

Guiding Thoughts on Human Sexuality
West Union Mennonite Church
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We are witnessing rapid changes in the sexual norms of our society.

In April 2009, the Iowa Supreme Court ruled that a law banning same-sex marriage was unconstitutional. Iowa became the third state, joining Massachusetts and Connecticut, to allow homosexual marriages. This change has redefined the historic understanding of marriage introducing the concept of “marriage equivalent” relationships. As the first state in the Midwest to legalize same-sex marriage, Iowa has been placed in the center of the national debate. We might understand this change as one in a larger constellation of other social changes such as young adults delaying marriage, cohabitation as a normative lifestyle choice, and new acceptance for choosing artificial means of conception.

As the state-sanctioned definition of marriage changes, the church will naturally need to describe in greater clarity its own understanding of marriage and sexuality.

Marriage is sanctioned by the state and the church in a single ceremony. When the state changes its definition of marriage it is natural for the church to consider how its understanding of marriage compares/contrasts to the understanding of broader society. Mennonites have historically understood the nature of the church to be a contrast community within broader social society (II Corinthians 5:16-21; Philippians 3:20-21).

Romans 12:2 tells the church not to be conformed to the patterns of the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we are able to test and approve the will of God. Our understanding of truth is determined by discerning our common faith and life through reading the Biblical text under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth (John 16:13). Because our citizenship is in heaven, we can expect that the truth of the church will be different than the truth of the world.

The Mennonite Church has repeatedly reaffirmed its historic view on homosexuality.

In nearly identical statements adopted by the delegate bodies of the former MC/GC denominations (Saskatoon, 1986 and Purdue, 1987) the church described an understanding of Christian sexuality that “precludes premarital, extramarital, and homosexual sexual activity” while calling for ongoing dialogue. Mennonite Church leaders have been consistent in reaffirming the church’s position on homosexuality. This was done by the delegate body and/or the executive boards of MC USA and Mennonite Church Canada in 1991, 1995, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2009 and by Central Plains Mennonite Conference leaders in 2002 and 2009.

Many people in the Mennonite Church have felt that the church has not adequately honored its commitment to ongoing dialogue.

In 1995, the delegate body of the Mennonite Church adopted two documents. It adopted “Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective” and in the same session the delegates also adopted “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love.” The Confession of Faith, Article 19, describes our understanding of faithful sexuality:

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

— *Confession of Faith*, 1995

“Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” emphasized the importance of demonstrating loving attitudes as people work together not to “win,” but to reach a joint solution that all parties could live with. Important commitments in this document included listening without judgment and openness without losing the foundation of Christ. The Mennonite Church has consistently reaffirmed commonly held beliefs about

sexuality as described in the Confession of Faith. The church is also committed to ongoing dialogue in the area of pastoral care for those touched by this issue.

In a peace church tradition that values conflict resolution, many people feel as though some issues are avoided because this conversation could result in conflict and cause division. The call for dialogue throughout the past decades have seemed to some as empty statements that are not adequately acted upon because of reservations by those in church leadership. As the issue of homosexuality becomes an increasingly important topic in the national culture, many feel that the church needs to renew its efforts to grapple with homosexuality.

An Open Letter was written to reinvigorate the discussion and reframe the conversation toward Jesus' radical hospitality.

During Holy Week this year, the same week that Iowa courts removed their ban on same-sex marriage, an open letter was sent to Mennonite pastors. This letter issued a call to the church to confess its exclusion of those who understand themselves to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT). Authors and signers of this letter hope that the church will be guided by the "radical hospitality" Jesus demonstrated in the Gospels. The letter was originally written by three pastors, but has since been signed by over 100 pastors and nearly 1500 others who are tired of a church that remains "silent for the sake of unity," while many brothers and sisters are excluded for their sexual orientation. This development has posed a dilemma for conference and denominational leaders. When being credentialed by MC USA, all pastors are asked to affirm their willingness to "respect and be guided by" the teaching of the Mennonite Church.

Recent communication from conference and denominational leaders have continued to reaffirm Mennonite Church stance.

Congregational reactions to the letter and the renewed conversation ranged from ambivalence to reactivity. Central Plains Mennonite Conference recognized that diversity is not necessarily in opposition to unity and that some level of disagreement among our churches on various issues of faith and life will remain among us. However, it is also recognized that too much reactivity could distract the church from being a "sign of God's Kingdom to the world around us" and create a church that is too focused on internal issues to be a witness to the world. In a letter to conference churches, conference leaders reaffirmed the church's official position on homosexuality described in the "Confession of Faith." At the same time, denominational leaders made a strong appeal to offer pastoral care to those who are dealing with this issue in personal ways.

Our understanding of the nature of the church will uniquely shape how we deal with these issues.

The Mennonite Church does not have a pope or bishop to decree rulings on these issues. Instead, we seek discernment with the Holy Spirit in continued conversation together. We all acknowledge that authority in our church does not come from any single individual, nor the state, nor cultural climate but from the Scriptures. The Biblical story is normative in our process of communal decision making. As we strive to strengthen the bonds of peace, we submit to the Lordship of Jesus as we discuss our ethical stance, conferring together until it seems good to us and the Holy Spirit.

We can identify a number of basic issues that will guide our discernment

- How do we interpret passages from Leviticus and Romans in light of Gospel?
- What are the similarities and differences between the 1st century church's experience and the 21st century church's experiences around the issue of homosexuality?
- How do we demonstrate the grace *and* truth of Jesus toward the LGBT community?
- How do we make sure that our faith and life is being formed by scripture rather than social influence?
- What does it mean to draw everyone toward the center, which is Jesus Christ?
- Is it possible to distinguish between unconditional love and unconditional approval?

These are all questions that require careful and prayerful discernment within our fellowship.