled with many hard questions during premarital preparation, including the language of “covenant union” or “same-gender marriage.” Another was over when the two women would share their commitment with the congregation. I encouraged them to listen to God and their hearts, trusting they would know when and what to share. When they did share their good news, most members applauded, though others were distressed. These are the risks and the pain of same-gender love.

A few Sundays after the two women shared their commitment, I shared with the congregation my pastoral role in preparing for their wedding. I confessed that for me, the congregation, and the larger church, it raised many impossible questions about process, decision-making, and pastoral action.

I noted that everyone feels pain over some aspect of homosexuality in general and same-gender marriage in particular. No one has felt more pain than sisters and brothers who are LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered) and have been wounded by the church. I observed that I could neither take away anyone’s pain nor wished to heighten the pain of those most hurt by the church.

I was aware that whatever I did as a pastor in this situation, members across the church would express deep distress or strong support. I was also aware that performing a same-gender marriage would lead to review of my ministerial credentials by the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference, a regional denominational body to which SMC belongs.

I suspected that if this pastoral act led to division or distrust, my pastoral ministry was over. I also knew I would rather leave pastoral ministry than refuse to do what I sensed God calling me to do in this time and place.

Our discernment led us to hold the July 2004 wedding in a home of friends not connected with SMC, so it would not be a congregational action. Under the circumstances, only a few members were invited. Many members were disappointed that the wedding was not at SMC so that they could attend. Later that summer, one congregational family hosted a reception for the two women and invited everyone who attends SMC. Though not officially a congregational event, this did give members the opportunity to celebrate with the two women.

### Enlarging the Circle of Discernment

From the beginning of the pre-marriage journey with the two women, I had shared my pastoral role

with our SMC Leadership Council and Pastoral Care Team. These congregational leaders were central participants in our nearly two-year discernment process. I did not ask for their approval or agreement but for both their personal and leadership-role responses.

Early in the process I also alerted conference leaders. I did not seek the approval or agreement I knew they could not give, yet considered keeping them abreast of our situation an essential part of discernment.

In addition, I sought counsel from many spiritual friends and mentors and ministry colleagues across the Mennonite church and beyond. Essential here was the spiritual director I have been seeing for nearly ten years, who helped me stay focused on *obedience to God* rather than *rebellion against the church*.

I have spent hundreds of hours with hundreds of people processing this one pastoral act, far beyond any other pastoral task I have undertaken. It is that *impossible* and that important. While I have taken sole responsibility for my pastoral action, it has never been outside the church or apart from my three decades of ministry in the church. I did not choose this pastoral responsibility or its timing. I accept it as a gift and as grace from God. How else do faithful dissent and essential change come in the church?

I have received many gifts and blessings on this journey, especially from Seattle Mennonite Church. Two

**I did not choose this pastoral responsibility or its timing. I accept it as a gift and grace from God. How else does faithful dissent and essential change come in the church?**

women who have shown their love for each other, for God, Christ, the church, and me as their pastor have been a blessing. The last thing in the world they want is to be a “cause” or to cause anyone pain; as lesbian women in the church, they know about suffering. They simply want to live out their loving faithfulness with us as the church.

The love and grace shown by SMC members who do not support my pastoral action has been one of my greatest gifts. The wisdom of our congregational leaders has been a joy and blessing as we have together led the church in this impossible time.

We are the church, and we are a member of MC USA. We need each other, not because we agree but because we are God’s people, the body of Christ.

### The Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference Process

In light of my early disclosure with conference leaders, the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference (PNMC) began a review process before the wedding. Three PNMC leaders met with some of us for an afternoon of praying together and sharing perspectives on what our situation might lead to. The PNMC leaders requested that I not officiate at this wedding.

After the wedding, the PNMC Pastoral Leadership Committee (PLC) is responsible for ministerial credentialing) met to begin a formal “review process.” The PLC informed me that my act placed me “at variance with PNMC and the Mennonite Church

USA. . . . which bring ministerial credentials into a review.”

I responded, in part, that

I am deeply aware that my pastoral action to officiate a same-gender covenant union is “at variance with PNMC and Mennonite Church USA.” There are many complex layers of biblical theology, ecclesial authority, and pastoral ministry at stake in this matter. . . . While I take full responsibility for my pastoral action, I have had many long conversations with an amazing and amazingly diverse range of church leaders who have become a “discerning community” for me. . . .

The PLC probed my theological basis for same-sex marriage and “this decision to go against MC USA consensus and to follow your own conscience” without congregational consensus. I responded that MC USA, the conference, and the congregation do not and could not have a consensus on homosexuality. I offered

*an invitation that Jesus issued, “Come and see” (John 1: 39). “Come and see” SMC . . . in worship and fellowship . . . so that you may know us by our love and by our faith. Then “Go and tell what you have seen and heard.” I am confident that if this love is of God, you will see its fruit in our life and faith at Seattle Mennonite Church. Until then, as faithful Christians, as Anabaptist*

Mennonites, and as spiritual leaders with power and responsibility, how is it possible for anyone to make this weighty judgment?

The PLC designated me as holding a ministerial “Credential at Variance” and requested that I “not perform further same-sex marriages.”

I received the PLC’s decision to be a sign of their commitment to continue our relationship and process. I did not promise that I would not perform another same-gender marriage. I considered such a promise to be a violation of my calling in the pastoral context of this congregation and my years of ministry. I wrote that I

respect the covenant of the fellowship of congregations in Mennonite Church USA, even when I so strongly oppose. . . . the Membership Guidelines. . . . I call upon you and the Mennonite Church USA to give the same respect for members, pastors, and leaders of the Mennonite church who in faithful discernment and calling hold a different view on this crucial matter of sexual orientation and same-gender covenant love in the church.

Let us recognize that we face pastoral responsibility and take pastoral action in differing ways on many things in the Church. We do so in ways that others in the Church would challenge as biblically unfaithful and in violation of

the church’s confession and tradition. I believe that we should question what it is that leads us to single out homosexuality as a test of faithfulness while ignoring differing biblical and confessional interpretations and applications on other issues.

The PLC never addressed my questions, invitations, and challenges. Rather, with no further communication or questions, the PLC suspended my credentials.

I was deeply grieved by their decision and by what I consider a breach of trust. Their letter informing me of suspension sounded utterly incongruent in tone and content from our previous process. The PLC charged me with “breaking trust”—yet they had not used that language during the process itself. I had responded in person and in writing to everything the PLC had put to me and to every step of the review.

The PLC was compromised when a member resigned (for health reasons) and a replacement participated in their decision to suspend. That appointee was a member of a congregation that had not only issued strong opposition to my action but has also since withdrawn from PNMCM.

With the PLC decision to suspend my credentials, the congregation requested a forum with conference leaders to redress the PLC decision. PNMCM has appointed a mediator to guide a new process that will also include SMC leaders and a retired PNMCM pastor.

After I received word of my suspension, I asked for a congregational meeting to hear members’ concerns and feelings about my being their pastor with suspended credentials. At that meeting, SMC members gave overwhelming affirmation to my continued call as their pastor. We go on, not of one mind on this difficult matter, but nevertheless, as one body of Christ, the church.

### To Guide Our Feet in the Way of Peace

As I write during mid-autumn, I look out across the water from a cabin on the majestic Puget Sound and see the bright sun dancing with billowing clouds. I am in awe of the beauty and mystery of God’s creation.

Last night the same horizon was concealed in deep darkness while the night air was troubled with the harsh roar of military jets from the naval base on the island across the water. We hear frequent proclamations that these instruments of war keep us safe from the “evils and enemies” we deplore. We know their real purpose is to destroy life created by God. Fear and enmity justifying violence that leaves victims in its wake do not serve the cause of Christ.

Last night I knew this roar of jets was not the familiar sound signifying transport to other cities and lands of God’s world. It was the sound of war!

**I am inspired by the words of medieval mystic Meister Eckhart: “True followers of Jesus are absurdly happy, totally fearless, and almost always in trouble.” I hope I am taking some modest steps along this Way.**

This sound has never been the same for me since “getting in the way of war” with Christian Peacemaker Teams as bombs fell on Baghdad in March 2003. I believe I was called then to the impossible but essential pastoral action of standing with victims of our war in Iraq. I believe that getting in the way of war in the church on sisters and brothers who are LGBT

is wholly consistent with and an equally impossible and essential pastoral action. How could I fear or refuse this pastoral calling?

I am inspired by the words of medieval mystic Meister Eckhart: “True followers of Jesus are absurdly happy, totally fearless, and almost always in trouble.” I hope I am taking some modest steps along this Way.

May Mennonites seek new and faithful ways to “continue the loving dialogue” we pledged in the 1980s to carry on. We can only do so by honestly acknowledging the utter *impossibility* of resolving our differences over homosexuality. Yet we know that “with God all things are possible!” Our God of the impossible made possible has become incarnate in Jesus Christ “to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

—Weldon D. Nisly, Seattle, Washington, is pastor, Seattle Mennonite Church and a member of Christian Peacemaker Teams.

# Pandora's Box or Fibber Magee's Closet?

C. Norman Kraus

## Introduction

According to ancient Greek mythology the world's troubles originated from the opening of Pandora's box. The gods sent Pandora, the first woman, a box full of indiscriminate evils with the strict instructions not to open it. But her curiosity got the better of her, and she opened it. As a result the tragic evils that plague the world escaped beyond the possibility to ever be gathered back into the box. Only hope remained in the box.

We have a modern variation on this theme in the comic action of Fibber Magee, a radio and later TV comedian of a half a century ago, opening the door of his overstuffed, disarranged closet. I remember vividly the comic anticipation of the radio sound effects when he began to move toward his closet despite the protests of his wife, Molly.

The Pandora's box myth is a *tragedy*—nothing to laugh at! The damage is irreparable. As in the case of Humpty Dumpty, whom all the king's men could not

put together again, there is no hope for any improvement or a restoration of the status quo ante. Hope only gives rise to endurance to live with the mess of unintended consequences created by an irresponsible act.

By contrast Fibber Magee's closet is *humor* that reminds us all of our foibles and human weaknesses. It is humorous because we know that the mess can be picked up, the closet rearranged and hopefully put into better order. A realistic hope for an improved future remains in our grasp.

I believe that the "coming out of the closet" of our GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered) friends has more in common with Fibber Magee's closet than Pandora's box. It has challenged many of us who were shut up in our own closets of "Don't ask, Don't tell" anonymity to re-examine our attitudes, our logic, and our biblical interpretation.

Unfortunately at the present the issue has us mired in a cultural war, and the battle rages on both the political and religious fronts. Positions have hardened on both sides, and professional mediators who have worked with mainline denominations are pessimistic that decisive institutional changes can be made in this generation. At the moment things do not look very bright for progressives in North American culture or in the church.

## The Current Situation

We in the United States have become a nation of "reds" and "blues" suspicious of each other's veracity and good intentions. Diversity itself has

become a threat, and we are tempted to view our cultural differences as matters of "terrorism" and "cultural war." Conservative analysts contend that religious piety and morals are under attack by secular humanists. Conservative preachers stir up their audiences to "defend the faith"—both political and religious. Progressives are classified with the "liberal media" and the "knowledge class" pushing risqué cultural change in society.

Ideological religious conservatives, now identified as "right wing," dominate the sociopolitical scene. These religious ideologues are fearful of the role that the Bible delegates to the Holy Spirit's empowerment and guidance of the church. They espouse a rigid authoritarianism of the literal biblical text as a control mechanism—a kind of control that the text itself does not support. In New Testament terms they are the "Judaizers" in the early church—those who wanted to keep the "traditions of the elders."

Such conservatism is often characterized by its use of fear as a motivation for action—fear of terrorists, fear of secular spiritual forces, fear of failure, fear of hell at the end. The great popularity of the *Left Behind* novels, which threaten unbelievers with missing the great escape from the "Tribulation" that is to follow the "Rapture," gives evidence of the angst that pervades our churches.

We need not review the list of social and political issues that fearful conservatives view as the secular threat to society, but the perceived deterioration of the sexual climate in

America is high on their anxiety list. It prompted the title of Judge Robert Bork's 1990s book, *Slouching Toward Gomorrah*—a phrase, incidentally, which he borrowed from a William Butler Yeats' poem on "The Second Coming."

Unfortunately this cultural climate has invaded the Mennonite denominations. Many see the church as a kind of fortress defending itself and society against the onslaught of secularization, and view both political and religious rules as definitive and protective measures.

An Everett Thomas editorial in *The Mennonite* (June 21, 2005, see reprint in this *DreamSeeker Magazine* issue) is on "Rules Help Discernment." Thomas concludes that organizational polity rules, confessional rules, and "membership guideline" rules keep the ethical discernment process (here sexual regulations) operating "decently and in order."

The clear implication of the editorial is that enforceable institutional rules are basic to the church's response "to matters of sexuality and faithfulness." Or as one nervous church leader put it with less sophistication but more candor, "If we can't hold the line on this one [homosexual practice], we might as well give up!"

To preserve the institutional viability of the church, the heterosexual majority in most denominations is tempted to operate as a faction imposing its political clout and taking cues from the political fundamentalists in the current culture wars. Following the traditional cultural paradigm of hierarchical male dominance, that

faction interprets the biblical narrative as justification for all antihomosexual behavior. It gives little or no credence to the actual experience of the Christian homosexual community as a living expression of the church. Indeed, to do so is considered compromise and sin.

Members of the heterosexual majority project their definitions of homosexual identity on to those of differing sexual orientation. Statistical "deviance" becomes equated with moral perversion. Same-sex erotic expression is by definition pronounced lust not love.

Since the orientation is itself a moral deviation (temptation), any behavioral expression of it indicates moral weakness. Its motivation can only be hedonistic desire! It is viewed as an expression of individualism and unwillingness to submit to community moral discipline. Again, by definition it is considered antisocial and antifamily. All this, of course, assumes that sexual orientation is a matter of the will.

I am convinced that many who fearfully exclude their brothers and sisters of same-sex orientation do not fully realize what they are doing when projecting their heterosexual image of a "homosexual lifestyle" on them. They ask in all naïveté why they should be criticized as "homophobes"; as Martin Luther King Jr. put it at the height of the civil rights movement, we must "respect their fears."

Christians of same-sex orientation and those who empathize with them need to convince their opponents not with compelling arguments, although

a vigorous discerning conversation needs to begin, but by giving faithful witness to life in the Spirit as Paul outlines it in Ephesians 4:30–5:2. I say a discerning conversation needs to "begin" because it is not at all clear to me that such a respectful dialogue exists officially in the Mennonite church at this time.

### The Immediate Way Ahead

The recent suspension of Weldon Nisly's pastoral credentials is evidence of this tension and fear! As a matter of fact, it is my observation that the process of orderly spiritual discernment in the church has lost ground to the fear factor in the past decades. We were actually ahead in 1985, when the two Mennonite denominations that would later merge cooperatively published the study *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*. This study admitted difference of convictions and called for continuing mutual tolerance and discernment.

In the meantime the sociopolitical culture has become more divided and tendentious. Unfortunately the church has followed suit.

Given this unfortunate development, John D. Roth's recent suggestion that Mennonites take a "sabbatical" from making public pronouncements on some of the conflictive issues that are causing schisms among us may be a good one. However, if we adopt this Sabbath imagery, we must remember that a

*sabbatical*, is not a *moratorium*! Traditionally sabbaths were not for doing nothing. They were a time for community maintenance—a time for covenant review, reassessment, and renewal.

**It is my observation that the process of orderly spiritual discernment in the church has lost ground to the fear factor in the past decades.**

And of course the many humanitarian emergencies were not to be ignored during the Sabbath. To those who objected to his healing on the Sabbath Jesus replied, "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (John 5:17 NRSV). The question then is what we should do on the Sabbath!

"Sabbaths" today are a "time out" for self-examination and prayer, for celebrating the reality of the new covenant community, and for exploring the community's center and parameters. Such Sabbaths are a time for empathetic conversation with covenanted fellow believers—a time for truly listening to the voices of others in the community who may differ significantly from us.

The Sabbath was and is to prepare for the coming six-day workweek. "Sabbath rest" is not a vacation. There are a number of priestly tasks that need to be done in order for a given time to qualify as sabbatical: First, we need to search for a more adequate and consistent vocabulary so as to frame the issues in such a way that persons on the various sides can agree on their meaning. This will require developing listening skills.

Second, we need to more carefully define the nature and authority of the

Bible for life in our contemporary global age.

Third, we need a more precise delineation of the moral character of the cultural diversity in our modern world, what one New Testament scholar has dubbed an “exegesis” of modern culture. What in the theological and moral sense of the term is the *world* of violence and abuse to which we are to be nonconformed?

Fourth, we need to define *heresy* over against the newly adopted Mennonite church term of “teaching position.” And finally, while we are doing all this we need to call a moratorium on any further exclusions, suspensions, or withdrawals from conference until we have achieved at least a modicum of these sabbatical tasks.

Let me elaborate briefly. We need to find the right vocabulary and questions to carry on a discerning dialogue within the church. Discerning conversations are impossible without agreed-upon definitions and use of language, which we have yet to achieve! Such definitions and use of language require *listening* to each other. And in this case, where the conversation is across the divide of sexual orientation, “each other” means that the majority heterosexual community, which at the moment is excluding homosexual believers, must listen and come to agreement with them on the meaning of words being used.

For example, what does homosexual, gay, or lesbian *lifestyle* connote as well as denote? What does the word *normal* mean in the question whether a gay covenant relationship (marriage or civil union) is normal? When one

uses the term *sexual deviance*, what is implied? Does it merely denote minority status, or does it have implicit moral connotations? Connotations are probably more significant than denotative meanings in this case.

A listening posture indicates a kind of empathetic stance and a willingness to admit that we may have incomplete information or inadequate comprehension. We all need to confess that we really do not understand the role of sexuality—hetero or homo—very well!

At present our understanding of both the biological basis and the biblical bias is still elementary. But too many among us are sure we are right, and that empathetic listening is in itself sin. We are absolutely certain that the Bible can only be interpreted and applied one way on any number of subjects!

And this brings us to the second point. We still need a good deal more hermeneutical discussion of the “biblical position” on sexual behavior and its application to our current situation—not more redundant exegesis of the text but more exploration of its development over time and how that relates to the latest chapter of the church’s experience.

How is the biblical position related to the changing mores and cultic practices of ancient Hebrew-Jewish cultural practice—all of which were understood as the will of Yahweh? And how is the latest “biblical position” of the New Testament related to our world today?

The problematic is not so much one of historical and philological in-

vestigation as of authentic contextual application to vastly different cultures today. If the church is to take a missional stance in a global world, we will have to discern the subtleties of reading the Bible in different cultures. And this applies to the rapidly changing cultural patterns of the Western Hemisphere caused in part by scientific research as well as differences in the traditional cultures of Asia and Africa.

This introduces the third sabbatical activity, namely, to continue the search for a more accurate delineation and discrimination of the moral character of contemporary culture. We are all well aware that the twentieth century was not the “Christian century” many liberals at its opening anticipated. Violence and abuse, political manipulation, hedonistic self-indulgence, social irresponsibility, and selfish disregard for life have all been rampant. Sexual mores have radically changed, and not all for the better. Permissiveness, irresponsibility, promiscuity, and pornography have resulted in a pandemic of broken families and shattered lives, HIV, and AIDS.

And many a voice has been raised criticizing the church for its timid and ineffective sexual ethic. Undoubtedly the Christian ideal of the family has been under severe pressure, and the radical change in attitudes and laws concerning same-sex sexual relationships has been part of this cultural turmoil.

**The question is how human sexual relationships, whether homosexual or heterosexual, are transformed in the Christian community.**

All this is true, but it is not the whole picture. More importantly, it does not provide the defining parameters for regulating life in the transformed community. For too long, by a negative and not transformative process, Mennonites have seen holiness as separation from the “world.”

The question is not whether worldly standards for human sexual relationships are a model for Christians. They obviously are not. The question is how human sexual relationships, whether homosexual or heterosexual, are transformed in the Christian community.

Are same-sex impulses and relations innately lustful and lascivious, and thus not open to the renewal of the mind that Paul speaks of in Romans 12:2? Is it simply optically impossible for those with a gay or lesbian orientation to form Christian *agapeic* same-sex sexual unions under the lordship of Christ? Of course, some gays may feel called to celibacy, but are there *agapeic* moral options for those who do not?

Thus far the heterosexual majority has answered these questions for the gay and lesbian minority without paying adequately sensitive attention to their experience. Many in the heterosexual evangelical community equate covenanted same-sex unions within the church with the promiscuous, pleasure-seeking “homosexual lifestyle” outside the covenant community. They assume that only their own heterosexual impulses have the

potential for spiritual transformation. The only Christian option for gays, they hold, is celibacy, or the renunciation and alteration of their own self-identity in heterosexual relationships.

But one must raise the question of whether this moral equation is any more legitimate than equating heterosexual sexual “practice” between covenanted Christians to such a heterosexual lifestyle! Our gay brothers and sisters do not make this equation. We must begin to listen to these voices also!

There is a secular, hedonistic sexual culture (both gay and straight) with its philosophy of life that does not reflect the light of Christ. Tacitly if not explicitly the church has identified all same-sex erotic expression with this secular hedonistic philosophy.

Those of us calling for a thorough reexamination of the nature of “human sexuality in the Christian life” (the title of the official Mennonite church study in 1985) must make clear the spiritual and moral distinction between the worldly and Christian communities. Those of us who are calling for changes in the social ethic must demonstrate the authentically Christian character of the self-consciously Christian GLBT community.

Those of us who are arguing for broader parameters of sexual “inclusiveness” in the church need to make clear what is the agapeic center and what are the responsible moral boundaries in our concept of “inclusive” covenant communities. *Human* sexuality is part and parcel of the hu-

man dimension we speak of as spiritual. And *Christian* sexual criteria subordinate our sexual impulses to the cause of Christ.

Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that their “bodies are the members of Christ himself” (1 Cor. 6:15 NIV). We need, therefore, to elaborate more clearly the boundary conditions of the “inclusive” community. And just as Paul argued for one ethic for Jews and Gentiles in the early church, so there needs to be one “inclusive” sexual ethic for members of today’s body of Christ.

The parameters of sexual behavior are pretty clear in the New Testament, and they apply to persons of all orientations:

*Prostitution*, engaging in erotic sexual acts for selfish gain—financial, religious (idolatry), or selfish advantage (pleasure or power)—is never legitimate.

All forms of *abuse*, which includes rape, pederasty, molestation, and incest that threatens the solidarity and health of the family and society, are strictly prohibited as contradictions of agape.

*Promiscuity*, which cheapens and debauches the sexual relationship, and adultery—a form of promiscuity, which breaks the covenant bond, are clearly beyond the moral boundary.

*Marriage* is in essence a covenant relationship that includes sexual expressions of erotic bonding both for the procreation and inculturation of children and for mutual sharing and joy in each other’s life. Divorce is seriously discouraged, and polygamous marriages are implicitly forbidden.

While these regulations allow for cultural diversity, they mark out the moral-spiritual boundary for all Christian sexual behavior.

Fourth, we need to define *heresy* over against that newly adopted term, *teaching position*. In the Catholic tradition heresy has the general meaning of an opinion or doctrine contrary to church *dogma*, which is considered absolute. However, in practice the church defines differences as “pastoral” whenever possible to avoid excommunication.

Does a Mennonite teaching position indicate a dogmatic absolute position, which it is heresy to challenge? Or is it a serious attempt by the community to mark culturally permeable boundaries as it calls people to faith in Christ? What is the role of faithful dissent within the body of Christ?

Mennonites have been dealing with homosexual sexual practice as heresy that excludes one from the church. This is understandable in light of our long tradition of excommunication and shunning. But we need to develop a penultimate system of counseling, admonition, pragmatic disciplines, and censure to deal with unacceptable diversity.

Finally, in relation to the moratorium on further formal exclusions from the institutional church, it has been noted that what marks the Christian minority GLBT crowd as really “queer”—a traditional term many of them have come to accept for themselves—is that it wants and continues to plead for membership in the

church! It might be argued that it would be best if they just settled for a queer church like the blacks once settled for a black church. But GLBTs insist on using words like *inclusive* and continue to entreat, almost wheedle, the denominations for recognition of their experience of Christ and inclusion in the recognized body of Christ.

While this insistence is an irritant to many in the church, on second thought it should be considered a genuine attempt to resolve the differences without one

more schism. In the 1990s, when the Assembly Mennonite congregation in Goshen, Indiana, was set back from official membership in conference because of its inclusive position, its response was to keep on faithfully attending conference and doing tasks of service while maintaining its convictions. Perhaps it is time for us to at least provisionally honor such persistence.

There are many issues that remain to be worked through. For this task to be completed, all of those “naming the name of Christ” need to be included. At the end of the day the authority of the biblical text is what the Spirit-led community gathered around the Bible understands it to be, and we are still at the dawn.

—C. Norman Kraus, Harrisonburg, Virginia, is a Goshen College professor emeritus and has also taught in numerous other settings in addition to being a pastor, missionary, and widely published author.

### What is the role of faithful dissent within the body of Christ?

# Challenges of “Crosscultural” Communication

*A Response to C. Norman Kraus*

John D. Roth

I want to preface my response to the article by C. Norman Kraus with a clear word of appreciation for Norman’s lifetime of teaching, reflecting, and writing on a wide variety of theological topics relevant to the life of the church. Like many others in the church, I have benefited greatly from Norman’s creative and insightful approaches to biblical interpretation. Even though I have significant questions about the conclusions he draws in his article, I hope that my respect for Norman’s commitment to the biblical text and the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is clear.

I also want to affirm Norman’s attentiveness—in his reference to a proposal I have made regarding Mennonite political engagement—to the clear distinction between a *moratorium* (a word I very consciously have *not* used) and a *sabbatical*. The language of moratorium, whether the debate is over politics or homosexuality, can easily suggest some form of conflict avoidance; a sabbatical, as Norman rightly notes, is an occasion to suspend normal activities for a season

to reflect more carefully and to prepare for reengagement. His argument for a “Sabbath” of self-examination and prayer makes good sense to me.

I also appreciate Norman’s effort later in his article to outline some of the ethical parameters for sexual behavior that he regards as being “pretty clear in the New Testament,” along with his call for greater clarification about the difference between “faithful dissent” and “heresy” in regards to the church’s teaching position.

These are important considerations that have sometimes become blurred in our conversations regarding homosexuality. Clarifying these positions should help to address some of the concerns moderates and conservatives have had about the larger assumptions that seemed implicit in the arguments of those advocating a shift in the church’s understanding of marriage.

My critique of Norman’s statement will focus on only three points, though a longer response could easily address other issues as well.

(1) Partisans in this debate would do well to practice a “rhetoric of empathy”—especially if they are hoping to actually persuade those who disagree rather than simply rallying like-minded people to the cause. In other words: How would my arguments sound to the person who is most in need of my wisdom?

With that in mind, I encourage Norman to reread his opening description of the “Current Situation” with the same sort of nuanced sensitivity that he calls for the church to

model during the sabbatical conversations. This section strikes me as a very broad-brushed caricature of those people in the church who have raised questions about the merits of redefining marriage to include same-sex unions.

Among examples of Norman’s broad brush are these: “rigid authoritarianism of the literal biblical text as a control mechanism”; “fear as a motivation for action”; “a ‘faction’ imposing its political clout”; “taken its clues from the political ‘fundamentalists’ in the current culture wars”; an imposition of “the traditional cultural paradigm of hierarchical male dominance”; and so on.

Although Norman does not absolutely equate these descriptions with those Mennonites who have resisted the GLBT movement, the “guilt by association” is unmistakable. The insinuation, of course, is something like this: “We are reasonable and principled in our faith commitments . . . they are cultural assimilates driven by motivations of power and self-interest.” It would be very easy (*though grossly unfair!*) to describe GLBT advocates using a similar set of caricatures.

One could dismiss Norman’s position, for example, as one more predictable consequence of the sexual revolution in the West; or as a front for the “Hollywood leftists” playing out a hedonistic version of modernity that makes an idol of individual autonomy and our cultural obsession with sexuality and the body. Yet I am certain that framing the argument in such loaded language would not be



helpful in promoting the sort of “Sabbath” conversation Norman is advocating.

A rhetoric of empathy—arising from genuine commitment to conversation—would challenge us to be more sensitive in our language. We must think rigorously and speak with clarity, but let’s not lose sight of the fact that these conversations are truly “crosscultural” in nature and that caricatures of the Other rarely lead to higher trust or better understanding.

(2) A similar caution, I think, is in order regarding Norman’s call for a new approach to biblical interpretation. We are all inclined to challenge the Other to adopt an “empathetic stance and a willingness to admit that we may have incomplete information. . . .” (This is good counsel, in my judgment, on virtually all matters of Christian conviction.) But such admonitions are plausible only to the extent that the people issuing them are also genuinely ready to adopt such a posture.

Some of the language that follows in Norman’s argument—such as “not more redundant exegesis of the text”—doesn’t necessarily bode well for a climate of mutual trust and respect regarding biblical interpretation. The question all of us need to ask is this: would *I*—not my conversation partner—be genuinely open to new understandings? Or is the point of the sabbatical really to create a rhetorical space for convincing the Other of the merits of my own hermeneutic?

These are difficult questions. *All* of us who care about crosscultural or ecumenical conversations must keep

asking them of ourselves.

(3) Finally, I think Mennonites and other Anabaptist-leaning Christians need to engage more seriously our understanding of how ongoing *discernment* is ultimately related to *ethical clarity*, both of which the Anabaptist tradition has valued. For the party of movement, the appeal to open-ended (endless?) group conversation makes eminently good strategic sense, as does a strategy of keeping one’s issues highly visible on the collective agenda.

At what point, though, does the community have an ethical right—perhaps even an ethical obligation—to say something along these lines: This is a topic about which discernment has happened, and the verdict, at least for this moment in history, is in. While individuals are certainly free to keep insisting that the discernment has not yielded the right result (or has not happened in the right way, or has not been effectively communicated, etc.) at some point the group at large must *legitimately* be freed to move on to other priorities.

**L**et me suggest a parallel example: In my many conversations with mainstream Mennonite congregations on topics related to the gospel of peace, I have heard countless arguments challenging the Mennonite position on pacifism—some of them crude, some poignantly personal, some highly nuanced. I appreciate the freedom people feel to raise such questions . . . and I welcome them. Yet I regard my personal calling at this moment in the church’s history as one of defend-

ing—as winsomely, graciously, and vigorously as possible—Anabaptist-Mennonite teachings on biblical pacifism.

To be sure, pacifism is not an airtight logical, ethical, theological, or biblical position. But it is a teaching central to longstanding assumptions about what it means to be a Christian in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

I want to be part of a church that is capable of considering counter-arguments. But I don’t think we should be devoting endless amounts of our collective time and energy to hear people in the Anabaptist-Mennonite orbit making public appeals in favor of the Just War theory.

At some point, we simply have to say, This is an ethical conviction that shapes our core identity. In the fullness of God’s providence, we could be wrong. But a congregation that formally, publicly, and unilaterally declares itself to be in favor of Christians serving in the military has, in our judgment, declared itself to no longer be part of the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage.

I think if you asked Anabaptist-Mennonites about it right now, a sig-

nificant majority would likely say something similar about homosexual marriage: This is no longer a topic we are ready to keep high on our congregational or denominational agenda. Our teaching position is clear: Congregations or pastors who choose to take formal, public stances in opposition are, in effect, choosing to disassociate themselves from the understanding of the larger community.

Perhaps the time has not yet come for the church to conclude this

about the question of homosexual marriage. But it would be helpful to hear from Norman whether such an understanding is *ever* appropriate for a denominational body and what criteria would be relevant in determining that moment.

I’m grateful to Michael A. King, to C. Norman Kraus, and to the other contributors to this issue of *Dream-Seeker Magazine* for the opportunity to engage in this “conversation about conversation.” I look forward to reading the full range of responses.

—*John D. Roth, Goshen, Indiana, is Professor of History, Goshen College, and Editor, Mennonite Quarterly Review.*

**Our teaching position is clear: Congregations or pastors who choose to take formal, public stances in opposition are, in effect, choosing to disassociate themselves from the understanding of the larger community.**



## Rules Help Discernment

Everett J. Thomas

*But all things should be done decently and in order.*  
—1 Corinthians 14:40

For the first time in Mennonite Church USA's young history, a pastor has been disciplined for performing a same-sex wedding (*The Mennonite*, "Ministerial Credential Suspended," June 7). In an unrelated story, a congregation's membership policy was judged by its conference to be inconsistent with Mennonite Church USA membership guidelines ("Hyattsville Guidelines Found 'Inconsistent,'" March 14). Recently a Mennonite camp decided it would no longer allow an advocacy group to use its facilities for its annual Queer Camp ("Camp Friedenswald Denies BMC Space," May 17).

These actions in the last three months illustrate that our denomination is in a much stronger position than it was in 1999 and 2000 to respond to matters of sexuality and faithfulness. For that we can be grateful to the many leaders who worked tirelessly at three critical documents: first, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*; second, *A Mennonite Polity for Leadership*; and third, "Membership Guidelines for the Formation of Mennonite Church USA."

Although some individuals involved in these recent situations carry a great deal of pain—and may struggle to proceed with integrity—these events are not roiling the church as they would have just five years ago. That is because we have established the necessary framework of accountability and discipline. Consequently it appears that new governance structures are working. It took several decades to get to this point.

Our *Confession of Faith*, adopted in 1995 by both General Conference Mennonite Church (GC) and Mennonite Church (MC) delegates, was a decade in the making. It was adopted almost unanimously by both groups and is now the bedrock upon which our discernment begins. It also provided the foundation for two binational Mennonite denominations to form two national denominations: MC Canada and MC USA.

But though few expected the GC-MC merger process to result in separate national structures, even that outcome may be providential: with the Canadian government on its way to legalizing same-sex marriage, MC Canada is free to respond without needing to fashion its response within a binational church context.

A GC-MC committee spent eight years in the 1990s hammering out the second document now providing some order. *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* created a governance structure for authorizing ministerial credentials. The leadership polity document also is clear about what is expected of those who receive a ministerial credential. For example,

the ethics section lists "Major theological deviation from Christian and Anabaptist Mennonite understandings," as one example of a breach of trust that can cause a conference to initiate a hearing and review process.

But it was a third document that enabled our fledgling denomination to begin finding its way through the incendiary issue of membership for sexually active gays and lesbians.

MC USA membership guidelines allow each congregation to establish its own policies for individuals to be members within it. But no congregation can just do whatever seems right in its own eyes if it wants to be part of MC USA. For any congregation to be a part of our denomination, it must belong to an area conference—and each conference establishes its criteria for membership within it. For a congregation to be part of a conference, its membership policies for individuals must satisfy conference guidelines.

While some leaders and congregations continue to disagree with our confessional statements—or how they are interpreted—it is helpful to have the rules in place. They are necessary in our tradition, which has believed for nearly 500 years that the church is the discernment community—with ultimate authority to determine what is right and wrong. The new guidelines, polity, and confessional statements created during the formation of MC USA are now helping us do such discernment decently and in order.

—Everett J. Thomas is editor of *The Mennonite*, where this editorial was first published June 21, 2005.

## We've Come This Far by Faith

Mary H. Schertz

**T**his is not a time in my life when I “have it together” regarding the issues of the church and same-sex unions. Nor is it a time when I am using “I don’t know where I am” language to avoid saying where I am.

Earlier I have been at all these places. When I first learned about homosexuality, as it was called then, I was fairly sure that it was wrong. It was at least strange and made me feel sort of breathless—as if I’d had the wind knocked out of me psychologically. Mostly I was ignorant—I was in college and then Voluntary Service those years. I cannot imagine today’s children being so ignorant so long, but it was a different era.

Later I was sure that homophobia was both sinful and a justice issue—and it was as imperative to eradicate as racism, sexism, or any other kind of “ism.” Even at that time, I would not have equated a traditional understanding of same-sex unions as sin with homophobia. I made the same distinction that the Purdue and Saskatoon documents do.

Still, I understood accepting same-sex unions to be part of the package of learning and creating tolerance. The way seemed straightforward and, in most

respects, the path appeared to be well-marked and well-trod by civil rights movements of one kind or another. The church needed to get on with the program on this issue as with so many others.

I still believe that homophobia is a sin and a justice issue. But I am less sure that the path for the church is well-marked on the broader issues of membership and same-sex unions.

For most of my career as a seminary professor, I have simply not stated an opinion. Sometimes I have said I did not know what I thought or that I could sympathize with the arguments from both sides.

I have mostly been honest in this equivocation, but I have also sometimes been afraid. In rare instances as a young professor, I was afraid of my seminary administrators, but in many more cases I have been afraid *for* my seminary administrators—and afraid for the seminary.

Personal fear, fear for my “voice” or for my career, has not been a large part of my experience. I think that I have a healthy respect for what the church can indeed do to individuals. But I also have, by whatever grace or good fortune, a healthy respect for my ability to survive and even thrive regardless of what the church does to me, whatever that means.

However, in light of the vitriol that has characterized the discussion at many levels—congregation, conference, denomination—I have for years felt safer just not saying much. The seminary is a sturdy institution. At the same time, we are very alive to our denominational ties. Despite our

sturdiness and the great good will for the seminary in the denomination, we sometimes feel vulnerable. The volatility of the issues of church membership and same-sex unions has not been the only point at which we experience a measure of vulnerability, but it has been an abiding one over the course of my sojourn here at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. So I have taken refuge in silence—unsure in any case what I might have to contribute to the discussion.

**T**he reason I am breaking that silence at this point has to do with a conversation Weldon Nisly and I had at the Bridgefolk gathering of Catholics and Mennonites at Eastern Mennonite University in July 2005. He essentially put before me a call. The seminary and seminary professors, he said, simply must speak—and listen—on this topic. We must dialogue with one another. We must create spaces where church leaders and members may converse with one another. He understood that the faculty members have a variety of opinions.

He understood that we do not have answers. He understood the difficulty and the risks. He was not anticipating any miracle, or indeed any specific outcome. He was not expecting that we would support his viewpoint, or indeed any viewpoint.

He was simply expressing trust that such an effort, costly as it might be, would in some way that we cannot foresee at this time bless the church and those who have committed themselves to Jesus and to walking in his way.

I was honored with his trust—and the pain and hope from which it springs. I do not know if a person who has not been through the vale that Weldon has walked could have moved me so. But he has, and he did.

In the spirit of Weldon's call, then, let me say as simply and concretely as I can where I am on these issues.

### Experience

Experientially, I have two anchors, two wellsprings of hope in this muddle. They are my classes and students on the one hand and my congregation on the other hand. The letters in our church periodicals, various denominational actions, rhetorical battles of one sort or another have been dispiriting. But actual discussions in the classroom and in the congregation, difficult enough, have been careful, respectful for the most part, and honest.

We have not come to agreement in any of these discussions. But I am grateful for each perspective, for what I have learned, and for how I have grown in these authentic and heartfelt conversations with students and fellow church members. These conversations are where I have experienced the Spirit, and they are the source of my belief that we can indeed move through this quandary to some better place with God's help.

For a number of years, Perry Yoder and I taught a class on biblical perspectives on sex, power, and violence. In the various offerings of that class, we had students representing every imaginable position on same-sex unions. I think our focus on biblical

texts rather than ourselves and our positions was the key factor in the character and tone of these discussions. We looked at all sorts of texts that had to do with human relationships before God. We asked all sorts of questions and looked at Scripture and ourselves with a view to what was life-giving as well as what was right and just. We looked at specific texts in light of each student's and each instructor's "top ten texts," the "texts without which I cannot live."

The gift my students and Perry gave me in the years we were doing that class was a conviction that this discussion does not have to be alienating. It can, in fact, help us all to grow toward God.

Another aspect of my experience was my moderating my congregation through a discernment process on same-sex unions that resulted in my congregation being disciplined (and then reinstated) in the Indiana Michigan Mennonite Conference. That process, both the discernment part of it and the conference relations part of it, was tough. It was tough on us as a congregation and on us as a conference. It was tough on me as a seminary professor and congregational moderator. That process brought us, a congregation that tends to be highly articulate, self-confident, and resourceful, to our knees before God in a new way.

However, that perhaps too infrequently assumed posture on our parts did not give us any answers, at least not any answers that resolved the issue or satisfied us all. We did come, by the grace of God, to a point where we

could go on as a congregation, as a wounded and incomplete but nevertheless viable body of Christ.

I will always be grateful for that grace—and for the congregation. I learned that we have God and we have each other—and both realities transcend the challenges and opportunities the issue of church membership and same-sex unions put before us.

In all the muddle, we have survived—my beloved seminary, my equally beloved congregation, and I. We have not survived intact. We have losses and we have wounds. But we also have a kind of fitness of the soul. We may not be holy, but we are holier. We may not be wise, but we are wiser. We may not be as compassionate as we should be, but we are more compassionate than we were.

### Bible

As a Bible scholar, I have also, through the muddle, amid the muddle, come to a position. It is a position that pleases no one and pretty much distresses everyone. Perhaps because of its innate unpopularity, perhaps because of the fear to which I spoke earlier, perhaps because it has never seemed to me to be particularly helpful, I have never articulated it very fully and will not do so here.

But in the interest of responding, however inadequately, to Weldon's call, here is what I think. Unsatisfactory as this position may be to anyone

else, it represents my best effort to be true to the biblical text from which I draw life.

I think there is more than one way to read the Bible with integrity on this issue. There is more than one way to live a faithful Christian life in relation

**I think there is more than one way to read the Bible on this issue with integrity. I think there is more than one way to live a faithful Christian life with respect to this particular aspect of our humanity and our sexuality.**

to this particular aspect of our humanity and sexuality.

I think that one can read the Bible and, with integrity and sound exegetical and theological judgment, come to the conclusion the Mennonite church has articulated in its 1995 *Confession of Faith*—that sexual union belongs within marriage

between a man and a woman and that membership in Christ's body carries the expectation of that practice. Many people have articulated that position—none better or with more pastoral concern than my colleague Willard Swartley.

I also think that one can read the Bible and, with integrity, strong exegesis, and sound theological judgment, come to a conclusion that the Mennonite church does not espouse. That conclusion has not been very fully articulated, at least from a Mennonite perspective, although some of the authors in *To Continue the Dialogue* (Pandora Press U.S., 2001) make a significant contribution, as have colleagues and students in biblical studies over the years.

If I were to articulate this construct carefully, I would begin with

the texts that admit eunuchs and Gentiles to the covenant. I would then relate this dynamic both to the larger thematics of the canon (holiness, love, reconciliation, atonement, and so on) and to the specific texts on sexuality.

I think, although perhaps it is too soon to tell, that this work would lead us to recognize that sexual union between covenanted, monogamous same-sex partners may also glorify God and that the body of Christ would be enriched and blessed by such couples.

### Where Does This Get Us, If Anywhere?

I wonder sometimes whether the church can hold both these positions within its body. I only know that, however uncomfortably, I can and do hold both these positions in tension within myself. But that is not the source of my hope. The source of my hope is that we have as a congregation, a conference, and a denomination, thus far at least, held both these positions—one sanctioned and one not sanctioned—within our communion. And God has been alive in our midst.

Beyond our own congregational,

**I wonder sometimes whether the church can hold both these positions within its body. I only know that, however uncomfortably, I can and do hold both these positions in tension within myself.**

conference, and denominational success in holding together thus far, the source of my hope is more fundamen-

tally my baptism. Whatever else my baptism at too young an age meant or failed to mean, I was clear then and have remained clear that I was baptized both into a congregation and into the church universal.

There are far greater differences in the church universal than this one we are so painfully experiencing. Yet we all remain children of God and, despite countless divisions, at some level we know and recognize the essential unity of the church. We know and recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

It has been a hard journey these past years as we have struggled together to discern our way. Not everything we have done and said to and about each other has glorified God. There is ample room on all our parts for confession. But we've come this far by faith. And God is with us yet. Whom shall we fear?

—*Mary H. Schertz, Elkhart, Indiana, teaches New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and directs the Institute of Mennonite Studies there.*

## Seeing from Where I Stand

Ruth S. Weaver

I remember driving from Banff British Columbia to Lake Louise and Jasper one year mesmerized by the incredible mountain range as we traveled mile after mile. And as we moved toward those beautiful mountains, our view kept changing but the mountain range itself did not change. Meanwhile others at different places along the highway had different perspectives, each one partly true; all of them (including mine) incomplete.

I recall a conversation on MennoLink (basically a Mennonite chat room) and the wisdom of Martin Lehman of Sarasota, Florida. Martin had written that truth never changes but that one's view of truth undergoes constant change, especially if one is moving. Martin had used the motif of a mountain. He had reminded us that it is important while driving in mountains not to forget our earlier view, to remember what we saw earlier, to recognize how it has changed and how it will continue to change, and to know that God's view takes in the entire mountain of truth. God sees what all of us see and what we do not yet see.

The mountain motif and the Haitian proverb "We see from where we stand" illustrate my journey of un-



derstanding and beliefs about sexual orientation.

When I first encountered the issue as a young adult (I am now 65), what I saw was something “wrong.” Clearly we had to be heterosexual or the species would disappear, right? Only later did I acknowledge that, among other things, humanity was in a population explosion, blowing the importance of that thought out the window.

But from my own internal perspective, I did not comprehend the orientation, and of course it was immoral. So yes it was wrong.

Then along came Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen and singer who did orange juice commercials and led a grassroots effort to repeal a Florida law that banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Now I was seeing from a new place. In my head I thought she was right, but my heart said she was wrong. Okay, so it was immoral, but the ways she spoke about homosexual people reminded me of the ways the army trained recruits, demeaning whoever happened to be our enemy.

**F**or a number of years the whole matter was a dormant one for me. This was the case even as I was aware that my maturing children were seeing this (and other issues) from different vantage points.

One day a single friend gave me the gift of trusting me with the news that this person was homosexual. Then a second—and married—

friend did the same. Startled and curious, I now began listening closely to their stories of being unacceptable. I found myself walking and seeing from a new perspective. These are *good* moral people; I realized there are likely other good people I know who must carefully guard the truth of their sexual orientation.

I realize there can be multiple causes of sexual orientation and that I am not seeing the whole of the mountain of truth. I can't make blanket statements that cover the whole of this (or any issue). Yet from within my own experience, this is what I am seeing:

There are good, moral people who are gay and lesbian. This is not a choice for them. (When did I choose to be heterosexual?) We are who we are, heterosexual or homosexual. Some have known this since they were very young. Many have spent years in denial, willing themselves to change without success; praying that God would change them but without having that happen.

I also see that some church members believe all homosexuals must change—they are unacceptable as they are. Other Christians, while not requiring change, believe gays and lesbians must remain celibate. The painful reality for me is that too often when this issue is discussed, I experience a fingernails-on-chalkboard reaction when I try to listen with the ears of my married lesbian friend.

And I realize that if I were a lesbian believer in many of our congrega-

tions, I would not have the inner strength to allow my brothers and sisters to know who I really am because I would fear it would jeopardize my continuing to belong to the community. I would fear being marginalized, maybe ostracized and evangelized. These are my people—still I would be unacceptable as I am. Allowing myself to be known would be too costly.

I recall an incident that helps me to understand the disconnect I experience here. While spending time with an elderly woman whom I dearly love, the subject came up and her distress was obvious. “Oh, I sometimes think it cannot be that some people in the church don't think this is wrong anymore.”

I did not want to deepen her distress by discussing it, so I just nodded in sympathy, and we went out for a walk. Coming toward us was a younger, obviously (to me) lesbian couple who smiled and exchanged pleasantries with us, delighting my companion. After they had passed, she exclaimed to me, “What lovely young women!” Yes, they were, I agreed.

How, I wondered, could I point this out to her? As we continued walking I also asked myself, Who am I as a heterosexual to deny others the right to commit their lives to each other?

**T**hese are some of the things I am seeing from where I stand today: There are gays and lesbians among us whose actions or beliefs are not being attacked; it is their very selves that are unacceptable. We no longer (I hope!) use the Anita Bryant rhetoric, but our

speech too often betrays lack of acceptance of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters as they are.

Our perspectives on this issue seem to grow more and more diverse. I hear men and women in the church calling the rest of us to join them in dialogue, to continue talking and discerning and finding our way through this. But I am also aware of others who see no need for dialogue; the truth they are seeing seems very clear to them. Therefore why talk about this?

Looking another direction, I see those who are encouraging the church to accept gay and lesbian couples. I can no longer find it within myself to believe they are wrong.

Instead, I am finding within me an acceptance of all Christ-following couples (man/woman, man/man, woman/woman) who commit to a lifelong covenant and relationship of fidelity.

But I linger and stand at a place along this path where I can see and hear the official church description of the mountain, and it does not include this perspective.

Looking up, I wonder how the creating, redeeming, sustaining Holy One sees this mountain of truth. And us. I suspect that God's larger concerns are our love and compassion and openness to hearing each other.

God willing, I want to keep moving and listening and growing and seeing others' perspectives as well as my own.

—Ruth S. Weaver, Ephrata, Pennsylvania, is a spiritual director.

**If I were a lesbian believer . . . I would not have the inner strength to allow my brothers and sisters to know who I really am. . . .**

# For Neither Heterosexuality Nor Homosexuality Is Anything

Paul M. Lederach

**A**ugust 2004 marked my sixtieth year as an ordained minister in the Mennonite church. During these years I observed and participated in many changes in the church—precipitated by the world impinging on the church and by the Holy Spirit’s working in the church.

I was born in Norristown, Pennsylvania. Until I left home to enter Goshen College, I attended a city church, the Mennonite Gospel Mission. I accepted Christ as Savior in a revival meeting there and was baptized in that city congregation.

When a junior at college, I was named to participate in the lot through which would be chosen the person to be ordained a minister for that city congregation. That brief, simple, solemn, service changed the direction of my life. The lot fell on me. I was forced to face in a new way the shape of discipleship.

During my 60 years of ministry, I cannot recall a decade when the church was not amid conflict. At one

point eschatology was critical. Prophecy conferences were convened to sort out issues related to the “last days.” Franconia Conference was largely “amillennial.” Other conferences were “premillennial.” These study conferences developed mutual respect for classical premillennial and for historic amillennialism. The more recent Dispensationalism was discerned as counterproductive to Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding of the church.

After World War II, the passing of plain attire became a stressful matter. The cape dress, black stockings, the bonnet, the prayer veiling for women and the coat without lapels, a plain hat, and no necktie were considered appropriate attire for committed Mennonites. In the early 1950s, Franconia leaders hoped the spiritual renewal from the “Brunk Revivals” would reaffirm the dress code as a visible sign of obedience to Romans 12:2, “not conformed to the world.”

The old wineskins, however, could not contain the new wine. Leaders of the rural Franconia Conference were slow to come to the painful conclusion that following Jesus did not require regulation attire—something persons in mission work had long realized.

**I**n 1949, again by lot, I was ordained to serve as a bishop. This opened the way to serve many congregations. But this also was painful. At that time Conference “Rules and Discipline” forbade members to own televisions. To enforce this legislation by withholding communion, in the light of

the behaviors the New Testament called for as fruit of the Spirit, I felt like one Jesus criticized—who strained at gnats while swallowing camels!

The “charismatic movement” in many congregations led to conflict and division. Differing views about gifts of the Spirit and divine healing should not have caused rupture. Had those with newfound experience been more patient and those without the experience more tolerant, divisive actions might have been averted. Despite the sad stories of division, the charismatic emphasis brought more freedom to worship, more appreciation for the gifts of the Spirit, and greater recognition of the work of the Spirit in endurance and congregational life.

The conflict around divorce and remarriage was very difficult. When I was ordained, the belief was that divorce could be tolerated but not remarriage. Divorce could be forgiven. To remarry was to live in continued sin.

These views made evangelistic outreach difficult. Since divorce and remarriage was on every side, all too often a couple that came to faith had divorce and remarriage in their past. Mission leaders’ hands were tied. New believers could not be baptized or received into membership if remarried. Yet to suggest that the remarried couple separate (with the presence of children adding even more complexity), and/or that a spouse return to the original partner were simply not viable options. To break another marriage was not appropriate.

As more and more divorce and remarriage involved Mennonite families, the church at last was forced to face its interpretation of the Bible regarding this matter. Gradually, we learned that divorce is the sin of breaking covenant. Jesus allowed divorce for infidelity, and Paul permitted divorce of a believer from an unbeliever. We learned that remarriage is permissible and have found ways to embrace those who experienced divorce and remarriage.

In some congregations the role of women in ministry is still not resolved. Earlier in my life, when a midwestern Mennonite conference ordained a woman to the ministry, I, along with many others, felt the conference had lost its way. I said so!

Since then, I have changed my interpretation. I discovered that a text in Timothy and one in Corinthians were not the controlling texts. The New Testament reveals that many women served in ministry and that gifting by the Spirit was not gender-related. My opportunities to visit young churches in Asia and Africa, where God used women in founding and leading emerging churches, led me to see that my narrow interpretation of women in ministry had to change.

**N**ow the church is engaged in another conflict: how to accept persons with homosexual orientation. For a

**Now the church is engaged in another conflict: how to accept persons with homosexual orientation. For a long time I accepted the notion that homosexuals were perverts and homosexual activity was exceptionally evil. . . . Gradually, however, I began to rethink my position.**

long time I accepted the notion that homosexuals were perverts and homosexual activity was exceptionally evil. This was evident in the community, in the laws of many states, and also in the views of the church. As a heterosexual male, I found homosexual acts quite obnoxious. I had no difficulty labeling them sin. When I witnessed a gay pride parade in a large eastern city, these attitudes were confirmed.

Gradually, however, I began to rethink my position. It dawned on me that just as all divorces are not the same, so homosexuality is a multifaceted matter.

This came home to me as a pastor. How should I relate to gay or lesbian young people in the congregation? They grew up in Sunday school and summer Bible school. They went to such Mennonite church camps as those at Spruce Lake or Laurelville. They were active in Mennonite Youth Fellowship. They accepted Christ and were baptized.

When they came to maturity, they discovered they were gay. They sensed this from little on but could not understand it or talk about it. Yet amid the turmoil of this discovery, they wanted to follow Jesus.

And then, what about their parents? They wondered how to cope with their child's orientation. How do

they handle their own attitudes? How did they handle the prejudices, malice, and ostracism of community and fellow church members?

It became clear to me that neither the parents nor the son or daughter fitted the picture Paul painted in Romans 1:21-32. They had not turned from worshiping the creator God to worshiping idols. They did not exchange the truth about God for a lie. They were not filled with every kind of wickedness. Both parents and child wanted a place in the church as followers of Jesus.

Since New Testament days, changes in the church have been difficult. Accepting Gentiles was difficult. Refusing to practice circumcision, so clearly taught in the sacred writings of the Jews, was difficult. To see that observing the Law—with its moral code, holy days, and rituals—must give way to the law of Christ caused untold difficulty. The Law of Christ involved “love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:14), being led by the Spirit (Gal. 5:18), and bearing one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2).

This called me, as a follower of Jesus, to think about and to act differently toward persons of homosexual orientation. There is so much I don't know about homosexuality. How does it originate? Is it in-born? Is it learned? Can orientation be changed?

Like so many things, “we know only in part.” Until matters are fully known, love requires patience and kindness. Love is not arrogant or rude, and does not insist in its own way (1 Cor. 13). Clearly, the world's hatred of homosexuals, the ostracism,

and the persecution should not be found among believers in the body of Christ.

**W**hat then should we do? Accepting homosexual persons who desire to follow Jesus into church membership is a congregational matter. A congregation that discerns membership of a homosexual is proceeding acceptably; it should not be disciplined for this.

In the congregation the person is known. Corporately the congregation discerns readiness for baptism and/or membership. Here the individual professing receiving new life by faith is affirmed. The congregation can see and rejoice in what Christ has done.

Conference and churchwide structures should provide guidance for discernment. But top-down mandates, though well intentioned, tend to lose sight of the uniqueness of each person, and in turn cause members to bite and devour one another over applying or failing to apply a mandate.

We should also encourage homosexual persons to enter committed, faithful relationships. Paul wrote that one of God's gifts is celibacy (1 Cor. 7:6-7). Paul also said that the person without that gift and unable to practice self control should marry: “It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (1 Cor. 7:9). At present the homosexual person, if he or she has not been given the gift of celibacy, has no option like this. A committed relationship (I purposely avoid entering the complexities of what one should call this) would help to keep promiscuity at bay. It would afford intimacy,



companionship, and stability otherwise lacking. From the beginning, God saw the necessity for a helper and partner (Gen. 2:18).

Over the centuries the Spirit has led the church to new interpretations of the Bible—in relation to slavery, to attire, to women in ministry, to divorce and remarriage. I look for the day the Spirit will enable the church to deal redemptively with persons with homosexual orientation. To paraphrase two of Paul's statements about the "circumcision" or "uncircumcision" controversy, I hope the church will come to see this:

**"In Christ Jesus neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love. . . ."**

"In Christ Jesus neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love (Gal. 5:1)."

"For neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality is anything; but a new creation is everything (Gal. 6:14)."

—Paul M. Lederach,  
Lansdale, Pennsylvania,  
has pastored many congregations and held numerous denominational leadership roles. He remains an active writer with numerous articles and books to his name, including Daniel in the Believers Church Bible Commentary series.



## Heterosexual Relationships Remain the Norm

Marlin Jeschke

**T**he controversy over homosexuality is claiming the time and energy of many Christians, not just Mennonite but also Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian, and more. It may be helpful to remind ourselves that this issue too will recede. Remember the elderly woman who said she found comfort in those Bible verses that began with the phrase, "And it came to pass"? Remember too the forebears of the Mennonites and Amish who split in part over buttons versus hooks and eyes? Or other churches who split over the doctrine of "eternal security"?

I have declined to get involved in the debate over homosexuality, in part because the passing of time and people's weariness over controversy eventually causes the fires of conflicts to burn themselves out. And often new conflicts eclipse old ones. But my reflections have brought me to some baseline principles that guide me for now, even as I remain open to new facts and truth.

**T**he first principle is what we have all observed, and it is already observed in the pages of the New Testa-

ment—that not everyone is called to the relationship of heterosexual marriage. When I was growing up we spoke of “confirmed bachelors.” We also had “spinsters” in our communities. Sometimes these people continued to live with family. Sometimes they found companionship and living arrangements with friends of their own gender, likely for several reasons, including economic considerations, security, or to escape loneliness.

Unfortunately these people whose calling was not heterosexual marriage were sometimes teased and urged to get married, their “friends” offering to set them up with dates, though usually they were respected. Persons who don’t want to get into a heterosexual marriage *should* have their choices and decisions respected.

Now whether same-sex orientation is by birth or through social influence or both—on that I believe all the evidence is not in yet. Further scientific research on the subject will surely come. Still, if people are not heterosexually oriented, too much debate in America and in the church ignores the distinctions between same-sex orientation and sexual practices. There is growing evidence that the practice of sodomy has serious consequences for health. Apart from that, companionship of people of the same gender is to my thinking no problem.

**T**he second principle I recognize, related to the first, is that sexual/gender relationships should not be governed by an insistence on immediate personal gratification. We all, I hope, know people who did not indulge in

premarital sex or indulge in sex between marriages if they were widowed or divorced. Or did not get into extramarital sex if they had a spouse with health problems.

For the most part such people who refrained from the “right” to sexual gratification often had more and better sex in their lives as a whole and were spared the effects of sexually transmitted diseases to boot, not to mention being spared emotional pain and scars. In addition they often set a good example to their children.

But personal gratification in sex, as in other aspects of life, is almost an obsession in American society today, part of the right to “liberty” and the “pursuit of happiness.” One of the best friends I ever had—my first wife, actually—once said (not to me but to our children) that a person’s philosophy of marriage should be to make another person happy.

We’ve likely all heard the saying, “Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own.” That principle applies also to the search for gratification and happiness, as many people with AIDS have discovered. Be careful about demanding your right to gratification of your personal desires without regard to a consideration of your entire life.

Foregoing the right to gratification of sexual desires may give you a lot more happiness in the long run than insisting upon gratification and showing little concern for the good of the broader society. This advice applies to far more heterosexuals than homosexuals, but it *does* apply to homosexuals too.

**T**his leads me to the third baseline principle. The lifestyle decisions of people in our society should be governed much more than they are by the good of the next generation, our children and youth. We don’t have to look around us very long to see a lot of people in American society who don’t seem to care about what happens to their own kids, even physically, let alone morally.

Then there are all too many who may care about their own children but are not concerned about the children and youth of our society in general. We should all have heard by now of social scientific studies that show the importance of a two-parent family for the social and moral health of children—a mother who demonstrates tenderness and affection, and a father who demonstrates strength and security, although not without love.

Again, this principle applies far more often to heterosexual relationships than to homosexual or lesbian ones. We are aware of the plague of single-parent families where men have sired children but leave the mother to rear them, even if they may supply an ex-wife or single mom with alimony, which they often don’t until forced by the law.

Some years ago I read a manuscript by a friend of mine entitled, “Why God Should be Called Father.” The writer noted that in much of the mammal world of nature males sire

offspring but then abandon the mother to let her bring up the young alone. In the human species, he suggested, we have hopefully evolved to

the point where males can make the moral decision to be faithful to their sexual partners, their spouses, *and to their children*, giving their children the benefit of two-parent nurture.

The importance of the two-parent family for the future good of society may not seem to apply to homosexual or lesbian relationships be-

cause most of them do not involve children, at least not generated by direct procreation. For now heterosexuality remains the underlying shape of humanity, inasmuch as male sperm and feminine womb are still needed to produce children, at least until same-sex couples are able to produce children by cloning. In view of the importance of traditional two-parent families, the examples of same-sex relationships, becoming more visible or conspicuous all the time, even flaunted, may register an unhelpful influence on the children and youth of our society.

**M**any people from the gay community say God made them that way and that God made all things good. They embrace their identity. And many parents of gay children accept them and defend them against criticism. Yet I have heard of many gay people

**I have never heard a heterosexual person wish to have a gay or lesbian orientation, which again seems to confirm heterosexuality as the underlying sexual norm of the human race.**

saying they wish they had been born straight. Or parents of gay children wish their children had a heterosexual orientation. But I have never heard a heterosexual person wish to have a gay or lesbian orientation, which again seems to confirm heterosexuality as the underlying sexual norm of the human race.

Recently many members of the homosexual community have agitated for legal recognition of same-sex marriages. Canada has made this national law. Such churches as United Church of Christ and Unitarian-Universalist have already recognized it for some time. Some individual ministers have officiated at same-sex marriages in denominations that do not countenance such marriage.

Calling same-sex unions marriage may take care of some legal problems such as spousal benefits, hospital visitation privileges, and so forth. In the end, however, it will surely complicate our vocabulary, inevitably adding an asterisk to the word *marriage* in popular usage to distinguish between marriage A (heterosexual) and marriage B (gay or lesbian).

Even the demand to call it marriage once again underscores the

point, even if obliquely, that heterosexual relationships constitute the norm. Otherwise why should homosexuals or lesbians desire the term *marriage* for their relationship, a term that centuries have invested with the meaning of a heterosexual relationship, which is precisely what a same-sex marriage is rejecting?

As I read it, from the Christian perspective *both* the married life *and* the single life are callings. Both deserve respect. Both have their respective responsibilities with regard to sexual expression. In recent years the plague of sexual immorality, abetted by TV, the movies, the Internet, magazines, and the porn industry, is doing its worst to destroy *both* the institution of heterosexual marriage *and* the moral life of people in same-sex relationships.

—*Marlin Jeschke, Goshen, Indiana, is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Religion at Goshen College, where he taught for 33 years. He is the author of various writings on church discipline, including most recently "How Discipline Died," published in Christianity Today (Aug. 2005, p. 31).*



## For a Sexual Discernment to Come

Gerald Biesecker-Mast

### A Coming Sexuality

I confess a desire for a sexuality of word and deed to come, not yet revealed, a sexuality of the new creation and a new humanity, a resurrection of body, soul, speech, and text in the reconciling love of Jesus. I yearn for the dark glass of this world through which we peer at one another to be washed clean, for mind and heart to be cleansed of the human stain, and for the new creation to burst forth.

I find support for such an apocalyptic desire in the teachings of Jesus, who preaches a resurrection without marriage and anticipates a wedding feast in which all of us are the bride (Matt. 22). I also find support in the writings of Paul, who refuses to naturalize any form of sex as ideal, instead associating all kinds of sex—including both heterosexual and homosexual relations—with the form of this world that is passing away (1 Cor. 6–7). The body of Christ, on the other hand, is identified with the world that is coming to be.

This coming body, this body of Christ—God's body—destabilizes and subverts all other bodily relationships. This body, to which we as baptized members

have been joined, is a peculiar body in which head and body have been superseded by the Godhead (Eph. 5).

Imagine a body that is female all the way up to the neck with a male head. Then sprouting from the male head is Christ. Which makes the male head look a bit like a female body. And then when we see God at the head of Christ, we see that Christ appears also as God's body.

Is Christ male? Yes, insofar as he is the head. But if Christ is also God's body, of which God is the head, then Christ is also figured as a female God-headed body. Likewise, the male head, insofar as it is headed by Christ, becomes part of Christ's body—thus occupying the female position.

This is a great mystery, a harbinger of the resurrection body, neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave or free, a body to come, a sex to come, which is not one.

### A Coming Discernment

My purpose thus far has been to gain some apocalyptic momentum for a brief deconstructive trek through the texts appearing in this issue of *Dreamseeker Magazine*. Rather than to critique or affirm these texts, I seek to discover in them the trace of a posture not yet recognizable, not yet speakable, a discernment on the way.

How might the coming reign of God show up in the texts of our moment? More specifically, how might the sex to come, the body to come, be made visible—even if only in a ghostly fashion—in texts which argue about homosexuality, in church debates and schisms about gay and les-

bian covenanted relationships, in the sacrifices and disciplines taking place throughout the Mennonite church, even as we write and read?

The introduction by Michael King takes us on a brief tour of the texts that follow while seeking to establish a dialogical posture by which to evaluate the contrasting perspectives to be encountered.

We find ourselves immediately amid a drama in which the struggle to achieve “genuine conversation” is posed against various looming and experienced obstacles such as silence, exclusive concern for persuasion, reluctance to engage directly, desire for exchange only with like-minded people, and, perhaps most significantly, the social risks imposed by denominational dynamics and disciplinary proceedings.

The implication here is that “genuine conversation” would be significantly improved by the removal of these obstacles. At the same time, King acknowledges that for those who oppose homosexual relationships in the church, precisely the removal of these obstacles represents a profound threat to their posture: “The very act of wanting to discuss homosexuality tends to be viewed as radical—why do you want to talk about it if not to change things?”

Thus, King acknowledges here what is in fact the political and social significance of this *Dreamseeker* issue and of his desire for “genuine conversation.” Far from being positioned somehow between two sides as a broker for “conversations across differences,” King as editor and this issue he

edits can be read as a highly political challenge, indeed a potential threat, to those who seek to maintain the status quo sanction against visible homosexuality in the church.

Furthermore, his advocacy for providing “safe places for genuine conversations,” could very well be experienced as subverting the safe space the Mennonite church has established for normative heterosexuality, just as that heterosexual “safe space” threatens the experience of well-being and social affirmation that visible homosexuals seek. One is thus left to question whether there is (or ever could be) any such thing as a safe space for “genuine discussion across differences.”

However, to note that the discussion launched in *Dreamseeker Magazine* is both political and risky is not a criticism or a failure of the project, but rather an acknowledgment of our inability to escape history and conflict. Indeed, it reminds us that all of us, however we experience threat and trauma in this discussion (and some experience it more painfully and unjustly than others of us), we are nevertheless called as Christians precisely to take up the cross and seek the reconciliation that Christ has already accomplished for us.

Having found in King's introduction an unsettling acknowledgment of the risky terrain ahead, we move on to Loren Johns' challenge to the church to live up to its complex confessional call for both homosexual

celibacy and loving dialogue. The Johns text seeks to identify this official church position with a difficult middle location somewhere between “liberal reactionaries” who ignore the church's call to celibacy and “conservative reactionaries” who ignore the church's call to dialogue. He places himself firmly on the side of standing with the church, rather than “over against it in its ethical discernment.”

**One is left to question whether there is (or ever could be) any such thing as a safe space for “genuine discussion across differences.”**

Yet the movement in Johns' text exceeds the simple identification of this “middle” ground with the church and suggests the radically “inclusive” potential of the Mennonite church official statements to which he refers. For, if we follow

Johns' argument, we see that it is not that the church's authoritative texts simply make a call to accept both the church's authority and to recognize the limits of that authority. Instead the texts quite clearly advocate both positions—celibacy and dialogue—as authoritative.

This leads to a highly complex posture with as yet unrealized ramifications which already begin to appear in Johns' text. On the one hand, Johns claims that “the clarity of each call has been obscured by the presence of the other.” On the other hand, Johns calls on church members to accept the authority of church discernment, as well as the limits of that authority. If we apply the latter claim to the former, we have in Johns' reading of Mennonite confessions about sexuality the call to

accept as authoritative the mutual obscuring of the demands for both celibacy and dialogue.

Furthermore, we have a call to accept the limits of that “obscure” twin call. Put differently, the church is called to a loving dialogue that obscures the call to homosexual celibacy. At the same time the church is called to loving dialogue about the limits and problems of loving dialogue. The church’s authority demands its own questioning, including the questioning of that questioning.

That means the circle of valid activities according to Johns’ reasoning includes those he would seem ready to exclude: reactionary conservatives who have “wrongly blacklisted certain individuals and congregations for contributing to dialogue on this issue” as well as reactionary liberals who have “wrongly . . . taken far too lightly the discernment of the church in calling for celibacy on the part of gays and lesbians.”

On the one hand, it is hard to imagine such a radically inclusive circle being functional. On the other hand, does not the church as it is in fact constitute precisely such an impossible circle?

One faithful response to such an impossible situation is confess once again that Jesus Christ, not our own strategically developed organizational structures and politics, is Lord. Everett Thomas does this in a persuasive way by reminding us that both our creedal affirmations and the discernment process leading to such affirmations are rooted in the authority of Jesus Christ.

In so doing, Thomas locates the difficult, ambiguous, and “obscure” Mennonite church confessional claims about celibacy and dialogue, not simply in the authority of the church, but directly in the Christian theological conviction that Christ is the source of both truth and grace. More specifically, truth is identified with creed on the one hand, while on the other hand grace is identified with the historical consensus that produced the truth.

As I see it, the power of this recognition of both truth and its historicity, lies in what Thomas’ text implies but does not quite get around to saying. The historicity of truth undermines the creedal authority of any truth, and the creedal authority attached with a truth makes it difficult to recognize the truth’s historicity. Thus, to use the language from Johns’ article, the truth of creed and the grace of consensus “obscure” one another.

But here that obscurity is rooted in none other than Jesus Christ incarnated. As such, we cannot but recognize that our affirmation of Jesus’ Lordship—and thus of a commitment to both truth and grace—is not only an “absolute conviction” but also an obscure mystery, a christologically rooted impossibility. Holding on to both truth and grace, then, is not so much an embrace of mutually reinforcing postures but a destabilizing stance that opens us to what we are as yet unable to grasp.

Then here comes Weldon Nisly’s story, guiding our feet into the pain and suffering—the cross-bearing agony—of that impossible opening.

This is a moving story and in its narration resonates with many gospel and Anabaptist points of reference, including the memory of the sixteenth-century forebears who dared to dissent from the religious authorities in Rome and Zürich.

With such a heroic and inspiring horizon in view, it may seem impertinent or disrespectful to ask about the political force of Nisly’s story. Yet, as should be apparent thus far, I do not see politics as somehow a “fall” from grace or humanity, but rather the sign of the human historical circumstance in which the gospel appears.

In Nisly’s story, the familiar discursive landmarks of confessional assertion, on the one hand; and dissenting action, on the other hand, appear once again on the horizon. For Nisly, his decision to engage in dissenting action becomes a struggle to make his actions signify as “obedience to God” rather than “rebellion against the church.” The venue for this “obedience” is what Nisly calls the “pastoral task,” which he defines as follows: “to be inclusive without letting homosexuality be the defining, consuming, or dividing issue of the church.”

This is a worthy goal; at the same time, the story of pastoral obedience Nisly tells only barely manages to provide cover for the highly political choices he is nevertheless making in the story. We learn for example that the Seattle Mennonite Church has never reached consensus on the issue

of including those in same-gender relationships and that members of the church have expressed to Nisly “their delight or distress about our being too inclusive or not inclusive enough.”

Between these two claims about lack of consensus and multiple viewpoints we find two casual observations that the Seattle church has sent representatives to the Brethren Mennonite Council or Supportive Congregations Network meetings and that the congregation expressed written opposition to the statement on homosexuality included in the 2001 Membership Guidelines of Mennonite Church USA.

Finally, Nisly acknowledges that despite the absence of consensus (or as he puts it ever so carefully, “even as we have never sought consensus”), “we have lived with an implicit inclusion and more recently an explicit blessing for members in same-gender relationships.”

Nisly’s account here describes almost perfectly the conundrum of “loving dialogue” noted earlier. In this congregation, ongoing dialogue without consensus in fact means including those in same-gender relationships as well as providing support to organized dissent against Mennonite Church USA policies on same-gender relationships. In the case of Nisly, the “pastoral task” seems to have become identified with the controversial blessing of same-gender unions.

**With such a heroic and inspiring horizon in view, it may seem impertinent or disrespectful to ask about the political force of Nisly’s story.**

The distress caused by this choice is indeed acknowledged by Nisly, although at the same time relativized by his observation that every choice open to him on this issue as a pastor was sure to cause hurt and pain. My reading of his story highlights the extent to which the phrases “pastoral task” and “obedience to God” in Nisly’s narrative cannot stave off the highly political “rebellion against the church” that his actions could not but be experienced as constituting.

Yet exactly in this “rebellion” or challenge to official policy, and not simply in his desire to be “obedient” is Nisly’s action precisely authorized by official Mennonite church confessions which require us to “mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ,” and “take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other.” The rebellion of Nisly is a biblical rebellion, akin to the rebellions of Abraham, of Moses, of Rahab, of Rebekah—rebellions which also constituted sacrifices, often of those nearest and dearest, in obedience to the call of God.

At the same time, the actions of the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference can well be imagined as impossible actions, a seeking to be obedient that also constitutes a sacrifice. Is it possible that both the sacrifice of Weldon Nisly and the sacrifice of PNMC officials are flawed yet generous gifts to be received with fear and trembling and hope? Is it possible that these sacrifices could be the condition of possibility for reconciliation, and thus salvation?

In moving through the remaining essays, we find efforts to manage or negotiate the same kinds of discursive oppositions that we have thus far given considerable attention. C. Norman Kraus distinguishes between the irreversible chaos of Pandora’s box and the manageable disorder of Fibber Magee’s closet, aligning the gay and lesbian challenge to heteronormativity with the messy closet over the explosive box, but identifying the conservative reaction with the terror of the opened box rather than with the pragmatics of cleaning the closet.

John D. Roth astutely points to locations in Kraus’ text where his own rhetoric seems to reflect the very fear of which he accuses conservatives—thus calling into question the extent to which the Kraus text is able to sustain in its own rhetorical form the preference for Fibber over Pandora as the ruling metaphor. But Roth’s text, calling as it does for empathy and care from Kraus toward the conservatives, seems prepared to ditch such practices altogether when it comes to the place of gays and lesbians in the church in favor of a final discernment (or at least a discernment that settles matters for this moment, however long that moment lasts).

Put differently, Roth seems to be prepared to abandon that part of the church’s official confessional statements about homosexuality which calls for “loving dialogue,” an “ongoing search for discernment,” and “openness” in much the same manner that “dissenting” congregations are prepared to abandon the celibacy requirement for gays and lesbians. Roth

then equates homosexuality with military service as practices that the Mennonite church historically opposes and about which the church may therefore have the right to announce a final discernment.

Here I must allow myself one declaration of bewilderment: How is it that the Mennonite church has reached a point of drawing a firm line in actuality against a practice (same-gender relationships) about which we have said ongoing loving dialogue is absolutely crucial while tolerating in actuality a practice (military or police service) about which we have never said that open dialogue was needed?

To be sure, Roth does not demand that the church end the dialogue on homosexuality, but the amount of his text imagining in a somewhat favorable light such an end seems to me at least to suggest the political leaning of his call to Kraus for more empathy toward those who fear the gay Pandora. This desire for a final discernment (or at least sympathy for such a desire) in Roth’s text seems to overshadow his affirmations of genuine conversation, more empathy, and cross-cultural exchange. (This takes place in much the same way as we have already noted the call more broadly for open dialogue and celibacy, consensus and creed, obscure one another).

As we consider Everett Thomas’ claim that rules help discernment, we return again to the trenches. We are reminded of the suspension of Nisly’s credentials that took place under MC USA membership guidelines.

We are reminded of the decision by Allegheny Conference to find the practices of Hyattsville Mennonite Church inconsistent with the membership guidelines. We are reminded of the decision of Camp Friedenswald’s board to exclude programs for gays and lesbians.

And as I write, a gathering of Allegheny Conference delegates has just voted to discipline Hyattsville by taking away their voting rights and by denying all members of their congregation the right to serve Allegheny Conference or MC USA in elected positions.

These conference actions and the sorrowful experiences that resulted from these actions demonstrate how rules, even when they work, not only produce decency and order but also suffering and division.

The only barely veiled pain of seemingly necessary rules which appears in Thomas’ text rightly sends us to the Scriptures and to more personal narratives, for which I experience profound gratitude. Thank you, God, for the journeys of Mary Schertz and Ruth S. Weaver and Paul Lederach. Thank you for the ways in which their minds have changed and for the ways that our minds can change.

Thank you for the tribulations that confront our easy assumptions and accepted creeds. Thank you for the church from which many of us learned that homosexuality was wrong and then from which we learned that this assumption has

**Rules, even when they work, not only produce decency and order but suffering and division.**

caused so much pain and grief. And then from which we learned that our reconsideration of this assumption offends many and threatens to divide the church, just when we were beginning to be blessed by the gifts of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

Thank you for the desperate hope that many of us still have that the church will be able to discover a new thing amid your grace and glory and through the body of Christ. Thank you for Mary Schertz's immersion in Scripture, for her discovery and embrace of multiple biblical voices, and for the voice of hope that she offers and that we need.

Thank you for Ruth Weaver's conversation with Martin Lehman, the mountains of truth through which she has traveled, and her desire for growth and new perspectives. Thank you for the biblically rooted confession of Paul Lederach that in Jesus Christ neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality is anything; but a new creation is everything.

Thank you for Marlin Jeschke's recollection of a time before our affections had been so neatly divided into heterosexual or homosexual identities, for his call to selflessness in sexual life, and for his distress at the cultural subversion of stable families and the moral integrity of both heterosexual and same-sex relationships.

And thank you for the desires of Michael King for genuine conversation, of Loren Johns to stand with the church in its complex call to celibacy and dialogue, of Everett Thomas for grace and truth, of Weldon Nisly for pastoral integrity and loving obedi-

ence to the God of peace, of Norman Kraus for discerning recontextualization, and of John Roth for cross-cultural empathy and settled decisions.

Thank you too for those who will never read these texts, for those who are fearful of such texts, and for those who will read these texts and be offended. God bless us all.

### A Coming Body

How we long to exceed the bounds of our historical quandaries, to find perfect communion with the other, to leave our bodies for an unearthly harmony of spirit and meaning! Yet is not the meaning of the incarnation the great good news that we are being saved in our bodies, in our history, in precisely our conflicts and sufferings? The church, with all its divisions, heresies, and excommunications, is the flawed human instrument through which the reign of God and the coming creation is being revealed.

On the horizon an apparition is taking shape. A transgendered body with many heads and several minds, this figure horrifies and fascinates. As we beloved members of Christ's body look more closely, we might see that we are gazing at a distorted reflection in the dark glass through which we look. The apparition is us—we who have been washed in the blood of the lamb and gathered from every tribe and nation in anticipation of the Lamb's wedding feast. The Spirit and the bride say, "Come" (Rev. 22:16).

—Gerald Biesecker-Mast, *Bluffton, Ohio, is Associate Professor of Communication at Bluffton University.*

## Responses

With gratitude to Michael and the other writers, I offer a brief pastoral response. Our way forward in the church in relation to homosexuality must primarily be a pastoral way rather than institutional decision and discipline, as Everett and John presume. Founding MC USA by exorcising the "problem of homosexuality" did not build the church on *rock* but on the *sands* of institutional majority rule and one-issue discipline.

Current struggles may not seem to be "roiling the church" as Everett says. Still anyone close to the struggle knows that there is more than individual pain roiling many faithful people in the church. I have heard the cries of pain and distress across the church by many who long to find a more loving and just way forward. In this struggle, the church is not best led by institutional decision and such pain is not well cared for by creedal discipline.

Norman, Mary, Ruth, and Paul help us see honestly and faithfully through the eyes of differing experiences and interpretations. Mary rightly names the key tension of "whether the church can hold both these positions within its body." How well we address all aspects of that tension, including the role of *pastoral action, exception to the rule, and faithful dissent*, will determine whether we are a church flowing with the "healing and hope" we profess. The question is whether we have the will and the wisdom to "hold the tension" together in the church as we walk by faith.

Thanks to Gerald for joining this "conundrum of 'loving dialogue'"

with an exceptional "deconstructive trek through the texts" by articulating the problems and paradoxes we pose. The lightning rod of "homosexuality" has been a litmus test that hides rather than reveals these issues. Having engaged the politics of the state before entering the politics of the church, I am keenly aware of the "political force" of my action. Yet politics is neither my primary motivation nor the impulse for this pastoral act.

—Weldon D. Nisly

Each of these good articles made me think. I would have wished for some articles from the perspectives of MC USA denominational leaders. What are they seeing and experiencing? What are their predicaments? Where are they being stretched by calls for multiple responses to this issue? It would be helpful to me to hear of their journeys, their challenges.

—Ruth S. Weaver

Along with John Roth, I "want to be part of a church that is capable of considering counter-arguments" (though he seems to doubt my willingness or ability to do that). Thus I find it disconcerting that he criticizes my conversational style rather than my counter-arguments. We seem to be unable to talk about the possibility that there may be more than one biblically supported position, or to discuss the implications of ongoing empirical experience. That is my concern—not that we disagree on biblical interpretation, but that we cannot discuss the basis of our disagreement!

I concur with Mary Schertz that the case for only one biblical position on the subject has not been made. There is still need for what Roth calls counter-arguments or I would call them counter-perspectives. I concur with Paul Lederach that we need to take our church experience much more seriously. And I concur with Marlin Jeschke that for the perpetuation of the human race, heterosexual sexual unions must remain the "norm."

Neither side of the sexuality debate should expect to arrive at one unchanging and universal cultural application of biblical ethical principles. The question is whether we can live with such fluidity in interpretation of these issues as we have with many others.

Establishing an authentic biblical praxis for the constantly shifting socio-cultural context is a perennial priority. If one peruses minutes of the various district conferences, as I have, one will see that Mennonites have faced constant change for 150 years. John Roth wants to consider the sexuality issue conclusively settled, shift our "priority" to other issues, and "move on." But sexuality, social justice, and violence (peacemaking) are unavoidable, pressing issues and have been for decades! The explosive expansion of empirical knowledge and the continuing rapidity of cultural change create a constant and continuing challenge for response, reassess-

ment of positions, and reapplication in practice.

Thus we need to find ways to accommodate the sincere differences of understanding among us. This is no time for the church to pronounce rigid moral and doctrinal dogmas. Perhaps we should be defined more by the questions we consider essential to discernment than by the rigid uniformity of our answers.

For example, for some, pacifism, death penalty, peace, and reconciliation are not fundamental issues. Yet they define Mennonite identity as a Christian group. For some, chastity, sexual fidelity in marriage, and the importance of family are not central issues. For us they are crucial, and our Christian commitment requires us to "continue the dialogue" toward consistent application.

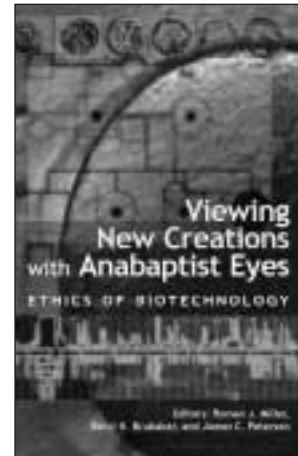
While Jesus did not leave us a detailed set of moral rules, he left us his Spirit and example. We mistake the Scripture as a detailed map rather than an inspired record of that example and of the Spirit's initial formative guidance in the life of the church.

For those who may be interested in pursuing this line of thinking further, Cascadia Publishing House will be publishing my book *Using Scripture in a Global Age* in 2006. There I include chapters dealing with the reassessment of biblical interpretation on both peace issues and sexual morals.

—C. Norman Kraus

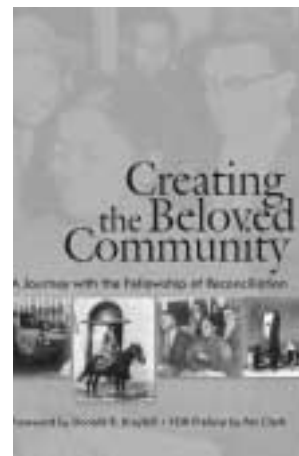


## New from Cascadia Publishing House



**Viewing New Creations with Anabaptist Eyes: Ethics of Biotechnology**, edited by Roman J. Miller, Beryl H. Brubaker, James C. Peterson. "It is so good to have a book that brings typical Anabaptist concerns and questions to the field of bioethics," affirms Nancey Murphy. "These authors emphasize communal discernment in facing tough ethical choices."

6 x 9" trade paper  
306 p, \$23.95 US/\$35.95 Can.  
Copublished with Herald Press.



**Creating the Beloved Community: A Journey with the Fellowship of Reconciliation**,

Paul R. Dekar.

"Creating the Beloved Community . . . speaks to all ages," says Donald B. Kraybill, "to all who reject the means of violence to break and kill and the simplistic bifurcation of the world into good guys and bad ones. It is a story for all who live and witness in the enduring hope of reaching the beloved community."

6 x 9" trade paper  
326 p; \$23.95 US/\$35.95 Can.  
Copublished with Herald Press.

**ORDER . . . From your local bookstore or**

• contact@CascadiaPublishingHouse.com • 1-215-723-9125 • 126 Klingerman Rd.; Telford, PA 18969  
Shipping: best method \$3.95 1st book, \$1.00 each add. book (Can. \$4.95/\$1.50); PA res. 6% state tax



Seeking to value soul as much as sales

For more information and order options visit [www.CascadiaPublishingHouse.com](http://www.CascadiaPublishingHouse.com)



---

### ***New from DreamSeeker Books***

*A Cascadia Publishing House imprint*



***Touched by Grace:  
From Secrecy to New Life,***  
Ann Showalter.

“Ann’s honesty and courage in the face of her husband’s homosexuality and AIDS not only brought healing to Ray and to their family but shaped the future of her ministry as a Mennonite pastor,” says *Norma Sutton*. “In addition, this book offers the Mennonite church a new model for dealing with the homosexual persons in their midst.”

*5.5 x 8.5” trade paper  
196 p, \$13.95 US/19.95 Can.  
Copublished with Herald Press.*

---

### ***A classic from Pandora Press U.S.***

*The original name of Cascadia Publishing House*



***To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality***, Living Issues Discussion Series 1, ed. C. Norman Kraus. “This kind of resource is the necessary beginning point for true discernment,” says George R. Brunk III of these reasoned yet passionate calls for all who care about this issue to deliberate under the Spirit’s guidance.

*Authors:* Kraus, Richard Kauffman, Marcus Smucker, David Schroeder, Paul Lederach, Melanie Zuercher, Ed Stoltzfus, Lin Garber, Michael King, Don Blosser, Carl Keener, Douglas Swartzentruber, Ted Grimsrud, James Reimer, Reta H. Finger, Mark T. Nation, Carolyn Schrock-Shenk.

*Respondents:* Brunk, John Lapp, Mary Schertz, Willard Swartley, Richard Showalter, Elsie and Don Steelberg, Elaine Swartzentruber.

*6 x 9” trade paper  
332 p; \$23.95 US/35.95 Can.*