

**Presentation by Faith Mennonite Church  
to the Fall 2012 Regional Listening Sessions of  
Central Plains Mennonite Conference**

Faith Mennonite Church first studied sexuality in the mid-1980s along with many other Mennonite churches, using the joint study document “Human Sexuality in the Christian Life.” In the following decade, members’ certainty about traditional church positions were challenged by a number of events within the congregation. One was the influx of a variety of persons, both birth Mennonites and other Christians, who perceived this to be a welcoming place. Perhaps the most seismic events were the breakup of four marriages within the congregation in which one of the spouses was gay. Further focused study and discussion sought to come to a consensus, which ultimately proved impossible. In 1996, the members of Faith voted to affirm the following position: “We believe that while scriptural teaching leaves room for disagreement on the issue of homosexuality, Christian gays and lesbians, whether single or in marriage equivalent relationships, should be welcomed into the membership and leadership of Faith Mennonite without regard to sexual orientation.”

This vote culminated a painfully contentious time in the life of the congregation and as a result of the vote, roughly one third of the members left to form a new congregation. Our congregation naturally turned inward, following the years of internal conflict and pain from the split. Nevertheless, we continued our active participation in two regional conferences: Iowa-Nebraska of the Mennonite Church and Northern District of the General Conference Mennonite Church. In 1998 the Iowa-Nebraska Conference placed Faith Mennonite in provisional membership status because of our position of welcome and when Central Plains Conference formed in 2000 we entered as a provisional member although we had maintained full membership within the Northern District. In 2003, following assurance from Faith Mennonite Church pastors that they affirmed the foundational statements of Mennonite Church USA, while also desiring a place for a minority voice within the church, Central Plains delegates voted to restore our congregation to full membership in the conference. We value this relationship and appreciate the support we have received from leaders and conference programs. We have been blessed by the interaction with other congregations, and we are grateful for this opportunity to share with you in a time of listening to the Spirit, even as we know that this has often been a mutually painful subject.

Slowly our congregation healed and we gained the energy to turn our gaze beyond our walls and welcome new people. We have been blessed by new participants, including many young families, who have found us as they searched for a church that combined a commitment to biblical faith, discipleship, and peacemaking.

During the past 16 years (and before) a number of gay and lesbian persons, some single and some in committed, life-long partnerships have been active participants and members of Faith. This includes one couple of more than 23 years who has raised their son, now 12, in our church. The participation of these brothers and sisters has both blessed us and also deepened our awareness of the pain of exclusion, discrimination, and outright hateful behaviors that many have experienced in their families and other areas of society, including the church. However, at no time during this period did any couple request a ceremony of blessing for their union.

In early 2010, our church council began to discuss the fact that the statement of membership inclusion we approved in 1996 did not specifically mention the granting of blessing to marriage equivalent relationships. Meanwhile, there has been a growing desire among many gay and lesbian persons, Christian and others, to share in the commitment and blessing of marriage. We decided that it was important to clarify this matter *before* a request was received so that an individual couple’s request would not become the focus of a discernment process. Although we knew that our denominational polity places restrictions on pastors with regard to performing same-sex unions, we felt that this was a matter for congregational discernment and clarification.

[pastor testimony] As I went through the process of being called to ministry at Faith Mennonite Church, a call that came from within the congregation while I was a member, I gave considered thought to this

matter. I have thought, read, and reflected on questions of same-sex orientation and relationships and biblical interpretation since the late 70s when I had college friends who were gay and discussions of sexuality were beginning in the church. By nature I am a person who often struggles between the weight of various viewpoints and understandings. I have grappled with the difficult biblical texts—not always finding full resolution—and I have found stories of inclusion and grace in unexpected places in the Bible. I hold a high regard for scripture and appreciate the way that Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman describes the interplay of the “Creative Word”—of Torah, the bedrock foundation of our Judeo-Christian faith; of the Prophets, which bring disruption and a new Word of the Lord, most often from the marginal and powerless, and of the Wisdom writings that reflect on the lived experience and draw conclusions about what gives life and what strengthens or destroys community. The interplay among these, according to Brueggeman, is informed by the deep personal faith that we find in the Psalms (and in the New Testament writings) that call us to obedience in response to the love of God, which we have experienced in Christ.

Together with study, I have witnessed the gifts and grace in the lives of gay and lesbian people in the churches I have been part of as well as at work and in neighborhood settings. In the writing I did to prepare for my ordination interview, and in the interview conversation, I explained the pastoral care dilemma of ministering to persons in loving, faithful committed relationships that I am not able to bless. There is power in blessing and the very best way to support the commitment of marriage, be it heterosexual or gay, is to entrust and encircle it in the care of a community for both for support and accountability.

I would clarify that while I pastor a congregation that welcomes gay and lesbian persons and I am prepared to offer the ceremony of marriage for their unions, I am clear when speaking with people outside of the church that our congregational position is not the position of our denomination or conference.

[Return to narrative]: In fall 2010 the church council decided to appoint a group charged with designing a process for discerning and clarifying the role of marriage within our statement of welcome. We communicated with conference leadership that we were beginning this discussion and committed to remain in communication during the process. There was, of course, uneasiness among conference leadership; this is not an easy topic in any conference or denomination. Nevertheless, we value their commitment to remain in conversation with us and to share their honest feedback along the way, which included continually representing the official position of the church regarding marriage.

There was some uneasiness as well within the congregation when we announced the beginning of the process. Participants who were present in the 1990s did not wish to revisit a contentious time within the congregation or risk another potential conflict with the conference. Other, newer participants were surprised that our welcome didn't already include the offering of blessing, and wondered whether our proposed process might change or alter our position of welcome for gay and lesbian people. We affirmed at the outset that we were not re-opening the question of inclusion and both sides agreed to proceed in trust rather than fear.

The Church Council commissioned a task force to design a process that would enable the church to clarify its stance on marriage as it applies to same-sex relationships. The task force developed an interactive, informative series to facilitate conversation and visioning for how the congregation was being called to live out our faith within the covenants of family, singleness and marriage. We based our process on these three areas addressed in Article 19 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995). We sought to include biblical, theological and historical perspectives and to listen to testimony from our congregation, as well as to the testimony found in the *Confession of Faith*. From February to April 2011, we held sessions during our Sunday morning education hour. In addition, we dedicated three sermons (one each on family, singleness, and marriage) during the process time. At the conclusion we held several Sundays of careful listening and discussion to gather what we had heard and where we believed God was leading. Although some of us had originally envisioned doing this process in conversation with other congregations, the high degree of vulnerability and the time commitment led us to proceed with an internal process.

The sessions were well-attended and marked by a high level of trust, but we know that not everyone may have felt entirely comfortable. Fears that the process might cause division within the congregation did not materialize, although we are aware that at least one family unit may have withdrawn from the congregation in part as a result of the process. Overall, the process deepened our sense of community. Families and single persons, as well as married couples, gave testimony to the joys and challenges of life in each of these states/stages of life. We became aware of unmet needs for connection and community, regardless of marital status, that we began to address even before completing our marriage guidelines process. Gay and lesbian couples and families gave testimony to the important ways our congregation has provided love and support for their family life and faith journeys.

[member testimony]: I grew up in the Mennonite church. My father (and mother ☺) pastored in the General Conference Mennonite Church for their whole working lives. When I told them just out of college that I thought I might be gay, they took it very hard. They quoted the scriptures to me that we have sometimes associated with naming homosexuality as a sin. But they also wanted me to know that they would always love me and that keeping a relationship with me was most important to them. So for almost thirty years now we have grown together and continued to learn from each other. I keep coming back to this experience as a model for the church.

I moved to Minneapolis after college and began attending Faith Mennonite Church at the beginning of their conversations about homosexuality in the early 1980s. I remember talking a lot to church folks with whom I felt affinity on this issue, but unfortunately, very seldom with those I did not. When I moved to Denver, I began attending a congregation within the United Church of Christ and became quite involved there. But I missed the relationships and connections that I had grown up with. When I returned to Minneapolis with my partner, Anna, in 1998, we began attending Faith.

I have received affirmation in this community to live more faithfully. I have been involved with our church's hosting of homeless families through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. I enjoy participating in the music for Sunday mornings. And in the past year, I with others have had a rich experience of welcoming a Somali refugee family to Minnesota after they had lived 20 years in a Kenyan refugee camp.

I have been nurtured spiritually in this community. A couple years ago, Anna and I went through a tough time when she received a cancer diagnosis from her doctors. During this time we experienced the wonderful care of this church family.

[Return to narrative]: In the months following the formal process, the task force drafted a set of guidelines and a summarizing statement based on the discernment process, which you have all received. During this drafting time, leaders of the church council continued in conversation with conference leaders. The pastor also shared with area Mennonite pastors a draft of the congregation's emerging consensus. We were grateful when, last August 2011, Dave Boshart, Tim Detweiler, Blaine Friesen and Susan Janzen took the time to travel to the Twin Cities and spend a good portion of a Saturday with several of our leaders. We were able to talk about our congregational process, our relationship with the conference and agree on ways to continue forward in good faith and trust.

The congregation voted to accept the marriage guidelines at our annual meeting in February 2012. While most members affirmed the guidelines and the process, one person abstained from voting, respectfully questioning whether the congregation should take a position that varies from the wider conference and denomination.

The bulk of this most recent discernment process occurred during 2011 which was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of our congregation. Throughout the year we had the opportunity to reflect on different stages of our history and God's faithfulness. We learned that the charter members chose the name "Faith" because the decision to start this Mennonite Church in the city felt like a leap of faith for them. There have been many other leaps along the way – starting the first independent MCC Crafts store that was not connected with a thrift shop and later joining with Twin Cities Mennonites to begin a local MCC relief sale; supporting a multicultural ministry which became the St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship when race relations were tense on West Side of St. Paul; and extending hospitality to immigrant and refugee families. Our walk with gay

and lesbian brothers and sisters is part of this larger, 50-year call to faith in Minneapolis, which they have helped to shape.

Friends, it is not easy to embrace a position that is at variance with our denominational understanding, but this position has emerged within our context of ministry and for us it is a matter of faithfulness. We desire to remain in fellowship and maintain the unity of the Spirit, as Paul encouraged the early churches, even as they worked through theological and ethical differences. While many denominations have divided over the question of same-sex relationships, we pray that we will be able to bear with one another in love and trust that the risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. At our annual meeting in June we centered our thoughts on being “Guided by the Spirit: To let the world know.” May the way we live, learn, and disagree together be a testimony to the Spirit’s presence in our midst.