

Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the  
Mennonite Church USA

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## **Chapter One: Naming the Violence of Process: Reframing a Pacifist Conflict**

*Systems of classification, such as those of 'diversity,' enact a form of symbolic violence...But there are also different kinds of violence. In addition to the violence of excessive categorization and disciplining, there is the violence of the appropriation of one's labor; the violence of imposed silence; the violence of being forced to struggle for the right to have a right; the violence of simultaneous erasure and overexposure; the violence of not being able to register one's own claims about the world; and ultimately, the violence of being required to behave as if democracy and reasonableness truly existed, when in truth they do not.*

M. Jacqui Alexander, "Anatomy of a Mobilization"<sup>18</sup>

*I've come to the conclusion that process is how Mennonites justify and inflict violence. As long as we have a process, we have been fair, good, and kind people.*

Carol Wise, Executive Director, Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBT Interests<sup>19</sup>

On April 5, 2014, Patrick Ressler, a recent graduate of Goshen College in Goshen Indiana, and the coordinator of the Philadelphia Gay Men's Chorus, left a comment after an article on the paper's website. The article in question described a campus discussion about the possibility of changing Goshen College's hiring policy to end its discriminatory practices against openly LGBTQ applicants. As a Mennonite college, Goshen's hiring policy reflected (and still reflects) the official position of its parent denomination, the Mennonite Church USA. In the article, college officials explain that they have, for the time being, halted the process of re-evaluating their discriminatory policy, out of respect for the Mennonite Church USA's continuing debate about what the article refers to as

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<sup>18</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 141.

<sup>19</sup> Carol Wise, interview with author, October 22, 2013.

“the acceptance of same-sex individuals [sic].”<sup>20</sup> Ressler responds to them with the following:

Goshen College, please be my advocate.

I am becoming more and more convinced that the ability to accept myths of ‘peace’ and ‘unity’ in the Mennonite Church is both a position of distinct privilege and a violent dismissal of the lived experiences of LGBTQ people.

In this Record article, President James Brenneman states that “...it is the ‘slow, methodical, careful, excruciating process that has kept the peace of the Mennonite church intact.’”

I challenge Goshen College to understand that the ‘excruciating process’ is far more dire for those who are excluded from rites and rituals of the Church and employment at its Institutions; that the ability to find ‘peace’ in the slow, tentative unfolding of justice in the Mennonite Church is a position of non-queer privilege; and that perpetuating the idea of the Mennonite Church as ‘intact’ devalues and misrepresents the painful history of LGBTQ Mennonites banging on the doors of the Church and its Institutions, pleading to be let in.

Until the leadership of Goshen College, Mennonite Church USA, and any other institution determining the worthiness of God’s children can recognize and affirm the lived experience of LGBTQ people as if it was their own, they will not understand their Institution as part of the problem, nor the need for action—nor

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<sup>20</sup> Kate Stoltzfus, “Leaders Entertain Hiring Policy Questions,” *The Record*, April 3, 2015, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://record.goshen.edu/2014/04/30100-leaders-entertain-hiring-policy-questions>.

their vital role in that change.<sup>21</sup>

Ressler's comment aims straight at one of the most cherished notions of Mennonites: that they are a peaceful people. This chapter takes seriously Ressler's claim that peace within the Mennonite church is a myth, and that privilege dictates who has access to particular ways of being peaceful. It interrogates how conscious practices of peace can themselves be experienced as violent. This work arises from six years of prolonged engagement with LGBTQ Mennonites, through ethnographic research, oral history interviews, and many informal conversations in which queer-identified Mennonites (and, often, their straight allies) used references to weaponry and war to describe what the church was doing and has done to them.

While conversations and debate about the oppression of queer people are current and ongoing in the Mennonite church, many LGBTQ Mennonites have been naming this oppression *as violence*, in one way or another, for almost four decades. While Mennonites can and do perpetrate physical violence against queer bodies, the violence that advocates like Ressler is identifying is not exclusively or even primarily physical. In his ethnography of transgender as a discursive category, David Valentine explains how his informants' namings of physical and discursive violences are linked: "All draw on a similar epistemology and causality: that representations and ideologies have effects in and of themselves; that representations are linked in a causal way to institutions beyond the power of the individual; that individuals are bound to enact the demands of

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<sup>21</sup> Patrick Ressler, April 5, 2014, comment on Kate Stoltzfus, "Leaders Entertain Hiring Policy Questions," *The Record*, April 3, 2014, <http://record.goshen.edu/2014/04/30100-leaders-entertain-hiring-policy-questions>.

hegemonic representations; and that those who are acted on are victims.”<sup>22</sup> What is perhaps most radical about the work of queer Mennonite advocates who speak of violence is their ability to identify hegemony in the practices of Mennonite communities and institutions.

This framing has chafed against those of church leaders who prefer to depict their institutions and communities as engaging in a necessarily slow process of “discernment” over LGBTQ inclusion as a divisive and polarizing political issue. In structured conversations, denominational conventions, committee meetings, Sunday school circles, and many other less formal settings, queer people have *been discussed*; they are *a concern*; they have been the subjects of *dialogue* and *discernment*. They have, on numerous occasions, been asked to *share their stories*. My italics are not meant to signify complete cynicism as to the results of such processes (though cynicism may be warranted), but rather to highlight the degree to which the terms of these processes constitute queer Mennonites as an unsolvable problem. Thus, I echo W.E.B. Dubois in posing this question: how does it feel to be an unsolvable problem?<sup>23</sup> For queer Mennonites, what material and affective experiences result from being constituted in this way?

Mennonite conflicts over sexual and gender diversity reflect those in other U.S. contexts, both religious and secular, and the purpose of this study is not to argue for Mennonite uniqueness. The idea of being Other, of being not only theologically but also culturally separate from other Christians, has shaped the way many Mennonites think

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<sup>22</sup> Valentine, David. *Imagining Transgender*, 220.

<sup>23</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Unabridged edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 1.

about themselves, particularly whites who identify as “ethnic Mennonites” and trace their ancestry back to European Anabaptist communities. At the same time, Mennonites in the U.S. are shaped by prolonged engagement with evangelicalism. As historian Felipe Hinojosa has argued, evangelicalism has probably been the most powerful force drawing white U.S. Mennonites away from separatism in the twentieth century. In this way, Mennonites were like many other mid-century evangelical Christians who moved away from separatist fundamentalism and towards organized missions and outreach.<sup>24</sup>

LGBTQ Mennonites in MCUSA negotiate the denominational context created by this history. To a large extent, the history of Mennonite evangelicalism has helped to create a dominant Mennonite discourse in which missions are associated with growth and racial diversity. For queer Mennonites, this presents a challenge, as evangelical theologies typically emphasize gender hierarchy and heterosexual supremacy.<sup>25</sup> Given that racialized identity and evangelicalism are mapped onto one another in Mennonite contexts, dominant discourse in MCUSA constructs LGBTQ Mennonites as the ideological opponents of people of color. This construction works against alliances between the very collectivities within MCUSA that have the bodies of knowledge necessary to name the violence of Mennonite peacemaking with specificity.<sup>26</sup> While I will discuss this antagonism in more detail in subsequent chapters, I mention it here to

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<sup>24</sup> Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> For a analyses that discuss how LGBTQ evangelicals confront these theologies, see Melissa M. Wilcox, *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003); Gerald Walton, “‘Fag Church’: Men Who Integrate Gay and Christian Identities,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 51, no. 2 (August 2006): 1–17.

<sup>26</sup> See Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, and Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

point out that LGBTQ Mennonites are not the only marginalized people within MCUSA to critique Mennonite processes of discernment and peacemaking.

### **The process brokers**

One Friday evening in the fall of 2014, I sat in a Kansas City Panera with three Mennonite pastors, all women. Two of these pastors, Ruth Harder and Joanna Harader, are straight ally pastors who are well known in LGBTQ Mennonite circles, serving in Kansas City and Lawrence, Kansas respectively. One, Sarah Klaassen of Columbia, Missouri, holds her ordination through the Disciples of Christ denomination because her queer identity precludes a straightforward path to Mennonite ordination. All three of the pastors were under forty at the time. They were meeting to strategize. Later in the evening they would be speaking to the MCUSA Executive Board about the movement for LGBTQ inclusion within the Mennonite church. Klaassen's presence in particular was something of a coup; the Board is widely perceived by LGBTQ Mennonites and their advocates to be hostile to queer-inclusive interests. In February 2014, after an MCUSA area conference licensed a lesbian pastor, Theda Good, in Denver, Colorado to the sustained and vocal protest of more conservative factions in the church, the Board issued a statement containing the following:

Mountain States' [the area conference that licensed Good] actions expressed the hope of many across the church who desire full inclusion for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. Yet the area conference's decision has exacerbated the polarities within our church and frayed the fragile strands of accountability that hold our church together in an emotionally-charged political atmosphere. This begs the

larger question of the best ways to tend the relationships between congregations, area conferences and the denomination.<sup>27</sup>

Klaassen and her ally colleagues were thus entering into a setting in which queer pastors and their supporters had already been cast as antagonists, lacking in accountability or care for the church. Their task was further complicated by the brevity that the occasion demanded; it was a Friday evening, the board members had been in sessions for several days, and the pastors only had an hour to speak. They were the only representatives of the Mennonite movement for queer justice who had ever been allowed to formally address the Executive Board. As I listened to them strategize, I realized that a central tension in their task was how to accurately represent the pain and violence perpetrated by the church, even by the very governing body they were addressing, without allowing that pain and harm to define the movement they were describing. Enough damage had been done, they felt, by making all LGBTQ-related advocacy about the recognition of queer pain. At the same time, none of them wanted to convey the impression that church leaders were holding themselves adequately accountable for the damage being done to LGBTQ people and LGBTQ-inclusive churches.

What is the problem with talking about pain? In her ethnography of Methodist congregations debating homosexuality, Dawne Moon argues that her interviewees who focused on the pain and suffering of gay people seemed to do so as a means of depoliticizing gay identity. For those speaking in solidarity with gay members, the pain experienced by gay people rendered legitimacy to their need to be accepted as gay. For

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<sup>27</sup> “Moving Forward: A Statement from the Executive Board,” *Mennonite Church USA*, accessed March 16, 2015, <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/moving-forward-a-statement-from-the-executive-board/>.



conservative members who felt sympathetic urges towards gay people, pain was evidence of the need for healing from the affliction of gayness. Notably, Moon portrays these uses of gay pain as fodder for conversations among straight people. The gay members of the congregation in question “tended to keep a low profile.”<sup>28</sup> The straight-dominated conversation around them left them few to no options for an expression of gay identity that was not rooted in the experience of pain. The straight members arguing on their behalf were unable to counter conservatives who believed in “pain itself as the pathological cause of homosexuality.”<sup>29</sup> In addition to this, “when members used pain to show that gay people belonged in the church, they made gay membership contingent on that pain. Gay people who were not in pain were still effectively equated with political self-interest.”<sup>30</sup>

The caution that Harder, Harader, and Klaassen displayed in speaking about pain attests to the presence of similar dynamics in Mennonite discernment processes on LGBTQ inclusion. While the expression of pain is unavoidable in the context of such processes, it also functions as a way of reaffirming LGBTQ peoples’ status as a problem in need of solving. Pain is also, to put it bluntly, politically useful, particularly for those who are charged with balancing the needs of competing constituencies for the larger purpose of holding together a denomination. That LGBTQ Mennonites collectively experience a great deal of pain is one thing that conservatives and liberals can agree upon, even if they differ over the reasons for that pain. For leaders who are flummoxed about how to unite differing viewpoints, experiences, and claims to truth, the exploration

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<sup>28</sup> Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004), 219.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

of queer pain is a relatively stable place to rest. I refer to such leaders, who hold administrative and bureaucratic leadership positions in Mennonite schools, agencies, denominations, and conferences, as “process brokers.” Process brokers are those who establish the terms under which structured dialogues, conversations, debates, and decision-making around LGBTQ bodies will occur.

This deployment of queer pain also functions to create what religion scholar Mark Jordan has called a “sexual character”: an idea about non-normative sexuality that is given shape through discourses of psychiatry, social reform, and even slang, until it crystallizes into a figure of deviance that may then serve a discursive function in anti-queer sexual politics.<sup>31</sup> Like Moon in her observations of Methodists, I have found that sexual characters have considerable power even for moderate and progressive Mennonites who rely on pain as justification for queer inclusion. Jennifer Yoder, a queer Mennonite advocate (whose work I will address in depth in subsequent chapters), wrote the following to me in the context of a lengthy online conversation about the perils of church processes to queer people:

I know that sharing the ways the Mennonite Church has harmed me, and the physical and emotional impacts of that harm, has sometimes helped people feel sympathetic to me, and there was a point at which speaking my truth was an important part of my process...[But] there came a time when I got tired of being everyone’s sad harmed queer, of reliving the same trauma aloud in the hopes it would convince someone to stop participating in harmful behavior: you shouldn’t need to see the ways you’ve made me bleed to know you shouldn’t harm me.

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<sup>31</sup> Mark D. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011), xii-xvi.

Seeing my full, happy, healthy, whole self should be all you need. You don't need to see a gunshot wound to know you shouldn't shoot people.<sup>32</sup>

Advocates like Yoder and Ressler must walk a difficult line. On the one hand, they are committed to naming violence as it happens, to disrupting a discursive framework that hides that violence for the sake of holding together the institutions that enable it. But they must also contend with the discursive figure of the “sad harmed queer” and its great appeal to process brokers across the political spectrum. “They try to find the vulnerable stories,” Carol Wise told me, in reference to Mennonite leaders facilitating “conversations” about LGBTQ people. “If your story is to say, ‘I feel very comfortable being queer, and have no desire to be anything else, and my anger is just at your systems of privilege and your ignorance, not at God for making me gay,’ their response is, ‘Well, thank you very much for your time. We’ll go find the person who cuts themselves, hates themselves.’”<sup>33</sup>

In the discourse of careful moderation employed by process brokers, denominational unity has come to operate in an ethical dialectic with LGBTQ inclusion, the former ever posited as impossible to sustain should the latter come to fruition. For a church that cannot decide whether or not to stay together, the sad harmed queer functions as a convenient generative tool. The processes by which this figure is made into spectacle are a reliable well of pain, ensuring a never-ending supply of vulnerable queer bodies. At the same time, the processes themselves produce a sense of satisfaction, that all have been heard, that the right thing has been done for the moment. As a discursive figure, the sad harmed queer helps to maintain a holding pattern that looks, from some angles, like

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<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Yoder, Facebook message to author, August 20, 2014. Used with permission.

<sup>33</sup> Wise, interview, October 22, 2013.

peace. The figure's pain is an appeasement to liberals who want recognition of past and ongoing wrongs, while its seemingly irredeemable brokenness can assuage conservative fantasies of rescuing the sexual sinner.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, for the past forty years, willingly or unwillingly, people who embody non-normative sexuality and gender have been made into symbols for Mennonites' most intractable disagreements about how to be in community with one another. This chapter does not attempt to answer the question of why this is. Surely the least that can be said on that subject is that Mennonites are much like other U.S. Christians in their decades-long tendency to use queer bodies and queer sexuality as a means through which to articulate political, spiritual, and organizational identities. My intent is rather to inquire as to how this preoccupation manifests in a group of people who define themselves explicitly as peaceful.

Mennonite pacifist discourse developed in large part as conversations among Mennonite men about how to resist masculinist nationalism and militarism. If soldiering was what made boys into responsible masculine citizen-subjects, then Mennonite men needed alternate means to citizenship, and to manhood. From the sixteenth century onwards, Mennonites migrated from one European country to another, and eventually, to North America, their movements largely dictated by the desire to avoid the involuntary conscription of their young men into military service for the nations in which they lived. What happens, then, when the definition of violence is not longer solely in the hands of

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<sup>34</sup> For analyses of this fantasy and its consequences, see Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2006), and Michelle Wolkowicz, *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

men of European ancestry, but also in the hands of women, people of color, and queer people? In the twentieth century as well as the current one, emancipatory social movements aimed at expanding access to the privileges of citizenship have contributed to the most rigorous challenges to Mennonite definitions of violence and nonviolence, as such movements have informed the Mennonites who have made those challenges.<sup>35</sup>

When queer Mennonites advocate for themselves to church leaders, it is often through naming (and subverting) the ways in which dominant, institutional Mennonite discourse objectifies, exploits, and excludes them. In interviews with me, in social media forums, in queer online spaces and in online comments in Mennonite publications, queer-identified Mennonites and those who speak in solidarity with them engage in conversational reframing. Such reframing operates in resistance to socially conservative discourses that pathologize queerness. But just as powerfully, this reframing challenges a more institutional, conciliatory discourse, one espoused by process brokers, who bemoan the “divisive issues” presented by LGBTQ politics and appeal to a higher ground, be it moral, institutional, or eschatological. Mennonite institutional discourse is dependent upon a collective theological imaginary in which the power created by social privilege and histories of inequality does not exist. The path to this imaginary space is paved at least in part through leaders’ use of phrases such as “shared values”<sup>36</sup> and “common life”<sup>37</sup>—language that is both vague and seemingly beyond reproach.

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<sup>35</sup> Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators*; Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*.

<sup>36</sup> Dick Thomas, “Why We Gather,” *The Mennonite*, accessed November 5, 2014, <https://themennonite.org/opinion/gather/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ervin Stutzman, “Tending Our Common Life,” *Mennonite Church USA*, accessed November 5, 2014, <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/tending-our-common-life-3/>.

## The sucker-punch

I write here in the present tense. For those invested in the fate of the Mennonite Church USA, these conflicts over framing are currently inescapable. But they are not new. Since the 1970s, LGBTQ Mennonite activism has been staging this discursive intervention, challenging dominant Mennonite ideas about community, politics, and violence. Much of this work has happened through alternative LGBTQ Anabaptist media,<sup>38</sup> but in less measurable ways, it has happened in the context of interpersonal interactions within families, churches, and Mennonite institutions.

Such interactions are marked by the potential for harm as well as education. LGBTQ Mennonites who are committed to remaining in Mennonite churches must frequently weigh the risks of engagement with fellow church members who present emotional danger against the potential benefits of making themselves accessible and available. John Linscheid, one of the first Mennonite pastors to lose his credentials after coming out as gay in the early 1980s and a longstanding activist presence among LGBTQ Mennonites, described his experiences of church dialogues as making him feel “spiritually sucker-punched.” In 2008, he wrote of a recent experience being recruited as a “gay voice” for a Mennonite anthology entitled *Stumbling Towards a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality*,<sup>39</sup> a recruitment that happened after Linscheid stepped into the fray of “dialogue” (or process) to point out that all of the collection’s original authors were straight. Of the final product, he wrote,

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<sup>38</sup> Christian Yoder, interview by Amy Short and David Quick, video recording, Washington, D.C., June 2, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Michael A. King, *Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2007).

It was full of all the old arguments, and many remarkably new ones, regarding the proper place and behavior of lgbt people and the political niceties of churchly inclusion and exclusion. It included gay and lesbian voices. Even some church leaders took great strides forward.

And I felt more hopeless than ever.<sup>40</sup>

Linscheid's reflection points to a tension that I often feel as I move through Mennonite spaces, both literal and virtual. To understand this tension, I first had to notice how expressions of hopelessness are consistently coded as morally inadequate, both in the church settings I was studying and in the U.S. more generally. American commonsense logic suggests that the hopeless person is not trying hard enough; at the same time, the hopelessness of the marginalized individual can be read as an affront to a collective that is portrayed as overextended in its efforts to tolerate difference. Even in church conversations in which LGBTQ people are surrounded by ostensible allies, they are often pressed to perform a version of what Lauren Berlant has called the "infantile citizen," a grown-up child who trusts the system to work.<sup>41</sup> This discursive construct places disproportionate pressure on those who are socially marginalized, demanding that they willfully disregard their own knowledge of the workings of power and inequality. In Mennonite settings as in many others, such pressures often come in the form of phrases such as, "At least they [process brokers] are willing to have a discussion," and "Let's give everyone the benefit of the doubt."

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<sup>40</sup> John Linscheid, "Done With Dialogue," *Outspoken: A Newsletter of Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests*, Spring 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

Then I hear the side murmurs, in the form of private Facebook messages, over beers later in the evening after the official business is done: *Some people don't deserve the benefit of the doubt anymore.*

I have often walked out of structured “dialogues” or “conversations” about LGBTQ people to hear wildly different responses to what transpired. Straight supporters often express satisfaction that the conversation happened, that differing viewpoints were shared in an atmosphere of mutual respect, and that everyone remained civil “despite our differences.” The conversation itself becomes a commodity, a piece of evidence that we can still “be church together.” LGBTQ participants, on the other hand, express what I came to view as a complex negotiation between the need to be a resource, to seem willing, to accept gratefully the provisional hand extended to them, and the undeniable experience of other, less conciliatory feelings. Notably, such feelings can and do arise even in settings in which queer people are granted space to speak frankly about the abuse of power and privilege and its impact on their lives. Queer Mennonites have fought to be given space to speak in institutional Mennonite settings, but being given space to speak is still a matter of “being given” something, something that is conditional and perhaps just as easily denied. How do LGBTQ Mennonites walk into the institutional space of “dialogue” or “discernment” without implicitly agreeing to its terms? In other words, here’s where the sucker-punch happens. “By entering the dialogue, I accept the implicit proposition that our human worth and our status as children of God are questionable and must be proven,” Linscheid writes.<sup>42</sup> He continues:

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<sup>42</sup> Linscheid, “Done With Dialogue.”



When I present evidence of the hypocrisy, unfair power structures, and patterns of privilege in the institutional church, I buy into the assumption that straight people rightly possess the power to judge who we are, what place we have in the church, and what our ‘lifestyle’ ought to look like. I become merely a supplicant before their bench.<sup>43</sup>

In a similar vein, Kirsten Freed, another queer Mennonite advocate, writes, “Violence is a strong word, and I choose to use it. The ideology and rhetoric that justifies physical violence against lgbt people is an extreme form of the same ideology that justifies discrimination and exclusion in our church.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, while the “sucker-punch” of church dialogue and a gay-bashing murder are not, obviously, the same kind of moral transgression, and differ in their material consequences, they are nonetheless linked. And importantly, in Mennonite discussions, linked in ways that are often only visible to those who are vulnerable to the larger systemic forces implicated in that linkage.

### **Danger to the church**

My first interview with Carol Wise, the current director of the Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBTQ Interests, happened over breakfast in a Minneapolis café. As I walked to the café, I realized I was nervous. If the queer Anabaptist movement had anything approaching a senior leader, Wise was that person, and I wasn’t entirely sure that she approved of what I was doing. I knew Wise from some of her writings in the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Kirsten Freed, “It’s so simple,” *Coming Out Strong* (blog of Kaleidoscope Program, Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBTQ Interests), March 1, 2011, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://www.bmclgbt.org/blog/2011/03/01/its-so-simple/>.

BMC archives. She had her own incisive analysis of the state of the church and injustice against queer Anabaptists. In my initial exchanges with Wise, at MCUSA conferences and over email, I sensed a slight wariness about my project that I could only assume was warranted, based on her experience as a leader within a movement that regularly dealt with the consequences of being poorly represented by well-intentioned straight people. Wise had been instrumental in discouraging a particular pattern in BMC members “sharing stories” at straight-organized church events, a practice that she found sexually exploitive,<sup>45</sup> and a practice I had a particular fear of unintentionally reproducing in my own work. I sought out Wise with the assumption that I was approaching an intellectual and ethical mentor as much as an interview subject.

Wise was a particular master of what I think of as the “comprehensive takedown”: sometimes in the form of a BMC newsletter piece, sometimes in the form of a letter to church officials. In a 1995 letter to the Program and Arrangements Committee of the Church of the Brethren (COB), for instance, Wise denounced its recipients for their controlling approach to annual convention speakers, which they defended by invoking the authority of the denominational statements.<sup>46</sup> The denomination’s Womaen’s Caucus had invited Martin Rock, the founder of BMC, to be a luncheon speaker the previous year, and the intensity of the threats and complaints against his presence had, in Wise’s estimation, scared the convention planners into issuing new, repressive speaker

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<sup>45</sup> Wise, interview, October 22, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> The Church of the Brethren holds national denomination meetings on an annual basis, in contrast to MCUSA’s biennial convention tradition.

guidelines.<sup>47</sup> Wise's challenge to the committee took aim at the legitimacy of their claims to authority.

Which Annual Conference statements will be targeted as binding, and which part of a statement will be considered operable when there are diverse opinions expressed within a statement? Are Annual Conference statements now to be considered as infallible doctrine?...Is no dissention of opinion on Conference statements to be permitted?...Whose peace is considered when we speak of disruption? If I personally find a group's theology or ideology offensive, is that grounds enough to have their luncheon cancelled? Whose opinion counts?...Where is the call for justice?<sup>48</sup>

In this letter as in her more recent work, Wise pushed deep into the underlying logics of repressive denominational practices (within both COB and MCUSA) to expose their inconsistencies and ambiguities. Wise's work also displayed a commitment to the low-church, anti-authoritarian Anabaptist theology that she had chosen for herself as an adult after growing up Methodist. Her denominational critiques rigorously accounted for what was often already obvious to queer Anabaptists: the fear of queer bodies motivated much of what masqueraded as a straightforward exercise of authority.

As we sat down over breakfast, Wise told me immediately that she found our email exchange reassuring. Upon hearing that there was a straight, Mennonite ethnographer interested in this subject, she told me that her initial response was to worry that I would try to argue that Mennonites were exceptional in their treatment of queer

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<sup>47</sup> Carol Wise, "Letter to Program and Arrangements Committee," January 25, 1995, Brethren Mennonite Council boxes, Church of the Brethren Archives, Elgin, Illinois.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

people—that is, exceptionally good. That she would worry about this gulf of difference between her perception and mine, I think, speaks to the continued presence of the tensions I described in the previous section. Years of experience with church process had taught many LGBTQ Mennonites that even ostensible allies were likely to read the state of queer justice in the church much differently than they did. In our emails, Wise was notably encouraged when I responded to her counsel that my work might make me unpopular with church leaders with evidence that I was already becoming unpopular with them. “My observation is many leaders feel betrayed by allies because allies are finally, finally speaking up, asking questions, and not automatically assuming the good will of church leaders,” she wrote.<sup>49</sup>

The question of what to do with assumptions of the “good will” of process brokers was a recurring theme throughout our conversation that morning. “At some point, the church can say, we didn't know. We didn't know,” Wise said. “But once you know, if you continue to act in that way, now you're doing violence willfully... the danger to the church itself is increasing exponentially, the longer it willfully enforces and maintains those structures of racism and sexism and heterosexism. Because there's no innocence left in it.”<sup>50</sup>

I asked Wise if she had ever offered that analysis to a church leader before, and immediately felt ridiculous for asking. “I mean, I’m sure you have,” I said. “What response did you get?” Wise laughed, and responded:

“Thank you for sharing.” Well. [pause] Because they don't believe they're doing violence. They're either protecting the church against our disruption, or they're

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<sup>49</sup> Carol Wise, email message to author, October 12, 2013. Used with permission.

<sup>50</sup> Wise, interview, October 22, 2013.

just trying to listen to all sides, or it's so hard for them, or they are so committed to the unity of the church. There are a lot of ways to try to reassert an innocence that in actuality has already been lost.<sup>51</sup>

### **Building a movement**

Wise was at the helm of an organization with a long history. Like many other Christian groups, Mennonites began to have public conversations about homosexuality in the 1970s. Mennonite activist Lin Garber, writing about the pre-Stonewall era among Mennonites, claims the following: “Before 1969 Mennonites simply subscribed to the attitude of the general population on the subject of same-gender affection: they pretended it did not exist...The prevailing mood was 'don't ask, don't tell'--as it was with such subjects as premarital cohabitation, abortion, and even birth control.”<sup>52</sup> Mennonite denominational publications of the 1970s show a gradual increase in the numbers of articles and letter from readers that referred to homosexuality. While the overwhelming sentiment expressed in these pieces was negative, the pages of these publications do reflect the beginnings of a social movement of Mennonites who identified as gay and as lesbians. Mennonite editors, while hardly accepting of sexual diversity, were not utterly hostile to the presence of gay and lesbian Mennonites in the conversation, and even published their words on occasion, as was the case in an anonymously authored 1978 story entitled, “A letter from two lesbians.” “Everyone—black, white, American, Chinese, male, female, heterosexual, homosexual—is saved by the blood of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Lin Garber, “Mennonites and the 'Homosexual' Issue: A Recent History.” From *Booklet #2: Historical Perspectives*. Welcome to the Dialogue Series, series ed. Ruth Conrad Liechty, The Welcome Committee, 2001.

The most important thing is a person's relationship with Christ, and that's all that matters."<sup>53</sup> Pieces like these always led to reader backlash. Following the "letter from two lesbians," one reader responded by complaining about the "avalanche of homosexual propaganda."<sup>54</sup> Another reader wrote, "With all the pornography we are forced to encounter every day, why must we also read this garbage?"<sup>55</sup>

In spite of this resistance, though, many gay and lesbian Mennonites continued to organize alongside those from other historically Anabaptist denominations, particularly the Church of the Brethren. Under the initial leadership of Martin Rock, a small group of Washington, D.C.-based gay men formed the Brethren Mennonite Council on Gay and Lesbian Concerns in 1976. For the first decade of this organization's existence, their work consisted primarily of maintaining and building a mailing list of potentially supportive or interested people, and creating their quarterly newsletter, *Dialogue*.

From its founding, BMC was concerned with the effects of the church's hidden violence against gay and lesbian church members. Rock himself was a Brethren employee of a Mennonite organization, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), an NGO for which he had worked for over a decade when he was fired in 1977 for being gay after being anonymously outed by a fellow employee. In his parting speech to MCC employees, Rock was frank about the effects of the way the organization had treated him. "We are very militant in our peace position and do not go to war," he said. "But in

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<sup>53</sup> Anonymous, "A Letter from Two Lesbians," *The Mennonite*, May 30, 1978.

<sup>54</sup> Harry Kaufman, "Letter: Avalanche of Propoganda," *The Mennonite*, September 12, 1978.

<sup>55</sup> Dorothy Loewen, "Letter: I Want Inspiration," *The Mennonite*, September 12, 1978.

relationships with people we can certainly do a good job of sticking a knife in their back and turning it slowly."<sup>56</sup>

“A lot of it [BMC] was a sanctuary movement,” said Wise. “In many ways it was a pretty wounded community. People didn't have anywhere to go for support.”<sup>57</sup> Jim Sauder, BMC director in the 1990s, also spoke of sanctuary: “Families are forced to be estranged from one another [by the church]...BMC becomes an alternate family, a family of choice for many people because they have been cast out of their family of origin.” Sanctuary became all the more vital during the AIDS epidemic, when Mennonite churches by and large deserted affected gay men and their families.

BMC was also committed to promoting education within those same churches. By the early 1990s, BMC was a transregional organization with an executive board, subcommittees, a paid director, and a mailing list of several thousand people. It functioned increasingly as a grassroots network engaged in educational work, mostly at the congregational level. Sauder described the work of BMC during that time as “dancing at the wall,” a metaphor embraced by the organization's leadership to describe how LGBTQ and ally Christians might engage with the obstacles put up by the institutional church without allowing its rejection to define them.<sup>58</sup> As Sara Ahmed writes, the “wall” metaphor arises frequently among those engaged in institutional transformation for inclusive ends.<sup>59</sup> The wall can be defined as “what you come against when you are

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<sup>56</sup> Martin Rock, “Martin Rock’s Farewell Speech to Mennonite Central Committee,” July 15, 1977, Stan Bohn Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

<sup>57</sup> Wise, interview, October 22, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Jim Sauder, interview by Amy Short, video recording, Minneapolis, MN, June 5, 2011 and September 18, 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Ahmed, *On Being Included*.

involved in the practical project of opening worlds to bodies that have historically been excluded from those worlds.”<sup>60</sup> Ressler alludes to something similar in the opening quote, invoking locked doors that LGBTQ people must plead to have opened.

But by the mid 1990s, many BMC members were weary of work that felt like pleading and pounding on walls. At a conceptual level, the dancing metaphor suggested that, “if the party is better on our side of the wall, they’ll come.”<sup>61</sup> Practically speaking, it moved the organization towards what was to become its most institutionally threatening intervention: the development of a network of openly LGBTQ-inclusive Mennonite and Brethren churches that still exists as the Supportive Communities Network (SCN). Joining the network was not and is not a casual act; almost every congregation that has joined has gone through what BMC calls “a process of education and discernment,” guided by resources that BMC has developed over the years to help foster congregational discussion processes that do not exploit or dehumanize LGBTQ church members.<sup>62</sup>

For Mennonite congregations, SCN membership functions as a particular kind of pro-inclusion identity marker. Certainly, Mennonites in SCN congregations are motivated by the desire to communicate genuine welcome to current and potential LGBTQ members. But SCN membership also indicates priorities in relation to the rest of the

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<sup>60</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Hard,” *Feministkilljoys*, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://feministkilljoys.com/2014/06/10/hard/>.

<sup>61</sup> Brethren Mennonite Council 5<sup>th</sup> International Convention, Meeting minutes, 1994, in BMC Collection, Box 11 Series 1 Folder 9, Church of the Brethren Archives in Elgin, IL.

<sup>62</sup> Wise identified four traits that inclusive congregations have, asserting that in her experience a congregation needs to have at least two of these in order to become SCN congregations: 1) They strongly value education. 2) They have a history of social justice engagement. 3) They have strong lay leadership and a pastor who won't sabotage the process. 4) They have a beloved son or daughter who has come out.



Mennonite world. As much as anything, it signals that a congregation has accepted a certain level of risk to relationships with conference and denominational leaders.

Not every congregation that starts the SCN process ends up joining the network. When churches decide not to join, the reasons generally have as much or more to do with the message that SCN sends to the wider Mennonite world, the possibility of risking relationships with other Mennonite bodies, than it does with any actively anti-gay voices within the congregation itself. For instance, in the archived meeting notes from one congregation of several hundred members that considered and ultimately decided against SCN membership in the early 2000s, I found evidence that Mennonite conference leaders actively discouraged the congregation from joining SCN on the grounds that it would destabilize fragile relationships with more conservative church factions.<sup>63</sup>

In this case as in many others, the church's stance on LGBTQ inclusion was perceived as a political signal, not so much to potential LGBTQ members as to other Mennonite churches with whom congregational leaders were negotiating organizational relationships. In the individual, anonymous responses to this congregations SCN "discernment process," many people wrote responses such as, "Why are we focusing so much energy on this issue?" and "There are many other important issues." As I read through these responses in the church's archive, I had a growing sense of the absence of LGBTQ people themselves in the discussion (commiserate with my knowledge that the church had almost no openly LGBTQ members at the time). Members expressed frustration that discussions about "homosexuality" were taking up so much time and energy. However, it was clear that within the larger church structure in which the

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<sup>63</sup> In the interest of preserving the confidentiality of individuals in this particular congregation, I am choosing not to cite their archives with specific details.

congregation was operating, such discussions were *the* central theater for a large-scale battle over organizational identity.

### **Intentional ambiguity**

The Mennonite world that such congregations were negotiating was complex, and the larger Anabaptist world that BMC was negotiating, even more so. While the Church of the Brethren existed in one U.S. denomination (and still does), BMC and its Supportive Communities Network was initially dancing at walls formed by two distinct Mennonite denominations, each of which had member congregations in both the U.S. and Canada: the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC), and the Mennonite Church (MC). (The latter was sometimes called the Old Mennonite Church.) After a lengthy process beginning in the early nineties, the U.S. components of these two denominations merged into the Mennonite Church USA. Denominational mergers, common occurrences in U.S. Protestantism, are rarely without their contentious elements, and this one was no exception. Janeen Bersche Johnson, a professor of Mennonite polity at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, describes the tension in this way: “In 1999, as we were moving close to the process that brought the denominations together, there was very high anxiety across the church about the merger, but there was also high anxiety about membership issues, particularly the membership of gay and lesbian Christians.”

To further understand how LGBTQ Mennonites have negotiated church life, and how inclusive congregations have operated within their various denominational contexts, one needs a basic understanding of Mennonite polity. In a Christian denominational context, “polity” refers to the visible structures of authority and lines of accountability.

Who makes the rules, and how? Who answers to whom? For Mennonites, the answers to this question are not always straightforward. Christian polity generally falls into three types of organization: *episcopal*, a hierarchical structure in which authority is concentrated with bishops, *synodal* or *conference-based*, in which a gathered parliamentary body of churches holds authority, or *congregational*, which, at its purest level, allows congregations nearly full autonomy. Mennonites have generally held some combination of congregational and conference-based polity.<sup>64</sup>

Both the General Conference and the Mennonite Church were made up of geographically-based area conferences that existed under a larger denominational umbrella, but while GC polity was almost entirely congregational, MC polity was more mixed. Some MC area conferences were congregational in structure, but others were more conference-oriented, meaning that within the area conferences themselves, a more parliamentary process was in place. And while bishops were unthinkable to most GC Mennonites, MC conferences had a long tradition of bishops or elders, regional leaders who were empowered to exercise disciplinary power over the congregations in their jurisdiction without the check of parliamentary procedures, thus operating in a more episcopal fashion. The bishop tradition gradually faded among MCs, but one area conference, the Lancaster Mennonite Conference, retained the tradition.<sup>65</sup> Even today, under the MCUSA, Lancaster is one area conference that retains a bishop board (and by the rules still in place, all bishops must be men).

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<sup>64</sup> *Mennonite Church USA Polity Introduction*, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bElRm6Q7LP0&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bElRm6Q7LP0&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

Anne Breckbill, a former BMC activist who also experienced both MC and GC contexts, explained to me that the difference between MC and GC polities had more to do with theology than anything else. The structures were not that different, she said, except that when a congregation in the General Conference decided to leave their area conference to be independent or go elsewhere, their parting message was “We don’t agree with you.” When this happened in MC congregations, the message was, “God doesn’t agree with you.”<sup>66</sup> Su Flickinger, who in the early eighties served on jointly-run GC/MC committee studying human sexuality, offered a practical example: “Mennonite Church folks were much more aware of what their leadership might say or think about what was going on, and the General Conference folks [were] really impatient with that. It was like, no, we can make that decision, we don't have to go check it out with anybody.”<sup>67</sup>

While the decade of preparatory discussions leading up to the merger was trying for many Mennonites, queer Mennonites occupied a particularly challenging position within them. On the one hand, their presence was under perpetual discussion as a “challenging issue” standing in the way of denominational integration, an issue that must be managed through careful spiritual discernment. On the other, openly queer Mennonites themselves were consistently marginalized within the context of these discussions, and speaking on their own behalf often made them targets for verbal abuse. When verbal abuse happened in the context of church discussions, it often went unacknowledged as such by discussion leaders. Homosexuality was constructed as a political issue, and therefore public statements of church leaders often bemoaned the

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<sup>66</sup> Anne Breckbill, conversation with author, June 13, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Su Flickinger, interview by Amy Short, video recording, Riverdale, MD, June 4, 2012.

“extremists on both sides.” Public, denomination-level conversations were framed in such a way that queer people could be read as political extremists for the very act of being openly queer.

What were the consequences, for queer Mennonites, of these discussions? Minneapolis writer Lisa Pierce, a member of the St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship, spoke to me about the disciplinary processes that her congregation underwent throughout the nineties because of its LGBTQ-inclusive stance:

There's a lens of conflict resolution rather than justice that gets used. Those things don't need to be separate from one another, but in practical application they often are. **Because the conflict resolution model presumes that there are two equal parties coming to the table to have a conversation about a dispute** [emphasis mine]. But in fact, when these conversations happen, a queer person comes to the table and bares their life to who knows who...The stakes are not the same. It's not an equal power conversation, and it never has been. It's a setup that fails from the get-go. In some ways it can't be avoided, in order for people to begin having exposure [to queer people]. But the toll it takes is huge. It's brutal.<sup>68</sup>

BMC responded to this political climate in part by responding to this “conflict resolution model” with a competing interpretive framework that named power imbalance and violence in much more direct terms. The clearest example I have found of such an analysis is an essay written in 1999, three years before the merger was finalized, in response to a meeting between the BMC Board and several church leaders. Written by Breckbill and published on BMC’s website, the essay asks Mennonite leaders to take

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<sup>68</sup> Lisa Pierce, interview with author, October 23, 2013.

responsibility for “maintaining respect and fair play” in the discussions in question. Breckbill's essay is a comprehensive refutation of the church's framing of “the homosexual issue” as an object of denominational conversation, with an insistence on naming aggressive political tactics *as weapons*. “Do not tolerate the use of weapons,” she writes.

Not all weapons are crafted out of metal, but all are crafted for battle...Do not give consideration, time, or energy to conversations that are initiated by an act of violence (i.e. an anonymous mailing, phone call, or rumor that infringes on personal privacy or safety)...**Do not allow hostage taking and threats.** [emphasis in original] More and more, churches are threatening to leave—and to take their dollars with them...Name this as violence to the minority and to the process and be clear that threats are not an acceptable part of this dialogue...Have the courage to allow churches that issue ultimatums to leave if they insist.<sup>69</sup>

Breckbill's challenge was consistent with the growing body of queer Mennonite activist work in its insistence that what was happening was in fact a matter to be discussed in the terms of battle. It was also, by the rhetorical standards of Mennonite institutional leaders, completely inflammatory in its coupling of anti-gay theology and violence. Breckbill identified the primary means through which queer individuals had been intimidated or pushed out of Mennonite institutions—rumors and anonymous outings—as categorically intolerable. While “hostage-taking” resonated with those who had experienced such behaviors firsthand, it was far more potent language than most

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<sup>69</sup> Anne Breckbill, “Guidelines for Establishing and Maintaining 'Fair Play' in the Church's Dialogue about the Inclusion of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual People in the Church.” *Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests*, March 2, 1999, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://www.bmclgbt.org/fairplay.shtml>.

Mennonite leaders were willing to use themselves, even if they shared Breckbill's frustrations in private.

What was the "hostage-taking" that Breckbill referenced? Johnson's own account of the merging process, recounted in an educational video on Mennonite polity in early 2014, offers some hints:

In the 1980s and 90s, a few congregations who had been part of both a Mennonite Church conference and a General Conference Mennonite Church conference had been disciplined by their Mennonite Church but not their General Conference conference, for their openness to having gay and lesbian members... So the question was, as we move toward this new church, what happens to these disciplined churches when we merge? Are they in, or are they out? Each conference, or each denomination, wanted its perspective or process to be honored. So the conferences that had disciplined a congregation had worked at that for a long time... they didn't want that process just ignored, or thrown out. And on the other hand, the General Conference conferences that had not disciplined still regarded those congregations as part of them, and they wanted them to come into the new church with them.

So how to work through this issue? There was some careful work on this, and at a denominational gathering in 1999, the membership guidelines had proposed a way forward for this. And Mennonite Church Canada, which was one of the new entities to come out of this merger, was ready to go ahead with those membership guidelines, and they adopted them there. And so they use the original membership guidelines, which are different than the ones the Mennonite Church

USA uses. And in the US sections, the General Conference Mennonites were ready to accept the original membership guidelines, but the Mennonite Church delegates were not. And we had said that any vote had to pass both groups. So we were at a stalemate.

Any account like this requires some subtextual reading. Johnson's video is meant as an educational resource for everyone in the MCUSA, and as such, her language choices reflect a deliberate neutrality. She speaks of "careful work," conferences that had "worked [at disciplining pro-inclusion congregations] for a long time" and didn't want their work "thrown out." To name such behavior more directly as "hostage-taking," much as Breckbill did in her piece, would likely undermine the purpose of Johnson's video, an educational primer on polity meant for mass distribution within the ideologically disparate body of the MCUSA. Johnson continues:

Between 1999 and 2001, a membership guidelines committee, which I was a part of, revised the membership guidelines for the Mennonite Church USA, so that they would be able to pass both delegate bodies in 2001. So this is a compromise document. And **as a compromise document, it has a fair amount of ambiguity built into it intentionally.** [emphasis mine]<sup>70</sup>

Among the ambiguous phrases purposefully written into the final draft (for the U.S. denomination) of the membership guidelines was the phrase "teaching position." Its ambiguity reflects the differing views within what became the MCUSA body about the purpose of collective documents to Mennonites, and Anabaptists more generally.

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<sup>70</sup> *Mennonite Church USA Polity Introduction*, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bElRm6Q7LP0&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bElRm6Q7LP0&feature=youtube_gdata_player).



Anabaptism, is should be noted, is not a doctrinal approach to Christianity. Mennonites do not point to foundational documents beyond the Bible itself as the sources of their faith. Thus church statements are not construed as divinely inspired so much as they are meant to be reflections of communal will at a given point in history. Mennonites who identify strongly with congregational polity tend to also identify with a skeptical approach to corporate statements of belief. Thus, it is less surprising than it might seem that delegates who thought of themselves as inclusive to gay and lesbian members nonetheless ultimately signed onto what was, inarguably, an explicitly heterosexist statement (see footnote).<sup>71</sup> The membership guidelines committee members assured more

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<sup>71</sup> The committee Johnson references added the following text to the original 1999 guidelines to create the 2001 version. I have highlighted the phrases that Johnson singled out as deliberately ambiguous.

### III. Clarification on some issues related to homosexuality and membership

#### Introduction

For the last several years, issues of same-sex orientation and lifestyle have been the source of deep controversy in our nation and in the church. More particularly, the process of bringing together our two denominations was complicated by differing responses to congregations who have accepted persons in same sex relationships as members. There are several congregations, formerly members of two conferences, who were removed from membership by one of the conferences while retaining membership in the other. In various and significant ways, these disciplinary actions touch other congregations, area conferences, and the entire church. Many people are asking for clarification regarding the beliefs and practice of the Mennonite Church USA regarding the matter of homosexuality, particularly as it touches on issues of church membership. The following commitments and polity guide our discernment and practice:

#### Commitments

Our hearts belong to God, God's word and God's church. We will follow Jesus. We know what it is like to be misunderstood and misjudged. We have within our own history misunderstood and misjudged others, resulting in alienation and exclusion. Nevertheless, we hold the church as God's gift; and we hold the church's teaching as our best human understanding of God's way.

We hold the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) to be the **teaching position** of Mennonite Church USA. "We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life" (Article 19).

inclusive delegates that the guidelines were a temporary measure to hold the new denomination together during what its planners hoped would be a temporary period of fragility. For conservative conferences, however, the segment of the Membership Guidelines on “homosexuality” was foundational to their commitment to joining the MCUSA.

Johnson’s video hints at the differences between the way that church professionals approach and understand polity and the way laypeople do. To those who spend their professional lives negotiating the church’s institutional structure, polity has a different significance than it does for those who mainly encounter its effects indirectly. While the ambiguous nuances of the phrase “teaching position” may have seemed significant to the drafters of the membership guidelines, in other words, those ambiguities did not translate in the way that they hoped.

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We hold the Saskatoon (1986) and Purdue (1987) statements describing homosexual, extramarital and premarital sexual activity as sin to be the **teaching position** of Mennonite Church USA.

We hold the Saskatoon and Purdue statements calling for the church to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views to be the **teaching position** of Mennonite Church USA.

We hold the abuse of power, in its many forms, to be against the **teaching position** of Mennonite Church USA.

Our passion for the church remains undiminished. Our search for the truth finds answer in the scriptures. Our love for God through Christ lifts us up. Our vision for God’s people is healing and hope.

#### Polity

Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same- sex covenant ceremony. Such action would be grounds for **review** of their credentials by their area conference’s ministerial credentialing body. (See A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership, p. 125 for a list of other actions that may prompt such a review.)

The concept of a mandated “review” for pastors who performed same-sex marriages—another deliberate ambiguity—was similarly fraught. (While the membership guidelines claim that pastors can be “reviewed” for other actions as well, officiating same-sex marriage was the only transgression explicitly named in the membership guidelines, and is, to my knowledge, the only action for which any MCUSA pastor has been “reviewed” by their presiding area conference.) The ambiguity of the word “review” has made it possible for a dedicated handful of pastors to officiate such unions and keep their ministerial credentials. But for LGBTQ church members, the conservative vocabulary (“same-sex orientation and lifestyle”) and the heterosexist ethics of the membership guidelines are not so much ambiguous as condemnatory. In many ways, reading the document as tolerably ambiguous was a privilege denied to those whose bodies and identities represented the “issue” at hand.

Cynthia Lapp, a Maryland pastor whose credentials have been reviewed for performing same-sex marriages, described the founding of the Mennonite Church USA to me in this way:

The denomination, because it was two different churches that were brought together, I think on the backs of gay and lesbian people—they could not do the merger unless they wrote the membership guidelines that were **very explicit** [emphasis mine] about how to deal with marriage and pastors' credentials if they were to perform a [same-sex] wedding. The whole denomination was built in a very fragile manner. And so of course it's going to be hard to hold it together.

Basically, we came together as a denomination to say that gay people aren't right.

In essence, that became the central tenet of the denomination. Which is insane!<sup>72</sup>

Gerald J. Mast, a Mennonite communications scholar, offers a similarly unambiguous analysis on the origins of the MCUSA and the membership guidelines:

Mennonite Church USA was founded in what René Girard might call an act of collective violence: the official exclusion of LGBTQ people from full participation in the church...This section in the membership guidelines appears to have been offered as a concession to conservative area conferences and constituencies that were regarded as necessary to the formation of the denomination. Hence, the denomination at its founding made LGBTQ people and communities a kind of sacrificial scapegoat for all of the fears about denominational faithlessness and decline that threatened to thwart support for the new denomination.<sup>73</sup>

In identifying LGBTQ people as scapegoats for “fears about denominational faithlessness,” Mast encapsulated a forty-year struggle in which queer people were made to represent far more than themselves. The drafters of the merger used that symbolism as a foundation from which to build their denomination. They sold what they produced as a reasonable compromise. To queer Mennonites, it felt like a sacrifice.

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<sup>72</sup> Cynthia Lapp, interview with author, July 6, 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Gerald J. Mast, “Pink Menno's Pauline Rhetoric of Reconciliation.” *Pink Menno Press*, August 2013, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://www.pinkmenno.org/2013/08/pink-mennos-pauline-rhetoric-of-reconciliation/>.

## Language of the enemy

Last fall, I attended a structured conversation hosted by an area Mennonite conference, entitled “The Church and Homosexuality: A Conversation that Can Bring Us Together.” In April, a web article in *The Mennonite* (the MCUSA magazine) contained the following quote: “Homosexuality and church process, once thought to be dealt with, is rearing its head again in mystifying ways, with dust kicked up from both progressive and traditional camps.”<sup>74</sup> The structured conversation and the web article in question came from relatively progressive impulses. They both rely on a construction that is familiar to their audiences, that of “homosexuality” as a divisive political issue that needs to be “dealt with,” or something on which reasonable people can converse and disagree.

To LGBTQ Mennonites, this construction alone signals at best lack of neutrality. Wise said to me, “Any time we have a 'conversation about homosexuality'--that is pretty wildly offensive. And it's set up as a process that even in its naming, deals violence to a group of people. Because it doesn't even respect how we understand ourselves, or what the proper language is.”<sup>75</sup> Anti-gay conservatives, on the other hand, tend to read support for pro-inclusion politics in the very use of the acronyms “LGBT,” “LGBTQ,” or reappropriative usage of the word “queer.” (The broad inclusiveness of such terminology hints at a more drastic upending of conservatively gendered worldviews than “homosexuality” language can begin to accommodate.) Of conservative Christians talking about “homosexuality,” Mark Jordan has written that “a young man can repent of carnal copulations, he can bewail them (year after year) as so many falls, but once he

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<sup>74</sup> Brian Stucky, “Unconventional Wisdom.” *The Mennonite* (web exclusive), April 4, 2014, accessed May 6, 2014, [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/17-4/articles/Unconventional\\_wisdom](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/17-4/articles/Unconventional_wisdom).

<sup>75</sup> Wise, interview.

begins to describe them in the enemy's language, perhaps even to defend them, he is lost."<sup>76</sup> And indeed, if there is one shared understanding that LGBTQ Mennonites and vocally anti-queer Mennonites seem to have, it is that there is no neutral language with which to talk about their differences.

### **No neutral Jesus**

*The third way is not synonymous with being nice to each other. The truth is that Jesus' "rhetorical tone" varied widely depending on who he was talking to—and possibly how tired and cranky he was. He spoke gently to the children and the woman caught in adultery. He got testy with the disciples. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers." He turned over the money-changers' tables in the temple. If the third way means following Jesus, then it cannot also mean smiling and nodding and trying to make everyone happy all of the time."*<sup>77</sup>

—Joanna Harader, pastor, Peace Mennonite Church in Lawrence, Kansas

Despite the dearth of neutral language with which to talk about LGBTQ justice, or perhaps because of that dearth, some Mennonite church leaders have come to promote neutrality itself as a spiritual virtue. The most prolific of these has been MCUSA

Executive Director Ervin Stutzman, who in October 2014 wrote the following:

I confess that I cannot imagine Jesus as a fiery advocate for the political approach on either side of many of these social issues. I believe he would be more likely to confront the rhetorical tone and many of the presuppositions and actions of all the parties in many of these public debates...I pray with hope that we can find a third way in Mennonite Church USA. We need not be divided by a party spirit, so that

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<sup>76</sup> Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*. Xxi.

<sup>77</sup> Joanna Harader, "Let's Talk About the 'Third Way,'" *Spacious Faith*, June 2, 2014, <http://spaciousfaith.com/2014/06/03/lets-talk-about-the-third-way/>.

one side or the other must win. Rather, we must seek for shared values and norms for Christian living that benefit our whole community.<sup>78</sup>

In a denomination of “shared values” in which nobody “wins,” what becomes of sexuality and gender identity? More generally, what becomes of difference? Stutzman’s words hint not only towards his own relative ease in accessing the appearance of political neutrality, but also to his resonance with increasingly widespread institutional practices that uphold “civility” as a social contract, thus subsuming and reappropriating democratic discourses of justice in ways that ultimately reinscribe white male power again and again. Furthermore, Stutzman infuses his call for civility with theological weight by suggesting that Jesus himself cared more about “tone” than content. Peacemaking thus comes not from radical actions, but from pacifying ones; not from below, but from “the middle”; not from outcomes, but from process.

In the past year, Stutzman’s calls for civility and good behavior come out at least once a month, in the form of columns and blog posts that rapidly circulate among LGBTQ advocates with whom, unsurprisingly, Stutzman is deeply unpopular. The critiques that unapologetically queer Mennonites offer are not easy ones for a leader like Stutzman to hear, or to act upon. His difficulties are sourced in the ideological divides of the groups that the denominational merger brought together. Queer Mennonite activism is ideologically grounded in the social justice traditions of progressive Christianity and in feminist and civil rights discourses. White Mennonites who resist LGBTQ inclusion are far more likely to identify with evangelicalism. And Mennonites of color often identify

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<sup>78</sup> Harader, “Let’s Talk About the ‘Third Way.’”

with combinations of these traditions and discourses that baffle white-dominant understandings of movements, politics, and social change.

To navigate this complexity, MCUSA leaders rely on the very processes that Ressler, Wise, Pierce, and Yoder have singled out for their violent potential. MCUSA leaders, it should be said, are not uniformly hostile to or oblivious to these critiques. In the course of my research, I've heard denominational leaders express a wide range of responses to the critiques they receive from queer and ally Mennonites. It's clear that the individuals who serve on the overseeing boards and in appointed leadership positions in the MCUSA and its area conferences hold a range of theological views about sexual diversity, and not all of them oppose the inclusion of queer people.

But at the same time, few of these leaders, particularly at the executive level, have demonstrated understanding or acceptance of the charge that church processes of communal discernment are themselves violent. And perhaps this is unsurprising. Discernment processes is, quite simply, how everything gets done when single leaders are not held up as divinely appointed sources of truth. MCUSA leaders express a great deal of confidence in the idea that God is at work in the midst of discernment; in fact Stutzman, wrote a book about discernment entitled *Discerning God's Will Together: Biblical Interpretation in a Free Church Tradition*.<sup>79</sup> In another recent column entitled “Cultivating Indifference,” Stutzman again defends the practice of discernment as a way through the church's divisions, writing, “[Discernment] grows out of a deep desire to

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<sup>79</sup> Ervin R. Stutzman, *Discerning God's Will Together: Biblical Interpretation in the Free Church Tradition*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House LLC, 2013).



know God's will, unfettered by petty desires or selfish ambition.”<sup>80</sup> Everyone, he says, must leave their investments in a particular outcome at the door. For Mennonites like Stutzman, who have built careers in church institutions, this is what defines a peaceful process. Peacemaking happens through the supposed renunciation of power.

Whether or not such a message is his intention, his construction of the ideal discernment process implies that a church discussion is power-neutral territory. In practice, what Stutzman is communicating to LGBTQ Mennonites is that their desire for full inclusion in Mennonite communities is a “petty desire” or “selfish ambition.” He may, of course, also be communicating to heterosexist conservatives that their cherished notions of Biblical truth are also selfish and petty. The essential problem, though, from the social justice perspective that most queer-inclusive Mennonite advocates embrace, is that once again this construction creates the illusion of equal vulnerability.

The “third way” that Stutzman references in his earlier quote is a theological concept both beloved and contentious within Mennonite circles. As a practice of peacemaking, Mennonites often promote the “third way” as equivalent to compromise. In hands such as Stutzman’s the “third way” functions as an institutional practice for containing ideological conflict. The problem with Stutzman’s appeals is that the “shared values” he invokes are impossible to disentangle from the realm of power and politics, the very place that where he portrays Jesus as presiding in neutrality.

But how does one talk about the experience of violence in neutral language? When is naming an act as violence an authentic and defensible action, and when is it a provocation in need of calming censure from the appropriate authorities? In a world

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<sup>80</sup>Ervin Stutzman, “Cultivating Indifference.” *The Mennonite*, March 1, 2014, accessed May 6, 2014, [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/17-3/articles/Cultivating\\_indifference](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/17-3/articles/Cultivating_indifference).

where neutrality reigns, what happens to the anger that comes from violation, from subordination, from being rendered invisible? While Stutzman and other executives elided these questions with the calming tones of managers, queer Mennonites and their supporters were eyeing the temple tables, and planning what came next.