To Continue the Dialogue
The Living Issues Discussion Series

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1. To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality
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   By Randy Klassen, 2001

   By Daniel Liechty, 2003
To Continue the Dialogue

Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality

Edited by C. Norman Kraus

Foreword by Richard A. Kauffman

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Foreword

NOT SO LONG AGO a group of conservatives in the Presbyterian Church USA “invited” the liberals in their denomination to leave. The conservatives were chagrined that these liberals were advocating ordination of “practicing gays” and performing same-sex covenantal unions. The liberals, not surprisingly, were incensed. This is our church too, they said, and we’re not leaving.

The pressing issue in the Mennonite Church is different: acceptance into church membership of non-celibate gays and lesbians. But the group dynamics are increasingly becoming politicized, in ways similar to what is happening among mainline Protestants.

I winced when I first saw a “Welcoming Letter” which appeared as an ad in the Mennonite Weekly Review (February 17, 2000). Neither the content of the letter nor the signatories were what bothered me. The arguments were familiar to me, and I found it interesting to observe who signed the letter (and who didn’t dare despite agreement with its content), some of whom I consider personal friends. Further, I knew the perspective represented in the letter wasn’t very welcome in official Mennonite discussions and publications. Thus resorting to an ad no doubt emerged from frustration at finding no better way to gain a hearing. But I also knew every action elicits an equal and opposite reaction. My wait was not in vain: though signed by a single critic, the reaction came in the form of another paid advertisement rebutting the welcoming letter.

I asked myself then, Is this the way we do church? Do Mennonites deal with a hot, contentious issue which seems to be ripping the church apart by carrying out a paid advertising campaign in an independent Mennonite newspaper? Although I didn’t say it there, this question was the inspiration for an article I wrote for The Mennonite, “A Third Way between Fight and Flight” (May 2, 2000).
Should we not, as a people of peace, I asked then, find another way for finding our way through this sticky wicket? And because I think there should be a third way besides fight and flight, I consented to write the foreword to this book—though not because I agree with all perspectives represented in these pages. That would not a dialogue make.

My interest in engaging in such dialogue is this: I fear unless we take another tack, Mennonites may be headed for the same terms of engagement as mainline denominations. For instance, when Gregory Dell, a United Methodist pastor in Chicago, was tried by his conference for “marrying” a gay couple, all three parties involved in the case hired public relations experts: Dell’s church and supporters, his opponents in the United Methodist Church, and the church itself. Each PR person tried to win the war of public opinion through the secular media, especially in the Chicago area. Eventually, this case became the subject matter for a Northwestern University-sponsored symposium on how the media become involved in and are used by contentious ecclesial combatants.

Perhaps this is an extreme example—but a lesson for Mennonites in any case. If we avoid face-to-face conversation, debate, and discernment and use instead the politics of confrontation, then we, supposedly a historic peace church, will have found no more redemptive a way forward than denominations seemingly ready to engage in Holy War.

What this issue should be about is discernment: trying to discern the will and way of God on this matter at the threshold of the third millennium of the Christian Era. I know, others will disagree with this premise. For some, the issue is standing up for an oppressed minority; for others, it is standing up for the truth as they know it. (Is there any other?) But if we can’t step back from our own positions long enough to hear the perspectives of others, then dialogue, if not discernment, is foiled. Then I see no way around the fight-flight syndrome.

Further, here is how I would frame the issue for discernment (others will disagree here, too): the biblical norm for sexuality is that a man and woman are commanded to leave their mother and father and join in lifelong union with one another. This was decreed before the Fall and was reaffirmed by Jesus (Matt. 19:5; Gen. 2:24; cf. 1 Cor. 6:16 and Eph. 5:31), despite the fact that he relativized the Levitical Holiness Code. The dilemma we are faced with is that, for reasons we still don’t entirely understand, a small portion of the popu-
lation has a same-gender orientation or affection. Such people are incapable of or find it unbearably difficult to be attracted to persons of the opposite sex; instead, they are drawn toward persons of the same sex.

The ethical issue, then, is not whether to change the norm. The Bible makes clear, it seems to me, that this norm is to be male-female attraction and marriage. The issue, rather, is how we respond to these exceptional cases. Do we demand that gays and lesbians try to change their orientation? Do we expect that they remain celibate, despite the fact that they, like most heterosexuals, burn with sexual passion (to paraphrase the apostle Paul)? Or would the Holy Spirit bless our making some exceptions enabling persons with fundamental same-gender attraction to enter monogamous, covenantal, lifelong, same-sex unions? Practically speaking, these seem to be the options facing us. And dividing us.

It is true that Mennonites have had a history of people peeling off on their own, of conservatives bolting because they think the church is moving too fast or making compromising changes; of liberals leaving because they think the church is too bound to the past, thwarting liberating or energizing changes; or of pietists of various stripes moving on amid claims the church is not spiritual enough. In many such cases, the schismatics are putting their own convictions, ideas, and religious experiences—egos, too—ahead of the unity of the body and this treasure we call peoplehood. Whereas I am not comfortable with the current struggle over the “H-issue,” as one chapter in this book calls it, I am even more discontented with the flight option.

What I plead for, instead, is a commitment to the common struggle of discovering God’s will for us. To do this, we need at least the following: confession, empathy, humility, patience, and prayer.

Confession: Here’s mine: I am hopelessly and helplessly heterosexual. Try as I might, I can’t imagine what it must be like to experience same-gender attraction or to be marginalized as a sexual minority. Further, I never chose to be heterosexual, although I enjoy it tremendously and can’t remember a time I didn’t feel attracted to the opposite sex. In fact, some of my earliest childhood memories involve feelings of attraction toward women. My experience no doubt colors how I approach same-sex orientation.

Empathy: Whatever stance I take, it must be tempered with awareness that the person whose sexuality I am discussing might be—hypothetically speaking—one of my children or a best friend.
Would that make a difference? More radically, what difference would it make if I were the one whose sexuality is being openly and vigorously debated?

Empathy, take two: We ought to be as empathetic in our responses to those with whom we disagree as toward persons experiencing same-gender attraction. Aristotle, I believe, was the one who said the mark of an educated person is to be able to argue a position with which one disagrees. Perhaps that is also a trait of a Spirit-filled Christian who longs to lovingly search for the truth.

Humility: It’s trite to say that none of us has the whole truth. But still true. Moreover, I wonder how we will be judged a generation or two from now. Given how different many matters look now than they once did, that question should give us all pause. We should all try to look back at ourselves from some historical perch about fifty years hence. Will we judge who we are now as too harsh? Too lax? If awareness of the potential for future judgment doesn’t make us humble, what will?

Patience: We need patience, not just with each other, but also with a process which doesn’t seem to yield either quick or easy solutions. Patience is a fruit of the spirit; fractiousness is not.

Prayer: What would happen to us if we devoted as much prayer time to this issue, personally and corporately, as we give to debate over the issues? I wouldn’t expect bolts of lightning to pierce the heavens on account of my prayers or those of all of us. But the terms of our engagement and the attitudes we bring to it might alter. I pray God it might happen. Soon.

Experts in “polarity management” point out that, whereas problems can be solved and conflicts resolved, polarities can only be managed. Perhaps this is an issue for which there is no resolution. We can only work at managing the polarities, by which I mean maintaining an emphasis on both the love and holiness of God, both justice and righteousness in the covenant community, both forgiving and enabling grace. Unfortunately, not many of us are capable, as individuals, of holding such polarities in creative tension. That is why we need each other in the church. And why we need to keep persons of varying perspectives in dialogue with each other. May the dialogue continue.

—Richard A. Kauffman, Pastor
Toledo (Oh.) Mennonite Church
Notes

1. Alasdair C. MacIntyre’s comment about moral argument in general is applicable to this issue: “The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which those disagreements are expressed is their interminable character. I do not mean by this just that such debates go on and on and on—although they do—but also that they apparently can find no terminus. There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement.” After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 6.

2. Mennonites, being a singing people, ought to keep two hymns in focus amid these discussions: “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy,” especially verses three and four; and “Teach Me, O Lord, Thy Way of Truth.”
Because homosexuality or same-gender sexual affection is a “living issue” that deserves serious discussion and an examination of various ways Christians understand the topic, To Continue the Dialogue is an appropriate volume with which to inaugurate the Living Issues Discussion Series. All books in the series provide guidelines for discussion as well as comments from respondents who begin the conversation through freedom not only to affirm but also to disagree with perspectives offered by authors or editors.

Special thanks are due to the many persons, both named and unnamed, who through involvement with To Continue the Dialogue helped launch the series. First to deserve credit is John A. Lapp. When he sent his response to the book, he suggested that such a series might be useful and that Dialogue was already nearly in such a format. Convinced, we immediately began to establish the series parameters and to polish this book into series format. Of course C. Norman Kraus, editor of Dialogue, deserves thanks for his many months of hard work on the book and for modeling, in his work with authors and publisher, the type of vigorous and candid taking of positions combined with flexible readiness to learn from the other we hope the series will help support. We also thank those who first suggested that a book on homosexuality be developed.

That is not to imply Dialogue is perfect. We wish, for example, that more of the writers asked to add their voices to the discussion underway in these pages had felt able to do so. Nevertheless, we are grateful for the many who have contributed insightfully, respectfully, and with some diversity of viewpoint to matters so frequently divisive. We pray that the discussion they help move forward will continue to unfold with the care they model.

—Michael A. King, Living Issues Discussion Series Editor
Editor’s Preface

THIS BOOK IS A SYMPOSIUM, THAT IS, A COLLECTION of chapters contributed by different people with varying points of view. It is important for readers to keep this in mind as they move from chapter to chapter. This means, among other things, that individual authors should not necessarily be held responsible for what other writers have said. And it certainly means that the editor does not necessarily agree with all that has been written. The chapters do not present an argument laid out in a rational order leading to a final conclusion. Rather they are like windows which give us varying perspectives on a common subject.

One might well ask what then gives the book its unity. What, beside the common subject of homosexuality, provides a connecting thread for the beads on this necklace? There are two strands. First is the concern for biblical interpretation or hermeneutics, broadly defined as both determining the meaning of the text and its ethical application (contextualization) in different cultures.

Second is the conviction that the church is not yet ready to declare a dogmatic conclusion to the contentious debate that swirls around the subject of human sexuality. The last word has not been spoken on either the meaning of biblical texts or the scientific nature and origin of sexuality, either hetero- or homosexuality. We do not yet adequately understand how differences in sexual attraction arise. While all the writers agree that any form of abusive, promiscuous sexual expression is immoral, we are not entirely certain how to assess ethical values in all homosocial expressions. Some authors lean one way and some another.

If there is an implicit position we are advocating, it is that the church may need to live with some ambiguity on this subject in the next decades. Even though we essentially agree on the exegetical
interpretation of the Scripture text, we may still legitimately differ on its contextual implementation. We may hold to the same basic sexual morality and "family values" and still differ in local applications of these values. Accordingly, we well may need to adjust the church organization to accommodate such differences, much as has happened in some contexts in relation to divorce and remarriage, and has happened among Mennonites, formally committed by confession of faith to a peace church position, when some who serve in the military also become church members.

My own chapters assume this necessity. While I contend that they present a legitimate and authentic reading of the textual meaning, I would not argue that they present the only possible reading. But so long as there are such legitimate differences, we need to be prepared to exercise respectful tolerance and acceptance of one another in the body of Christ. Some of our authors speak of the need not to be too certain or dogmatic in our "firmly held convictions." Others plead for putting person ahead of dogma, while still others present the different options which genuine and competent Christian scholars have adopted. It is not the intention of any of the authors to argue that there is only one indisputable solution for the church to adopt.

The interpretative process does and must go beyond scriptural word study and determining the historical meaning of the text. There are no revealed applications of textual meanings that can be translated into dogmatic social practice and directly applied universally to each situation. Contextualization inescapably introduces an element of subjectivity. The significance of social practices differ widely from culture to culture and locality to locality because individuals and local communities have their own idiosyncratic experience of culture. Further, anthropologists have discovered that cultural meaning is dynamic and constantly changing. It is this cultural dynamic and flux, not the ambivalence of Scripture, that makes the continual mid-course cultural adjustments necessary. And for guidance in that task we rely on the presence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

Because the data are not all in, and because human lives and well-being are at stake, this symposium advocates that the church’s stance should remain one of “dialogue.” Our stance, as Mennonite denominational documents of the 1980s urged, should continue to be an experiential one of study, examination, and exploration as we seek the mind of the Spirit both in biblical understanding and con-
gregational life. A number of church documents have begun to use the phrase “teaching position” to describe the Mennonite denominational stance on homosexuality. This is a happy phrase if it describes the true spirit of the teaching process which requires continuing openness to new information and experience.

Although we have sought balance wherever feasible, the word dialogue in the title should not lead the reader to expect that this volume fully balances views pro and con on the issues involved. Dialogue is not polite adversarial debate. Neither have we tried to balance representative institutional views. We have, in fact, avoided advocacy papers which argue explicitly either for or against the acceptance of monogamous homosexual unions in the church. Thus we have aimed not simplistically to pit the “traditional” against the “innovative,” the “exclusive” against the “inclusive” positions. Our authors vary in their point of view on this issue while frequently pleading for a continuing openness to developing understanding both of biblical and experiential data.

Those who take an absolutist position on either side of the question will naturally see this as weakness. We hope, however, that our readers will be persuaded that there is room in the church for Christians of both persuasions who remain open to continuing the dialogue.

I would be remiss if I did not point out that this symposium is the result of a close collaboration between the editor and Pandora Press U. S. publisher Michael A. King. He not only encouraged and nurtured the process but has also helped shape its content. All of us, editor and authors, owe him a special debt of gratitude. In addition Michael and I are grateful to colleagues behind the scenes who encouraged and supported the project with both words and money. And we are indeed grateful to our authors for their generous and timely contributions.

—C. Norman Kraus, Editor
Harrisonburg, Virginia
Chapter 7

Mennonites Shift Focus from Morality to Who Belongs

Michael A. King

During 1997-1998 I studied the delegate conversations that led to the 1998 excommunication of Germantown Mennonite Church from Franconia Conference, a Mennonite denominational body to which Germantown up to that point belonged. As part of that study, I prepared the history offered here of how conversations in the larger denomination and eventually at Germantown gradually shifted from morality to polity. As I examine below, the debate moved from the morality of same-sex sexual expression to whether persons or congregations whose theology of homosexuality was more inclusive than that of the denomination should be included or excluded as members—or whether a third way between these poles might be found.

This is by no means to suggest that discussion or discernment of moral issues has ceased to take place. Obviously homosexuality continues to generate much ongoing wrestling with matters of morality. At the same time, my suggestion is that the leading edge of the conversation has over time shifted somewhat from what is right or wrong to what, amid the continuing moral tensions, the polity options shall be.

My history begins with 1987. Of course starting the narrative here is potentially an arbitrary decision; what happened in 1987 was shaped by previous currents of church polity and conversation. But
for my purposes starting with events in 1987 seems less than arbitrary, because the Franconia conversations, as well as most denominational discussion, have been explicitly shaped not so much by what preceded 1987 as by the ripples sent out from and defined in Purdue.

**The Purdue 87 Statement**

At “Purdue 87,” held at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana, the Mennonite Church, through a biennial North American assembly of delegates, attempted to define its stance on homosexuality. The Human Sexuality in Christian Life Committee, a denominational committee charged with helping Mennonites over six years to discuss and clarify their stand on homosexuality, had produced a report which included concern to love “those with a different sexual orientation” but also attempted to clarify the boundaries of acceptable sexual expression. Delegates voted to approve the report. These key words were later to become those meant whenever the Purdue 87 statement was referred to and remained so significant they were reproduced in the 1997 Franconia delegates booklet:

- We confess our fear and repent our absence of love toward those with a different sexual orientation and our lack of understanding for their struggle to find a place in society and in the church.
- We covenant with each other to study the Bible together and expand our insight into the biblical teachings related to sexuality. We understand the Bible to teach that genital intercourse is reserved for a man and woman in a marriage covenant and that violation even in the relationship, i.e. wife battering, is a sin. It is our understanding that this teaching also precludes premarital, extramarital, and homosexual genital activity. We further understand the Bible to teach the sanctity of the marriage covenant and that any violation of this covenant is sin.
- We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burdens 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. (Praying for the Church Beyond Us, 1997, 29)

That the delegates’ adoption of this statement was a defining
moment in an ongoing flow of effective history but not a damming of the current seems evident in this news report:

Some delegates—especially those with a hardline position against homosexuality—seemed frustrated that six years of work had still not produced a clear denominational stand. A few others, like Sam Steiner of Ontario/Quebec, argued that the Bible itself “is not that clear” on homosexuality. Martin [chair of the Human Sexuality committee] pleaded for compassion and tolerance, and Moderator-Elect Ralph Lebold asked the delegates to accept the fact that there are differences among them on the subject.

David Thomas of Lancaster suggested that the affirmation/confession/covenant section of the committee’s report could be used as “a statement that we can take back to our congregations.” The delegates agreed—by a large majority. (Gay and lesbian Mennonites in attendance at Purdue 87, through a statement they issued later, said they felt rejected by the action.) (Shenk, 1987, 533)

The plurality of delegate viewpoints, the call even by the Moderator-Elect (the denomination’s top elected leader) for acceptance of different viewpoints, and the fact that a delegate helped turn what had been a “report” into a “statement”—such factors point to the inherent ambiguity of the delegates’ action. What had they done? Had they approved rules binding on all Mennonites? Or a more informal report to their congregations? In addition, whatever the official or unofficial status of the statement, it called for Mennonites to “remain in loving dialogue . . . recognizing that . . . the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance.” What did this mean? Was the statement a provisional one, to be revised as further truth was glimpsed?

For eight years the status of the statement as well as the meaning of the “loving dialogue” phrasing remained unresolved. Precisely this ambiguity then became a resource for those who preferred that the church stance not be interpreted solely in exclusivist terms or as having churchwide authority. Ensuing tensions between rival interpretations led to a denominational need to lessen the ambiguity.

Efforts at clarification then involved such moves as a January 1995 consultation of Mennonite church leaders reported on by J. Lorne Peachey. There General Secretary (highest denominational staff position) James M. Lapp responded this way to questions about
the role of the statement: “General Assembly statements have the authority conferences attribute to them. . . . If conferences accept them as authoritative, they are” (Peachey, 1995a).

In contrast, Mary Burkholder, the executive secretary of the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada (one of the conferences, or regional clusters of congregations, to which Lapp was referring), noted this: “I would have thought that when a statement is passed by General Assembly, it has authority for the life of the church” (Peachey, 1995a).

Other participants in the consultation noted the difficulty of determining at which level of denominational life accountability was finally lodged. No definitive conclusions were reached, but participants “agreed the answers need not come as ‘either-or’ in resolving the questions and tensions.” They explored a range of options conferences had in “dealing with churches that adopt a practice different from the formal position of the Mennonite Church on homosexuality.” These options included the following (1) terminating a congregation’s conference membership or encouraging the congregation voluntarily to seek membership elsewhere; (2) accepting a congregation without question; or (3) continuing a relationship with the congregation while placing restrictions on it—such as by demoting it from full to “associate membership” in the conference. Additional possibilities included allowing “practicing homosexuals” to be congregational members but not leaders at any denominational level, or establishing a few “congregations of refuge” permitted to accept practicing homosexuals (Peachey, 1995a).

In this consultation report can be seen the continuing ambiguity regarding the denomination’s position on homosexuality and what range of freedom congregations and conferences had to determine their own stand on the issue. Also evident in the report, however, are moves toward clarification, particularly in the outlines of the three options—exclusion, inclusion, or inclusion with restrictions—for conference handling of dissenting congregations that were to emerge as key in the Franconia discussions.

The report on these options marks a key shift in the denominational discussions. Here a significant move is being made from questions of whether or in what ways homosexuality is sinful to how different stances should be dealt with. This is evident in responses to the report by writers who hold contrasting positions but who focus on the managing of differences. On the one hand, Ryan Ahlgrim is disappointed that consultant participants did not address the possibil-
ity that a congregation could have homosexual members but not be at odds with the denominational positions. He contends that this could be the case, because the Purdue statement “identifies homosexual genital activity as a sin, but it says nothing about forbidding church membership to homosexuals” (1995). On the other hand, Ruth and Timothy Stoltzfus Jost “are dismayed and deeply concerned that our church would consider approving, or in any way accepting, any practice the Bible calls sin” (1995).

For some months, the Gospel Herald records show, ambiguity fostered continuing discussion along similar lines. Ambiguity persisted even as some conferences began to make decisions regarding congregations which accepted practicing homosexual members. In April 1995, Illinois Conference delegates “took steps toward the exclusion of two . . . congregations” even as a guest speaker “cautioned against rushing to judgment” (Hockman, 1995). In May, as Cummings reports, Franconia Conference delegates acted to place Germantown Mennonite Church on associate member status for two years, meaning that the congregation “may send nonvoting delegates to conference assemblies and members serving in conference capacities may complete their terms.” During that period Germantown was asked

not to advocate for a position on homosexuality different than the conference, refrain from sanctioning same-sex covenantings, and support the conference in upholding the ideals of heterosexual relationship and marriage. (1995)

Both conference actions prompted numerous letters continuing the debate regarding the status of the Purdue statement and its meaning. Thirty-nine people signed a June 1995 open letter asking that “the efforts to expel churches that have gay and lesbian members be discontinued” because “Our church statements on homosexuality have not required exclusion from membership but, rather, openness to dialogue” (Ahlgrim et al., 1995). In early August, ten more persons added their names to the original 39, noting that the “Mennonite church statement on homosexuality calls us to openness to dialogue, not exclusion” (Borntrager et al., 1995).

In contrast, on August 29, fourteen members of a men’s Bible class supported the Franconia action, contending that “sin must be purged from among us if we expect God’s blessing as a Mennonite Church” (Bachman et al., 1995). Twenty-seven members of another congregation expressed their strong concern “about the way that
some people apparently desire to use Scripture to justify including practicing homosexuals into church membership” (Byrne et al., 1995).

The multiple-signatory letters were perhaps the last straw for Gospel Herald editor Lorne Peachey, who on August 29 (1995b), in the same issue in which he published the final such letters, declared a moratorium on letters to the editor on homosexuality except “if a letter addresses something we print.” Peachey noted that up to that point all letters had been published in keeping with the “Mennonite Church official statement on homosexuality—which calls the practice sin but also urges continued discussion with those who disagree. . . .” But now perhaps a period of silence would be more beneficial, “to allow us to catch our breath” and “pray, study the Scriptures, and listen to what God may be saying to the church” (1995).

Still ambiguity persisted. Then, according to a December news report (Gospel Herald, 1995), a “news story in the church press about 12 Mennonite and Brethren congregations which have publicly stated that they welcome gay, lesbian, and bisexual people as members” led to a sharp clarification of lines. The Mennonite Church General Board asked the Council on Faith, Life, and Strategy (CFLS), which reports to it, to resolve the ambiguity. CFLS indicated that the Purdue statement “is the position of the Mennonite Church as well as of CFLS and the General Board” and stressed that

the words “loving dialogue” found in this document should not be construed to mean that the homosexual issue is unresolved or that the position of the church is in question. . . .

Rather, “loving dialogue” relates to the area of pastoral care in terms of biblical teaching on the denominational position, care of families and individuals who are touched by this issue, admonitions to those with a homosexual orientation, sponsorship of ministries that are directed toward calling persons out of homosexual practices and restoration in the body of believers, and dialogue that reflects the love of Jesus. (Council on Faith, Life, and Strategy, 1995)

Despite such efforts to reduce ambiguity, the fullest tests of the church’s position continued to unfold in the conferences. The key debate continued to be how differences should be managed. Gospel Herald summarized 1996 developments this way:

Three area conferences deal with homosexuality in annual meetings. Recommendation to oust two churches who [sic]
don’t make homosexual practice a test of membership fails by three delegate votes at Illinois Conference meeting. Indiana-Michigan Conference delegates pass statement on sexuality and membership, and Southeast Conference moves toward separation with congregation which accepted into membership a gay couple living in a covenanted relationship. (1996)

On April 15, 1997, precisely while the Franconia cluster conversations on which my study focused were under way, a significant event took place. As Gospel Herald reported, by a roughly three-fourths vote Illinois Conference, whose earlier vote to expel two congregations had failed, agreed to place the congregations “under discipline” (Sommer, 1997). This was a new form of sanction delegates had created by amending their previous constitution. Such discipline stopped short of expulsion of congregations while removing from them conference voting privileges, possibly conference funds if they were receiving them, and the right to serve on conference commissions. Then late in 1997 Franconia did decide to expel Germantown congregation, effective in early 1998.

In the years since, as various chapters in this book amply document, the struggle has continued to define who shall be considered in or out of an area conference or the emerging Mennonite Church USA and on what terms. The end of the story may lie years or even decades ahead.

Notes

1. The study is reported in full in King, 2001. This chapter is adapted from that work and is used by permission of Pandora Press U.S.

2. Although most chapters in this book follow MLA endnote style, this chapter and chapter 9, which are among those more oriented toward social science, follow the author-date style more common for social scientific writing.

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