

‘She Sleeps with Her Girlfriend’: A Twentieth Century Excommunication¹

Priscilla Beth Reimer, *Woodmore, Manitoba*

I am nothing. Without Christ, I am nothing.

Breathe in, I told myself. “You are nothing!”

Breathe out. “I am nothing!”

“You are nothing!”

“I am nothing!”

“You are nothing!”

Breathe in. Breathe out.

“You are nothing unless you get saved, nothing without Jesus Christ.”
Every instinct in my six-year-old body knew he was wrong, rebelled against the self-hating mantra that had begun in my head. I tried to stop it, but it wouldn’t.

“You are nothing! I am nothing! You are nothing....”

It got louder and louder until it filled up my body and spilled over, drowning everything in its cruel, relentless rhythm. And I began to believe him.²

I began to believe him, this self-confident Bible-thumping bully, but I knew deep inside that he was wrong. Wrong because I am somebody. I am Priscilla Beth Reimer, daughter of David J., turkey farmer and agri-businessman, and Helena (Plett), farmer’s wife, mother, gardener, and seamstress, both pillars of the Blumenort Evangelical Mennonite Church in which I was raised. Our family could be found in the pews, every Sunday morning, singing the hymns and participating fully in the life of the congregation. It is who we were. It was our life and it was lived in the full awareness that we were the people of God.

I am also granddaughter of Rev. David P. Reimer (1894-1963), editor of the *Familienfreund*, Elder of the Blumenort church and Moderator of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference, and Justina (Brandt), the Elder’s wife. I trace my heritage back to great, great grandfather Klaas R. Reimer (1770-1837), founder of the *Kleine Gemeinde*.³ Our family is so deeply rooted in the church that its identity and ours are almost indistinguishable from one another.

* * *

Born in 1951, I grew up on a turkey farm near Blumenort, a rural community seven kilometers north of Steinbach, settled in the mid-1870s by Russian-Mennonite immigrants. In the year after my birth the *Kleine Gemeinde* changed its German name to The Evangelical Mennonite Church. The evangelical part of the name indicates that the church had come under the influence of evangelical Christianity with its emphasis on personal salvation.

It was never clear to me what it was that we needed saving from but certain things, certain kinds of activities were sinful. Things like gambling and card playing, dating, greed, swimming, physical violence, smoking, jewellery and fashionable clothing, military service, short hair for women, theft, listening to the radio, alcohol, watching television, neckties, swearing, going to the movies, laziness, sex outside of marriage, lying, dancing. Being saved, born again, meant that you didn’t do them and that you struggled fiercely with desire.

Through the eyes of a child, life in Blumenort was a seamless whole; family life, religious life and cultural life overlapped to the extent that they were impossible to tell apart. I went to school with the same children with whom I attended Sunday School. And as teenagers we all went to

choir practice on Friday evening whether or not we could carry a tune – most of us could. We were Mennonite, after all. And after choir practice we all went skating together. When it was time we were baptized.⁴

Baptism is a ritual, an outward sign of an inward, spiritual truth and it has always been one of the more important sacraments for Mennonites. Because adult baptism is one of the things that separated Anabaptist-Mennonites from their sixteenth century Roman Catholic counterparts who practiced child baptism (Anabaptist means rebaptiser or the baptism of one previously baptized). Mennonites believe that baptism should follow upon a confession of faith and that children are incapable of such a confession. From this I drew the conclusion that, if I was going to be baptized, it would be on my terms, according to my truth, because I wanted to, because it meant something to me, not simply because it was expected. I took my faith and church life seriously.

I wanted to be accepted, to be acceptable, to be received into the fellowship of believers just like my friends who were baptized at twelve or thirteen, maybe fourteen. But I held out until my sixteenth birthday and then I was saved. I experienced my salvation as a giving in, as an acceptance of my destiny, a respite from fear. But that is not all that it was, this saving. I remember being surprised by love in that moment, knowing that I was connected to something bigger than Blumenort, something beyond myself.

On Sunday, 18 June 1967, I was received into the fellowship of the Blumenort Evangelical Mennonite Church (EMC) on my confession of faith. After graduating with senior matriculation from the Christian high school in Steinbach, I went to Germany for two years of voluntary service at a children's home. When I returned, I went to Bible College, taught Sunday School, started the College & Careers program at the church, and as a university student I was in a leadership role with the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship group at the University of Manitoba. In the summer of 1985, I left Winnipeg for Toronto to embark upon a Masters degree program at the Institute for Christian Studies.

It was here that I first encountered gay subculture. Or, here that I was drawn into gay subculture for the first time and here that I fearlessly identified myself as a lesbian, though not without foreboding. I was fearless because my decision was hardly impulsive; it was based on long hours of soul-searching, reflection and intense discussion with trusted friends. I was fearless because the conclusion was true to the person I knew myself to be. The foreboding came with the fear that people in my life would not understand or that they might become hostile.

I also knew that salvation in the Evangelical Mennonite tradition was not once-and-for-all. The Blumenort Church, like all Mennonite

churches, had always practiced excommunication as a means of church discipline.⁵ Grievous sin, espousing heretical doctrine or serious misconduct, could lead to excommunication from church membership in the hope that the sinner would repent and return to fellowship. I knew that homosexuality was considered such a sin. I knew that the membership I had retained in Blumenort over all these years would be in jeopardy even though equality for gays and lesbians had by this time made considerable headway in Canada as a whole and in some churches.

By the 1980s the Mennonite churches of North America were widely aware of homosexuality. The Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (BMC) was founded in 1976 by Martin Rock, a young man who was fired from his position at the Mennonite Central Committee because of his sexual orientation. BMC continues “to provide support for Brethren and Mennonite gay, lesbian and bisexual people, and their parents, spouses, relatives and friends; to foster dialogue between gay and non-gay people in the churches; and to provide accurate information about homosexuality from the social sciences, biblical studies and theology.”⁶

Various church denominations entered the debate during this period. In 1980-01, for example, two of the largest Mennonite conferences in North America, the General Conference and the Mennonite Church commissioned a study of human sexuality. This study provided the groundwork for the Saskatoon Resolution of 1986 and the Purdue Statement of 1987. (The two conferences merged under the name The Mennonite Church in 2000 and the statements are now known as the Purdue/Saskatoon Statement.) The Statement deals with the issue of homosexuality within the broader context of human sexuality, but Ron Sawatzky, Moderator of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and then Mennonite Church Canada from 1996-2002, says that “the statement was the result of the church wrestling with the issue of homosexuality.”⁷

In the Statement, the Mennonites committed themselves to a process of compassionate and loving dialogue. The Listening Committee for Homosexual Concerns was struck in 1990 and disbanded two years later after the General Board rejected the Committee’s findings and suppressed its recommendations. The debate about what it means to remain in “loving dialogue” continues in the Mennonite Church to this day while, at the same time, more churches are publicly affirming of gays and lesbians.⁸

I returned to Winnipeg in June 1988 to be with my lover-companion and came out to my family in the fall of the same year – I had come out to my older brother David prior to my return.

Three years later, in March 1991, I received a telephone call. I was at my desk on the second floor of Artspace.

“Hello, Visual Arts Manitoba.”

“Hello, Priscilla?”

“Yes, speaking.”

“It’s Walter Reimer.”

“Oh. Hello.”

“I was wondering if we could get together sometime. You still have your church membership here and we like to stay in touch with our members.”

Walter and I – Walter Reimer was the pastor in Blumenort at the time – agreed to meet for coffee and I hung up the phone. I knew my time had come.

I knew my time had come because my instincts told me that the meeting was not really about staying in touch. In all the years that I had been a long-distance member, I had never had such a call. Liz, my partner, advised me not to go, to call it off, but I insisted that I had nothing to hide. By Tuesday, I considered myself “quite calm.”⁹ The calm was short lived, however, when Walter told me that my sister Hanna and her husband had come to him recently to express their concern about my openly lesbian lifestyle.¹⁰

This and subsequent meetings and conversations merge in my memory, but I know that at this first meeting Walter asked me how I could justify living with another woman in a sexual relationship. I told him and his wife Margaret who was with him, that I did not like having to justify it but if I had to I would argue that I was not gay by choice and that the Christian scriptures do not address the kind of relationship that I was in, namely, a committed, long-term union similar to marriage.

If my journals are accurate then Walter agreed that gay people are not responsible for their sexual orientation but that married heterosexuality is God’s norm. “Therefore,” he writes in a recent letter recalling those meetings “we advised and taught that members and adherents of the church should be discreet in a monogamous heterosexual relationship or live celibate.”¹¹

It puzzled me at the time but Walter also asked me about my current theological position or beliefs. In hindsight I recognize that he was trying to establish my orthodoxy; Christian feminist liberation theology did not meet the criteria. We talked further, during that first meeting, about the fact that I had not been active in the Blumenort Church for a long time and that the Church had not previously dealt with the issue of

homosexuality – I was breaking ground then and it appears as though I am breaking ground to this day. As recently as 25 September 2007, when I spoke with David Thiessen, EMC Conference Pastor, and asked whether EMC Churches are dealing with the issue of homosexuality, he said, “I should probably be disturbed that it’s not coming up. It’s not very visible in our churches.”

The Evangelical Mennonite Conference ministerial did issue a position statement on homosexuality in 1999, the same year that the Supreme Court extended common-law benefits to same-sex partners and eight years after Walter and I had our first meeting. But it appears that the statement was motivated by external, societal influences rather than real-life situations or the internal realities of church life. This is confirmed in an email from Erica Fehr, Administrative Assistant to the EMC Conference Pastor: “I have looked through our records and the first mention of the homosexuality issue is in 1995 when our conference pastor at that time wrote the following: *Some denominations have recently developed statements on homosexuality in response to some of our society’s directions. We feel it is necessary for us, as well, to respond to this issue.* He then requests position statements from other Mennonite Conferences and sets in motion a process to form an official position for the EMC.... It would seem... that the impetus was external. We responded to what was happening in society.”¹²

* * *

I pressed Walter Reimer on his intentions and his response implied that, as a minister, he was sometimes required to take action that he himself was not entirely in favour of but that he was obligated to proceed with church discipline. I had no interest in being Blumenort’s test case but told Walter that I would face the future, head on.

Over the next few days, I talked with several people including my sister Hanna. I expressed my overwhelming sense of betrayal that my own sister would have turned me in without talking to me first and asked what had motivated her. “I don’t know,” Hanna said. “I just know that God told me to do it. I was obedient and the rest is up to God.”¹³

Hanna remembers that phone call: “You were very, very hurt and wanted to talk about it. I had a bit of a superior feeling,” she says. “You were crying on the phone and you felt you just couldn’t get anywhere with me and I felt I had to stick to my point.”¹⁴

“We felt,” my brother-in-law Cornelius adds, “that the church needed to be pure and holy and we felt your lifestyle was not... we then expected that maybe you would reconsider the lifestyle.”¹⁵

My trusted friends in Toronto, Kurt and Leona Schwarz, who also grew up in the EMC Conference – Leona in Blumenort and Kurt in Kleefeld – were familiar with the world-and-life-view with which I

found myself in conflict. Kurt urged me to “claim my power” and to cancel my church membership.¹⁶

On April 15th, with a growing premonition that nothing good would come of the process and knowing that I could not reconcile church dogma, I wrote a letter addressed to Walter Reimer and members of the Blumenort EMC Church requesting the termination of my church membership. I hand delivered the letter at a second meeting thinking that it was not too late to avoid public humiliation.

* * *

An almost two-month period of silence followed. It ended when Walter called another meeting. This one was to take place at the Windsor Park Inn restaurant with other church representatives present – it was remarkable to me, at the time, that all these meetings took place in restaurants. My early spiritual life took root and developed at home, in Sunday school, in the church and now my life was on parade in public eating establishments.

Once again, I phoned my friends and learned from them that what appeared to me to have been a period of silence and inactivity had in fact been full of activity. Kurt and Leona heard through family members that “The Priscilla Reimer” Issue, as we affectionately began to call it, had been raised at a recent church membership meeting. They were surprised to learn that I knew nothing about it.¹⁷

Once again, I was “outed” behind my back, this time to the entire congregation. Once again, I was overwhelmed by a sense of betrayal and outrage. I phoned Anne Reimer, a member of the church, a woman my own age, a friend, someone I thought I could trust to find out what had happened at this membership meeting. She did not recall that my letter had been read and it became clear to me that my request for annulment had not been granted.

Anne remembers our telephone conversation vividly to this day. She took my frustration and anger with the church very personally. “I felt I had been hit,” Anne says. “I felt shattered. When you criticized the church you were criticizing me.”¹⁸

Anne admits that she was and remains torn between her loyalty to the church and its teachings and her friendship with me. At the same time there was never any doubt in her mind that she would be there for me.

“I just knew that you were a hurting person and you needed all the support you could get. I don’t think it ever crossed my mind that I wouldn’t get involved. I just knew that I needed and wanted to do it. This was the right thing to do.”¹⁹

The next day I phoned Walter and made no effort to curb my anger. I asked why my letter had not been read and he told me that he felt it

needed interpretation. I countered by asking why I was not allowed to speak for myself. I did not get an answer.²⁰ I told Walter that I was too frustrated and angry to attend another meeting. He informed me that a membership meeting was already scheduled at which “the issue” would be resolved. I do not remember my response word-for-word but imagine that it was something like, “Well. You’re welcome to go ahead with the meeting, but I will not be present.”

“I was very upset,” Anne goes on to say, “by the way things were being done. Why did it have to be... just boom... now we’re working this thing through? Why not listen to a few people?”

Anne tried talking with Walter and his wife Margaret about it. “But I didn’t feel like I was heard,” she says. “I felt very strongly the pain that there was, the pain from the way it was being done. I pled with them to stop the... the just barrelling over [people].”²¹

My Mom and Dad chose, for the most part, to be uninvolved for conflict of interest reasons; they too were torn. They agreed with church doctrine and policy but were torn between their love for me and their love of and commitment to the church. (Out of six children, only my youngest sister and brother and their families were active in the Blumenort Church at the time, and I have not talked with them about their involvement in events nor how they felt about it.)

But around this time, in late June, I got some genuine support from my family. Aunt Betty, my Mom’s youngest sister, was marrying for the first time at the age of fifty-five. This was a special occasion and I, as the oldest niece, was supposed to be the first person down the aisle. I did not want my presence to be a public embarrassment and asked if they would rather that I did not attend. They responded with a unanimous, “No way. You are family.”

An uncle of mine apparently expressed an opposing view, but I was the first one down the aisle that day and took great strength and comfort from it.

A month or so later, I had another call from Walter. He and his family were leaving for holidays and he wanted “The Priscilla Reimer Issue” resolved before they left. I countered by saying that I did not share his sense of urgency, that it had taken me thirty-five years to explore and claim my sexual identity and several more weeks of indecision could hardly matter.

I do not remember when I first asked for an opportunity to speak with the church membership. I felt that my voice deserved to be heard, but I was silenced at every turn. My father shed some light on this in a conversation we had. He drew my attention to the section in the Blumenort EMC Constitution that deals with the *Discipline of Members* where it says that “the church shall exercise biblical discipline towards members who teach false doctrine or who live in sin.” Letting me speak

to the membership, Dad suggested, could be perceived as allowing the teaching of or listening to false doctrines.²²

However, on August 26th I was grudgingly allowed to meet with Church Council, the Ministerial, and their wives. By this time, I was worn out emotionally and asked whether I could bring someone with me for support. No, I was told. Not unless I invited someone from the Blumenort Church. So, once again, being who I am, I went alone.

This meeting, as Anne remembers it, was not helpful. "I don't remember what was said," she says, "but it felt like there was a stone on my heart."²³

I agree that the meeting was ineffectual. When I reread the "sermon" I preached that day I can feel the righteous outrage. And while the content is true, it was delivered in a defensive and sanctimonious tone that makes me cringe. I am quite sure, that the people in attendance misunderstood my plea for justice. What they reacted to were the words, "If you loved me...."

"Pastor Reimer has assured me," I said, "that what he and the church at Blumenort have done in this situation has been out of care and concern for me and my spiritual wellbeing. But I say... if you loved me you would treat me with respect. You would deal with me as a fully human being created in the image of God."²⁴

At all these meetings, it was always "Walter and his wife" and, what I remember most clearly about this last, this final meeting is that the men in the room seemed focussed on the business at hand while the women attempted, as they were able, to bring some emotional care to the occasion.

* * *

In early September, I received a letter informing me that the church membership had voted and that, as of August 27th, my membership had been terminated.²⁵ I didn't think to do so at the time but in an effort to determine what percentage of the church membership actually voted, I requested access to church records in a letter dated 13 September 2007. I knew that time was limited; I was scheduled to present my findings on 12 October. I received a prompt reply, but access was postponed since, prior to releasing information, Church Council wanted a summary of my paper "...that would demonstrate how church records information would be presented."²⁶ I submitted my summary on 03 October but did not receive a reply until 30 October, after I delivered my initial paper in Kitchener-Waterloo.

Copies of the 25 June and 27 August 1991 church membership meeting minutes were attached to the Church Council's letter but they were unable to locate the additional information I had requested, namely committee meeting minutes, a copy of the church constitution in effect

in 1991, the number of people present at the 27 August membership meeting and the total number of church members at the time.

A plausible estimate is possible, however. The Blumenort Church had 550 members in 1982 and, as a regular attendee, Anne Reimer estimates that attendance at membership meetings averages one hundred (she was present at the 27 August meeting at which the vote was taken).²⁷ The 1986 Constitution that was in effect at the time of the vote – I was able to obtain a copy from another source – makes no reference to a quorum. The meeting minutes of 27 August indicate that “...a minimum of 75 percent be required for the release of Priscilla’s membership. After prayer the membership, by secret ballot, voted to terminate her membership.”²⁸

Given that the constitution does not require quorum, the 75 percent requirement must be interpreted as 75 percent of the members present. If there were a hundred members present and if the total number of members at the time was approximately 550, then approximately 14 percent of the membership voted on the question of my release from membership. I could have challenged the 14 percent vote. Excommunications have been challenged in the past over such technicalities and caused church schisms.²⁹

While it is unclear whether the Church perceived my release from membership as an excommunication or as a straightforward termination, ministerial meeting minutes and the Church’s final letter clearly indicate that the Blumenort EMC Church perceived the course of action taken with regard to “The Priscilla Reimer” Issue as a process of church discipline.³⁰ And I was familiar with that process; I’d seen it in action before when young, unmarried women got pregnant, for example. I witnessed their tearful confessions at membership meetings in which they were restored to fellowship – the young fathers of their babies were always strangely absent.

I respect the Church’s right to set standards for membership based on its theology and vision of life and I believe it was clear to both of us by the time the final letter was issued that repentance or confession on my part would not be forthcoming.

* * *

A recurring theme or question runs throughout the conversations, correspondence and journal entries from 1988-91: Why didn’t you withdraw your church membership sooner?

My brother David suggested that I cancel my membership as early as January 14th, 1989.³¹ “I know,” he says, “that it had come up repeatedly by the time Hanna had gone to the Church. I thought it would be a good way for you to be proactive. I didn’t understand why you would want to continue to be a member of the Blumenort Church

under the circumstances in any event. I was trying to help you protect yourself.”³²

“Why is it so difficult to cut this last, formal tie to Blumenort?” I wrote in my journal in the spring of '91. “I don't know why I haven't done it long ago. I could have avoided all of this or could I?”³³

Or could I?

Church Ministerial minutes of June 11th, 1991 indicate that “her letter of request for membership release was read. Consensus was that this should be dealt with as a discipline case. We want to communicate to her our offer of help and support in seeking help.”³⁴

However, church discipline was not the only option. The Blumenort Church Constitution under the section titled *Absentee Members*, which is a subsection of *Church Discipline*, states that “absentee members who do not transfer [their membership to a church in their new community] are asked to maintain contact with this church. If such absentee members seem indifferent about maintaining a relationship with this church and if they give no clear reason why they should remain members here, they may be dismissed from membership.”³⁵

I knew that the EMC congregation at Blumenort had long ago ceased to be my spiritual home and I clearly qualified as an absentee member. My letter requested release from membership on exactly these grounds: “I have not been an active participant in church life at Blumenort for a long time” I wrote, “and do not anticipate reactivating my membership.”³⁶

The church leadership team at Blumenort consciously chose to treat “The Priscilla Reimer Issue” as a discipline case. They consciously chose punishment and public humiliation over the more compassionate option. I cannot help thinking that it is this spitefulness, the knowledge that the Church would most likely adopt shameful punishment rather than compassionate release, that motivated family members and trusted friends to suggest that I withdraw my membership. I never expected my people – my family, my clan, my church – to agree with the choices I had made. Nor did I expect that my church membership would survive scrutiny. I also did not expect that my human dignity would be so thoroughly undermined.

* * *

A lot has changed since 1991. Both my sister and brother-in-law have apologized for what they did. They have, in the intervening years, gone through a similar process of church discipline and now understand betrayal from personal experience.

Walter Reimer, it seems, has also changed. I received a letter recently in which he wrote, “Our understanding as a church was quite narrow and rigid. Our love and respect for you, as a woman in God's

image did not shine through all our deliberations. I am deeply sorry we could not achieve better understanding and consensus. My hope and prayer for you is to be able to glean from this experience some insights that can help you on your pilgrimage. May your presentation also further assist others who are on a similar journey.”³⁷

And I too am not the person I was. When I returned to the question of forgiveness in preparation for this paper, I realized that something had changed in the intervening years. In 1991, “forgive and forget” was the only concept of forgiveness that presented itself and I rejected it out of hand. In the mean time, however, a new, more nuanced view of forgiveness has percolated from head to heart. I have become a clumsy practitioner of forgiveness and for this I have Stephanie Dowrick to thank.

“Forgiveness,” Dowrick says, “does not depend on someone else accepting our forgiveness – or on our own guilt entirely vanishing. Forgiveness arises as we discover that we do not need to remain eternally shackled to a time of loss or pain or betrayal or sorrow *that has already passed*. We can come alive again in this moment. This same willingness lets us discover that our experience of life and of our soul’s strengths *can* expand; that wrongs may never be righted, but that life can nevertheless rise up again – and take us forward.”

“But let me also say what forgiveness is not,” she goes on to say. “Forgiveness is not about trivializing a wrong that’s been done, or pretending that the wrong didn’t happen. It certainly does not pretend that whatever was once wrong is now all right. In fact, the contrary is true. You may be very clear indeed about what went wrong – but also just as clear that you are choosing not to respond in ways that are wounding or violent.

Forgiveness also does not demand your silence. Sometimes speaking up clearly about what is wrong is helpful as well as truthful.”³⁸

* * *

“Why didn’t you cancel your membership sooner?” my EMC family and friends ask. Friends that did not grow up in the church, on the other hand, ask why I didn’t just walk away. There is more than one answer, of course.

One answer is that the Blumenort EMC was home. Not only did I belong to it, it belonged to me. Regardless how closed, narrow and intolerant it appears from this distance, regardless how counterfeit or how tenuous my place in that community may seem after what we have been through – the betrayal is enormous – it is nevertheless home. Wherever I have wandered on the face of the earth and regardless how far, I have rarely and only briefly known a place to be home the way that Blumenort was home. Life was not a seamless whole as it appeared

in childhood. It was a patchwork quilt with frayed and tattered seams that needed re-stitching from time to time but, for better or for worse, the seams held. It was a community.

"If we were lucky enough as children to be surrounded by grown-ups who loved us," Wendell Berry writes, "then our sense of wholeness is not just the sense of completeness in ourselves but also is the sense of belonging to others and to our place; it is an unconscious awareness of community, of having in common. It may be that this double sense of singular integrity and of communal belonging is our personal standard of health for as long as we live."³⁹ I once lived in such a world and it remains central to my understanding of human well-being, of my well-being.

Another reason I found it difficult to leave home is that the religion on which I was raised, in its theology and its practices, was punitive and based on fear. From the Brunk Brothers crusades to "The Priscilla Reimer Issue", there was an abusive dynamic at work of the kind that keeps people locked in unhealthy relationships, unable to let go, unable to leave home; relationships in which the victim is blamed for the abuse and made to believe that if they would only give in, only do what they're supposed to do, for their own good, then the abuse would stop. I knew inside, but never really believed, that I could work out my own salvation with care and with trembling. My home had tied me tight with emotional-intellectual bonds, bonds that cannot be easily undone.

Yet another reason is that they could not let go of me. The easiest route for the church would have been to release me from membership and to let me go "in my sin." But for their own reasons they could not do so. They were then, and in many respects still are, tied to their experience of me. I do not understand it, except that perhaps home works two ways, tying the individual to the community and the community to the individual. For their own reasons they continued to see me as a significant person and as long as they did so, how could I cease to care? How could I let go?

Perhaps a final reason is that walking away from social and spiritual injustice was not an option for me. I chose to stay and fight because "The Priscilla Reimer Issue" is an issue of justice and God's people, even the Blumenort EMC, must struggle to be just. Great-great grandfather Reimer founded the church because a higher standard was required. I was fighting for that higher standard, even if from a place he could not have imagined.

It is a paradox as life so often is: While the Church at Blumenort had ceased to be my spiritual home, it was nevertheless still tied to me and I to it. Despite the betrayal, my faith is deeper and I am stronger. Perhaps, so too is the Blumenort EMC. I am Priscilla Beth Reimer. I am not nothing. I know it. So does my church.

Notes

- ¹ The title, *She Sleeps with Her Girlfriend*, was inspired by an anecdote told to me by a friend who heard it from a family member who overheard comments made at a family gathering. My friend had two elderly aunts who lived together their whole lives, unmarried sisters, spinsters we used to call them. After attending a church membership meeting at which “The Priscilla Reimer” Issue was discussed, one of them commented that, if what Priscilla was doing was wrong, then perhaps she shouldn’t be sleeping in the same bedroom as her sister. I delivered a paper under this title (on which this one is based) at the *Family & Sexuality in Mennonite History Conference* on Friday, 12 October 2007.
- ² Pennsylvania Revivalist George Brunk, the Mennonite equivalent of Billy Graham, came to Steinbach in 1957 when I was six years old. I remember my awe at the size of the tent, the number of people, the way he preached; it was exciting.
- ³ The Kleine Gemeinde, or “little church” was an offshoot of the Mennonite churches in Russia. Reimer formed the church with a number of members of his congregation in response to what he considered the lax morals of the other Russian Mennonites. The group migrated from Russia to Canada and the United States in the 1870s. Cornelius Krahn and Al Reimer, “Reimer, Klaas (1770-1837),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. Retrieved 12 February 2009 <<http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/R45613.html>>
- ⁴ “One aspect of the Blumenort Church which did not change after 1948 was the singular importance of the church in the community. It was estimated that in 1982 70% of Blumenort adults were members of the 550-member church,” a quotation from Royden Loewen’s, *Blumenort: A Mennonite Community in Transition* (Steinbach, Manitoba: The Blumenort Mennonite Historical Society, 1983), 582.
- ⁵ Harold S. Bender, “Excommunication,” 1955, *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. Retrieved 08 February 2009 <<http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/E948.html>>.
- ⁶ The BMC Mission Statement quoted from Vol. 18, No. 1 (Summer 1996) of *Dialogue*, BMC’s quarterly magazine. The mission statement has subsequently undergone revision to include transgendered issues and concerns.
- ⁷ Email from Ron Sawatsky to Priscilla Reimer, 23 September 2007.
- ⁸ I served on the BMC Board of Directors for six years from 1991-97.
- ⁹ Priscilla Beth Reimer, unpublished journals, April 1991.
- ¹⁰ Walter Reimer recalls, in a 20 September 2007 letter, that “Cornie and Hanna’s visit is clear to me as an expression of concern about your lesbian lifestyle.”
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Email from Erica Fehr to Priscilla Reimer, 03 October 2007.
- ¹³ Priscilla Beth Reimer, unpublished journals, April 1991.
- ¹⁴ Interview with Cornelius and Hanna Brandt, 17 September 2007.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Priscilla Beth Reimer, unpublished journals, April 1991.
- ¹⁷ Priscilla Beth Reimer, daily organizer, 14-17 June 1991.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Anne Reimer, 25 September 2007.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ When I talked with Walter on 18 June 1991 he did not recall whether or not my letter was read at the 28 May 1991 church membership meeting at which “The Priscilla Reimer Issue” was first raised with the membership. However, membership meeting minutes, a copy of which I obtained after my presentation on 12 October 2007, indicate that the letter was read on 25 June 1991.
- ²¹ Interview with Anne Reimer, 25 September 2007.

- ²² Telephone conversation with David J. Reimer, 03 October 2007. Section XXI of the Constitution remains unchanged over many years; the 1992 Constitution is quoted here without the biblical references.
- ²³ Interview with Anne Reimer, 25 September 2007.
- ²⁴ Priscilla Beth Reimer, an unpublished and untitled paper, 26 August 1991.
- ²⁵ Letter to Priscilla Reimer from the Evangelical Mennonite Church at Blumenort, 03 September 1991.
- ²⁶ Letter from Blumenort EMC Church Council, 19 September 2007.
- ²⁷ See footnote 4.
- ²⁸ Blumenort EMC Church Membership Meeting Minutes, 27 August 1991.
- ²⁹ Henry Fast, "Evangelical Mennonite Conference (Kleine Gemeinde)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. Retrieved 07 February 2009 <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/E9364ME.html>.
- ³⁰ Letter to Priscilla Reimer from the Evangelical Mennonite Church at Blumenort, 03 September 1991 and minutes of the Blumenort E.M.C. Membership Meeting, August 27, 1991. My brother David was the only one who actually used the word "excommunication" in reference to the process in an 05 October 2007 email.
- ³¹ David Reimer, personal letter, 14 January 1989.
- ³² An interview with David and Trish Reimer, 07 September 2007.
- ³³ Priscilla Beth Reimer, unpublished journals, April 1991.
- ³⁴ Meeting minutes, 11 June 1991. I obtained experts from the minutes of the 16 April and 11 June 1991 ministerial committee meetings from someone on the committee mailing list during the time that "The Priscilla Reimer Issue" was in process.
- ³⁵ Constitution of the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Blumenort, 1986, 13.
- ³⁶ Letter to the Blumenort EMC Church, 15 April 1991.
- ³⁷ Walter Reimer, letter, 26 September 2007.
- ³⁸ Stephanie Dowrick, *A Talk on Forgiveness*, a very short version of a talk given on 15 June at the 2007 Happiness and Its Causes Conference and published in the *Universal Heart Network Message*, 13 August 2007.
- ³⁹ Wendell Berry, *Health is Membership* in *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1995), 87.