

From Policy to the Personal: One Queer Mennonite's Journey

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“You ask me to enter/ and then you make me crawl/ and I can't
keep holding on to what you got/ when all you got is hurt . . .”
– from the song “One” by U2

Introduction

During my last year at Canadian Mennonite Bible College I was required to take six hours of Mennonite history in order to graduate. This came as no surprise to me, and it was by no means a burden – I was excited about learning more about the history of my people. Dr. John Friesen was the professor at the time and about two hundred pages into the text book – a familiar one to many of you, I'm sure – *An Introduction to Mennonite History* by Cornelius J. Dyck – Friesen started talking about a sect of Mennonites who met for the first time in 1860 in West Point, Iowa. Their focus was on education, missions and publication of tracts. They elected a *Reiseprediger* – a travelling preacher - named Daniel Hege and I remember him being quoted that if Mennonites are “not to increase their guilt” we must stop “neglecting the duty of missions as commanded by our Lord” (Dyck, 259). As professor

Friesen was concluding his discussion about this particular sect of Mennonites I remember thinking “Who are these people? They seem like freaks.” Just as that thought crossed my mind professor Friesen said, “And this group of Mennonites eventually formed into what was called the General Conference of Mennonites in Canada and is now called Mennonite Church Canada.” I was more than a little surprised; these were my people.

Further on in the section about the General Conference Mennonite Church, Dyck notes that the new church body’s “provisions were to make it possible to work together on all important matters without violating the congregational freedom of the churches. Uniformity in all things was not considered necessary for co-operation” (258). I believe that this idea of congregational autonomy while remaining in fellowship with the greater church stands as a hallmark of our branch of Anabaptism.

In this paper I wish to trace the history of that policy while also weaving in parts of my personal history. It should also be noted that I am aware that this is by no means a comprehensive history, and not the only work that’s been done around this issue.² Still, I propose that we are at the ground floor, so to speak, of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered academic Mennonite history. History is the story of people and with this paper I offer my story in an effort to begin the building of queer Mennonite academic history. When I contacted Carol Wise, executive director of the Brethren and Mennonite Council for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Interests (generally referred to as BMC), to ask her a few questions about the history of the organization she wrote, “Like many non-profit organizations who are focused on change, we haven’t done a very good job of maintaining our own history.” I am thankful for the opportunity to add another chapter to that history.

In an effort to gain perspective, I will parallel my story with the story of church policy – at the bi-national, national, provincial, and congregational level – remembering that the nature of Mennonite Church Canada policy making is to invite discussion amongst its members. Certainly councils are formed for comprehensive study of certain topics related to policy, yet it has never been my understanding that the national church as an institution is intended to dictate policy. Rather, the church is intended as an expression of the will of the membership. From my perspective and experience this is a very inefficient and sometimes frustrating process of developing policy but also extremely worthwhile.³

When at about age seventeen I came into the knowledge that I was not heterosexual, I started off by identifying myself as bisexual. That was the title with which I felt most comfortable at the time that I came

to terms with my sexual orientation. As the years progressed I've been called a lot of things – 'homosexual', 'dyke', 'queer', and 'lesbian', many times with rather unsavoury adjectives in front of those titles. For some reason, I've come to appreciate the word 'queer' the most. For me, it reflects the most broad and inclusive way of discussing 'other'. It's a pejorative term that I, and many others within the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered) community, have proudly reclaimed thereby taking the power away from those who wish to use hateful language against us. I thus use the word 'queer' as shorthand when referring to myself and also to those who fall outside the heterosexual normative.⁴

There is no papacy for Mennonites, no central church to make pronouncements from on high. Rather, congregations, with members, discuss and then vote on issues. While inclusion of GLBT people as full members of the Mennonite church (with or without caveats) has been discussed by the membership (both at national and individual congregational levels), what has struck me is a desire expressed by some individuals that we all simply accept that which has been stated in *The Confession of Faith* (72-74). They seemingly advocate for a cohesive, unified, mono-theology for all congregations based on this document. In other words, the attitude seems to be one of, "Why are we even discussing this when we've already said in our *Confession of Faith* that homosexuality is a sin? Why doesn't the leadership of the Church simply suspend and or discipline those churches at variance with *The Confession*?" This viewpoint, I believe, is contrary, to the founding principles of Mennonite Church Canada where congregational autonomy has always been viewed as workable within the body of Christ. In a search through the online archives of the *Canadian Mennonite* with references to 'homosexuality' or 'homosexual' I found that on many occasions there are either letters to the editor or references within articles to *The Confession of Faith* advocating that it should be used as a standard for church membership. It seems that some within the conference are much more comfortable with the leadership of the church acting with concentrated power and handing out punitive punishment than I am.⁵

My Narrative

I am Jan Braun, born and raised just outside of Osler, Saskatchewan and I am a queer Mennonite. My story is indelibly linked to the main narrative of Mennonite history.

As was mentioned previously, in 1860, in West Point, Iowa, on Pentecost, a meeting took place which eventually paved the way for the emergence of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA.

In 1976 a group called the Brethren and Mennonite Council for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Interests was formed (BMC) in an effort to advocate for GLBT people within the Mennonite and Brethren churches and to promote dialogue and education within those church communities. The council's founding member was Martin Rock, a member of the Church of the Brethren, who was fired from his position at Mennonite Central Committee because of his sexual orientation (Wise, 2005).

On October 1, 1979 I was born, fourth child to Dick and Kathy Braun. I was dedicated by my parents at Osler Mennonite Church (OMC) in Saskatchewan shortly after my birth and was raised as a member of the OMC family. I attended Sunday school, church youth group, worship services, and provincial and national conferences; I went to summer bible camp; and, beginning in my late teens, I was invited to serve on church committees and also to lead worship and give sermons.

In 1980 the General Conference of Mennonites commissioned a study on human sexuality. The Mennonite Church, North America's largest Mennonite church denomination at the time, joined this task a year later and together the two church bodies created *Human Sexuality and the Christian Life: A Working Document for Study and Dialogue*. In 1986 the General Conference Mennonites passed a resolution at their Saskatoon assembly which committed the church to dialogue about the issue of homosexuality while simultaneously denouncing homosexual 'practice' as sin. The resolution also stated that "genital intercourse is reserved for one man and woman within the marriage covenant."⁶ In 1987 the Mennonite Church passed much the same resolution. A year later, in 1988, Ames Mennonite Church was expelled by Mennonite Church's Iowa-Nebraska Mennonite Conference for accepting covenanted gay couples as members of their church. Just a few years previous to that their gay pastor had his credentials revoked.⁷

In 1990 a joint Mennonite Church-General Conference of Mennonites "Listening Committee" was formed in an effort to hear about the struggles, pain and suggestions of GLBT Mennonites. The next year, in 1991, the Listening Committee presented their findings and recommendations to the executive councils of both organizations. Both the Mennonite Church and General Conference of Mennonites rejected the recommendations of the committee and, in what I believe to be an unprecedented decision, ordered that the recommendations be suppressed from the general membership of both church bodies.⁸

In 1995 the Mennonite Church "Council on Faith, Life and Strategy" issued a statement regarding their 1987 resolution saying that that resolution was "the position of the Mennonite Church." This was an effort to clarify that homosexual 'practice' was still considered a

sin and that 'practicing' homosexuals could not be members of the Mennonite Church. In 1997 the Franconia Mennonite Conference in Pennsylvania voted to expel Germantown Mennonite Church – the oldest Mennonite church in all of North America – for their support of gays and lesbians.

Also, in 1997 I was baptised upon confession of faith and accepted into the membership of Osler Mennonite Church. In the fall of that same year, I started my studies as a theology student at Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC), Winnipeg, Manitoba. As I came to understand my sexual orientation I was profoundly aware of the statements issued by the national church body in Canada and those of its sister body in the United States, stating that 'practising' homosexuals were not to be admitted into the membership of the national church and that 'practising' homosexuality was considered a sin.

After having attended many Peace It Together conferences in my teens at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, and following in the footsteps of two of my older siblings, I enrolled as an undergraduate upon graduating high school. As I experienced the freedom of living on my own and working within what I considered to be a large urban context – Winnipeg – I started the process of coming out to myself and to some of my close friends. Although it was never explicitly stated by the administration of the school at the time, I lived with a daily fear that being out as a lesbian would be grounds for expulsion and removal from the campus. I know now that this was an unlikely scenario; nevertheless, I was absolutely terrified and certainly heard no hint of safety from any of my professors, the administration, or the board of directors of the college. I always had the sense that if my professors would have made supportive statements in the classroom about full inclusion of GLBT people in the Mennonite church, it would be at the peril of their jobs. The consequences of being 'caught' or named as a lesbian seemed so horrific that I couldn't even imagine for a moment what those consequences might be. I could only imagine losing everything – my church, my family, my CMBC family, my education, and my future.

The balance between honouring the person that I was while keeping my secret was very difficult but seemed entirely necessary. I became extremely secretive and the separation between the personal and the public self was one that I tended with diligence. Nevertheless, I resolved that I would give myself five years to adjust to the knowledge of my sexual orientation, and then I would come out to my parents; I knew that the secret-keeping and self-censoring was damaging my psyche.

In the summer of 1998 I went to Toronto where I was a summer student pastoral intern at Toronto United Mennonite Church (TUMC).

I worked under the tutelage of senior pastor Gary Harder and associate pastor Shannon Neufeldt. I also worked as a summer student chaplain at St. Claire O'Connor Community, serving as a chaplain to senior citizens (an intentional community in Toronto built by Mennonites, meant to be intergenerational but mainly housing senior citizens). I was nineteen years old and, as is commonly said, felt called to be a minister. This calling was re-enforced by the support that I received from the congregation which I served that summer. I came away from that summer with plans for the future – I would graduate from CMBC and then enrol at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) in Elkhart, Indiana, in preparation for becoming a minister. At the time, there was no question in my mind that I would simply remain closeted while attending AMBS. As their policy states on their web site, "It is understood that all members of the seminary community will respect the confessions, convictions, values and commitments of the tradition and the churches that it serves." Being openly queer did not seem like a viable option.

In 1999 Calgary Inter-Mennonite Church was expelled from the Northwest Conference of the Mennonite Church for their acceptance of gays and lesbians as members.

In 2000 I graduated with a Bachelor of Theology in the last class of Canadian Mennonite Bible College students before the college became a member of Canadian Mennonite University. Just before graduation, it was customary for students to visit the academic dean in order to confirm that enough credits had been completed for graduation. As I sat down for my meeting, the dean asked me what I had planned for the next year. I told him that I had decided I wasn't ready for seminary yet so I was enrolling at the University of Waterloo in the religious studies department. "No," he said, "don't do that." I was taken aback, not sure why he was discouraging me. He quickly added, "You've already taken thirty hours of theology, and you're going to seminary. Do something else, take English." So I enrolled in the undergraduate English program at the University of Waterloo, a world that I had not previously considered opened up to me. As I made plans to move to Waterloo, Ontario, it was with the self-understanding that in two years I would have to spend the summer with my parents in order to find a way to come out to them as queer.

Also in 2000 the General Conference of Mennonites of Alberta suspended the Calgary Inter-Mennonite Church for their acceptance of gays and lesbians as members (this meant that they were suspended from both area conferences that they belonged to: ly the General Conference and also the Northwest Mennonite Conference). In that same year, a group calling themselves the Welcome Committee published an open letter, in the Mennonite Church publication, the *Mennonite*

Review, welcoming all GLBT people (*Mennonite Weekly Review* February 15, 2000, 2:15). The letter also asked that the Mennonite Church “bless monogamous relationships of same-sex couples who affirm covenant vows.” It was signed by 650 people.

In 2001 the Mennonite Church and the General Conference of Mennonites chose to integrate, creating Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. As a new body they accepted the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* which states in article 19 (72), “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life . . .”

In 2003 Shannon Neufeldt, associate pastor at Toronto United Mennonite Church, and my former mentor, was fired from her position after coming out as a lesbian to the congregation the previous year (*Canadian Mennonite* July 2003, 7:14). The news story stated the following: “On June 21, the Toronto United Mennonite Church (TUMC) decided that it can no longer employ Shannon Neufeldt as associate pastor. This conclusion came after 14 months of a discernment process which began in April 2002 when Neufeldt disclosed her same-sex orientation and then her commitment to a same-sex relationship.”

During my tenure at the University of Waterloo I attended a ‘seminary sampler’ at AMBS in an effort to clarify my path in life. My plan continued to be that upon graduation I would attend seminary and simply closet myself completely. I believed that I could simply bury myself in study for a couple of years and walk away with the degree and experience that I felt compelled to pursue. As the years passed, though, that belief simply crumbled before my eyes.

From the very first day that I accepted in my heart the nature of my sexuality, I grieved for all the things that I anticipated losing. Not one day passed when I wasn’t keenly aware of the fact that, if I continued to be true to myself as a queer woman, I would eventually lose everything. There was not a week that would go by when I wouldn’t break down into tears, unable to reconcile my feeling of being called to be a minister while at the same time feeling called to be myself. “How, God,” I would pray, “do you think that this is going to work?”

Mennonite Church denominational minister, Sven Eriksson, in response to the anticipated change in Canadian law regarding same-sex marriage, in August of 2003, published an open letter regarding the issue. Noting that it was an opportunity to, “[C]onfess our beliefs, but also provide openings for us to provide gracious ministry to people for whom these concerns have deeply personal resonance” (*Canadian Mennonite* August 4, 2003, 7:15), Eriksson reminded readers that our (Mennonite Church Canada) beliefs are laid forth in the *Confession of Faith*, article 19. Clearly, ministers, who might consider conducting

same-sex marriages still would be expected to abide by restrictions spelled out in the *Confession of Faith*.

In March of 2000 I started to write – I had always been a writer, with poetry being my main focus, and in particular a love for performing that poetry – but this was different. It was a little piece of prose that had two characters with dialogue which eventually grew into more characters, more dialogue and started to divide itself into chapters. Before I knew it, I had two hundred pages and many characters. Eventually I recognized that I was telling my story through a fictional narrative.

The summer of 2002 came along – my self-imposed time was up, so I packed my things and moved home, back to Saskatchewan, for the summer. Finally, on August 7 of that year, I sat down with my parents and told them – “Mom, Dad, I’m gay.” I am twenty-eight years old now, and certainly have a lot of life to live, but I can say with conviction that coming out to my parents was the scariest thing that I have ever had to do. Looking into the eyes of my devoutly Mennonite parents – the people who had raised me in such a way as to put the church above all things in my life – and telling them the most disappointing news of their lives is an experience that I wish upon no one. I simply didn’t have a choice. They, of course, are their own people, with their own societal pressures and their own context out of which they grew into adults and parents and I respect that.

As I faced my parents that day, it became clear to me that to be a minister or to simply find acceptance in Mennonite Church Canada would require winning over the hearts and minds of people like my parents. But as I reflected further, and started to consider the plight of Calgary Inter-Mennonite Church, a sense of hopelessness became greater. Despite the official policy of congregational autonomy within Mennonite Church Canada, the chain of events, I believe, is very clear. For example, in the case of Shannon Neufeldt, had Toronto United Mennonite Church decided not to terminate her employment as associate pastor that decision would have been rendered moot due to the fact that Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) made the decision not to continue to licence Shannon after she came out (*Canadian Mennonite* August 25, 2003, 7:16). According to the *Canadian Mennonite* story at that time, the conference executive concluded that “any employment covenant of a congregation with a person in a same-sex committed relationship would be outside MCEC’s process for granting ministry credentials.”

Not ‘moot’, some might argue, since she could continue to work as a pastor only without the credentials to perform official functions such as conducting weddings. Had TUMC continued to employ Shannon as an ordained minister, what would have happened? One need not

search far for an example of the probable outcome. As I have already mentioned, in 2000 Calgary Inter-Mennonite Church was suspended by the General Conference of Mennonites of Alberta for the church's acceptance of gays and lesbians as members. Also in 2000 "several congregations, including the large Coaldale Mennonite Church" in Alberta, "withdrew from the conference over issues of congregational discipline, especially on the matter of congregational acceptance of homosexual members." (Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online).

Let us continue on with this 'what if?' scenario within the framework of congregational autonomy. What if Mennonite Church Eastern Canada had refused to discipline TUMC for their refusal to fire their openly lesbian minister? Would Mennonite Church Canada then have suspended MCEC? What would have happened then if MC Canada had refused that action? Would it have had to end its association with Mennonite Church USA?

The February 20, 2006 issue of the *Canadian Mennonite* reported that Mennonite Church of Vernon voted almost unanimously to leave Mennonite Church British Columbia because of their belief that the provincial and national church bodies were not doing enough to address their concerns over the 'sin' of homosexuality. In its announcement that it was severing ties with the provincial body, the Mennonite Church of Vernon also made direct reference to a Toronto United Mennonite Church statement regarding sexual union between two covenanted adults. According to the news report, the Vernon Church felt "that neither the provincial conference nor the national church body have adequately addressed their concerns regarding Toronto United Mennonite Church (TUMC)—an MC Eastern Canada congregation that has stated that sexual intimacy should be reserved for covenanted monogamous relationships between two adults without specifying they be of opposite gender." It seemed that the Vernon Church felt that TUMC should have been disciplined for not explicitly stating that right sexual union is only within the confines of a relationship between one man and one woman in a covenanted marriage relationship.

That same issue of the *Canadian Mennonite* also reported that the two largest congregations in the Mennonite Church Saskatchewan conference decided, also by large margins, to leave the conference. Cornerstone Mennonite in Saskatoon and Grace Mennonite in Neuanlage, both with memberships over three hundred, stated that they could no longer be a part of either the area or national church body due to the lack of discipline concerning homosexuality.

The blood-loss didn't stop there. The same issue also reported that Calgary Inter-Mennonite (CIM) and Mennonite Church (MC) Alberta would also be 'parting ways'. The article, quoting from a MC Alberta

statement, said, "Considering the difficulties of working together, it may be best for both parties to work separately." It went on to say that "MC Alberta's draft letter to CIM expresses regret that they have chosen to break with the conference."

When I graduated from the University of Waterloo I didn't enrol as a Masters of Divinity student at AMBS. After my years of grieving I had finally come to the conclusion that there was no possibility for me to pursue the path of the ministry within the Mennonite Church. Friends would try to console me by saying that I should simply forget about the Mennonite church and pursue being a minister with a church that accepted queer people as members and ministers. My answer has always been the same: I am a Mennonite, for better or for worse. I asked, and was accepted into the membership of the Mennonite Church and I will not leave.

In the summer of 2006, my childhood friend was married by a Mennonite minister at our summer bible camp. I sat in the audience overjoyed for her happiness and in the fact that she had found the love of her life and was celebrating that love with her friends, family and church community. I also sat in a state of muted grief knowing that such a celebration would never be afforded to me. No Mennonite church minister would be able to conduct a marriage ceremony for me without risking his or her job. The camp would not have been able to rent the facility to me for a same-sex marriage without those administrators risking their jobs and all the funding provided for the camp. Most of my church family members likely would not feel comfortable attending a same-sex marriage. I don't even know if my parents would join me on my wedding day to celebrate. The risks that all of those people would have to take in affording me the same privileges as my fellow church family members would simply weigh too heavily on my conscience to be able to ask.

Presently, I am still a member of Osler Mennonite Church which is a member of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan which in turn is a member of Mennonite Church Canada. For how much longer my membership will last, I don't know. My little piece of prose will soon emerge as a full-length novel, published by Arbeiter Ring Press of Winnipeg. My story is in print. There is no hiding the fact that I am a lesbian and a member of the Mennonite Church and what will come as a result of this undeniable awareness, God only knows. I may never be a minister, and perhaps that's best left behind at this point in my life. There may never be full acceptance of and membership in the Mennonite Church offered to queer Mennonites. The rift between myself and some of my loved ones may never heal in this lifetime. That history is yet unwritten. For now, I offer one queer Mennonite's story in the hope that more voices will be added to this book.

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Notes

- ¹ Acknowledgements: Thanks to Meagan Peasgood whose gentle pushing spurred me into action.
- ² I am thinking particularly of Gerald J. Biesecker-Mast, "Mennonite Public Discourse and the Conflicts Over Homosexuality." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 16(1998): 72.
- ³ I would like to make a quick note about language. The language that I use to self-identify has changed over the years as my beliefs and comfort level has shifted. I have learned that the power of naming oneself is very important. For Christians, the language that we use to speak about each other and to each other requires a respectful consciousness. For an excellent discussion of the importance of the use of conscious Christian language I would encourage you to refer to John Friesen, "Language for Mission: toward an Inclusive Church", Winnipeg MB: Council on Faith and Life, Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997.
- ⁴ I think that the best rule of thumb, when in doubt about which words to use, is to ask the person with whom you're talking.
- ⁵ For an in-depth and well researched discussion of this topic please consult Lydia Neufeldt-Harder's essay, "Marrying "in the Lord": Becoming "One Flesh" in the Church", which was presented to the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada Conference, "Family and Sexuality in Mennonite History", Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario, October, 2007.
- ⁶ "Resolution on Human Sexuality," adopted at the triennial session of the General Conference Mennonite Church, July 1986, Saskatoon.
- ⁷ Loren L. Johns, "Homosexuality and the Mennonite Church." <http://www.ambs.edu/LJohns/H&MC.htm>.
- ⁸ Johns, "Homosexuality and the Mennonite Church." Again, it should be noted that to my knowledge and through the course of my research, I have not found another

example of a committee's report being suppressed from the general church body but I am aware that there may be other examples that I have not found.

- ⁹ "Applying to AMBS." *Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary*. 8 October 2007. <<http://www.ambs.edu/admissions/applying-to-ambs>>.