

Toward a Welcoming Church: A Mennonite Case Example

by:

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Introduction

Bill Lee describes community action as “the purposeful bringing together of people and structuring their effort to achieve some alteration or development in the life of a group.”(Lee, 1999, p. i). A community worker usually orchestrates such action, as one who is specifically recruited to facilitate social change (either from within or from outside the community). Community action can also occur, however, in situations where the need for social change is recognized by some within the community, and one or more people embrace the role of ‘initiator’ in community action. Bill Lee cites the Social Work Dictionary when he refers to the initiator role as one of “creating a climate of introspection and self-assessment for the...community, and facilitating communication, stimulating awareness of problems, and encouraging belief in the possibility [of] change” (Lee, 1999, p. 57).

The Mennonite community at large, with sub communities of local churches, is in need of community action to facilitate social change with respect to its non-inclusive stance towards the queer community. Although people who identify as queer are experiencing improved inclusion in the mainstream Canadian culture (but not always), many still experience blatant discrimination, shunning, and feelings of ‘otherness’ within the Mennonite Church.

This paper presents an argument for social change within the Mennonite Church, as rooted in an understanding of the Anabaptist tradition of radical action. The official stance of the Mennonite Church with respect to sexual minorities will be explained, with examples of discrimination and exclusion of queer individuals from full involvement in the Church.

The case of the Ottawa Mennonite Church will be presented as an example of the very early stages of community action at work, as a response to the Calgary Inter-Mennonite Church’s efforts to become a publicly welcoming community. The Brethren and Mennonite Council’s Supportive Congregations Network (SCN) demonstrates organized social action within the broader Mennonite community. It is my goal, as a member of the Ottawa Mennonite Church (OMC), to facilitate this local community to become affiliated with the SCN, and to publicly affirm a welcoming stance for people who identify as queer. I will present suggestions for direction for the OMC as we move forward in this journey towards inclusion for *all* believers.

Anabaptist Tradition – Defining Constructs of the Mennonite Church

The Mennonite Church is a peace church, dedicated to processes of non-violent conflict resolution. It is committed to a philosophy of the ‘community of all believers’, with an understanding of faith as guided by the scriptures, accessible to all who seek to follow Jesus, individually *and* in community.

Mennonites recognize the value in organizing as a wider community of Christians connected through the support of local faith communities of fellow believers....In community, we seek hope in place of despair, healing instead of suffering, and peace instead of conflict (MC Canada, 2004).

The Mennonite Church grew out of the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century, which is referred to as the “most radical wing of the Protestant Reformation. Due to their belief in the voluntary nature of the faith...and the refusal to bear arms, the Anabaptist[s] posed a threat to the existing social order, and over 5,000 were martyred...” (Brethren Mennonite Council, 1996, *Who Are Brethren and Mennonites?*, p. 1). The Mennonite community takes its name from Menno Simons, a true community organizer who kept the spirit of the faith community alive in his work amongst underground faith communities (BMC, p. 2), and was persecuted for his commitment to his values and beliefs. As Anne Breckbill reflects:

The early Anabaptist experience was about freedom, empowerment, calling forth their passion. It was a social, religious and sexual liberation. These brothers and sisters moved from the celibacy and austerity of cloistered life into vibrancy, exuberance, hope, passion and spiritual connection with God....In fact, this vitality – the very essence of Anabaptism – is precisely what was threatening to the powers of church and state (Breckbill, 2003, p. 4).

We should recognize the value in this radical tradition of passionate commitment to faith that was predicated on peaceful resistance to unjust hierarchical structures. The Mennonite Church, in its refusal to embrace the vibrant and deeply committed community of individuals who dare to identify as ‘queer’ Mennonites, is denying itself an existence that is congruent with its heritage (that of a community committed to social change) and biblical underpinnings (core value of acceptance of the outcast). The foundational principle of inclusion of all believers, as witnessed in the life of Jesus who welcomed the outcasts of society, calls the people of the Mennonite Church to live with integrity, speaking out against the injustices of the Church in its exclusion of the queer community.

Public Statement with Respect to Sexual Minorities: Mennonite Church Canada

Bill Lee comments on the limited citizenship of queer individuals in society: “Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons have been highly regulated so that community members have not experienced full civic participation as valued citizens” (Lee, 2002, p. 73). Unfortunately, this limited participation is often experienced by queer individuals within the Mennonite Church as well. According to their website (MC Canada, 2003), the national conference, Mennonite Church Canada, maintains an official commitment to exclusionary statements as described in:

1. Confession of Faith, 1995 (Article 19) (Mennonite Church USA, 1995) – defining marriage to be between one man and one woman, effectively stipulating that same-sex unions or marriages will not be blessed or performed,

2. Resolution on Human Sexuality, 1986 (Saskatoon) (MC USA, 1986) – defining homosexual activity as sinful and accepting only celibate homosexuals as members,
3. Resolution on the Issue of Homosexuality, 1998 (Stratford) (MC Canada, 1998) – limiting church membership in the conference to churches who support the conference statements.

This exclusionary rhetoric leads to sanctioned discrimination of queer individuals. Kathleen Temple, who recently resigned from her teaching position at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) in Virginia, refers to the disrespect and harassment that people who are different often experience at EMU. What is troubling, however, is that the ‘Church’ sanctions discrimination against people who differ in their sexual orientation. She writes:

Unkindness toward sexual minorities and allies is unique and constant – it is the one type of discrimination that is condoned by those in power. I no longer want to participate in an institution that continues not only to commit but even to defend harassment, hurt, exclusion, and castigation of people because of their sexuality (Temple, 2004, p. 1).

Public Statement with Respect to Sexual Minorities: Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada (MCEC)

Although still officially supportive of the collective statements as listed above, the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada (MCEC) seems more open to dialogue, recognizing the diversity of opinions and the harm that exclusion can cause. MCEC has issued a recommendation “not to exclude congregations that have gay and lesbian members or who do not fully support the statement of the church on homosexuality” (MCEC, 2004, p. 2). In an explicit call for ‘creating safe space for dialogue’, this conference stipulates its commitment to stop the “painful exclusion homosexual persons often experience” (MCEC, 2004, p. 2). The MCEC document called “Pointing a Direction on Homosexuality”, as cited already, offers a discourse that hints at movement in the direction of becoming a welcoming community, while at the same time respecting the struggle in community of bringing extremely diverse groups of people together. Despite this climate of openness in hearing the dissonant voices, MCEC maintained its official commitment to Conference statements when asked to support a congregation in its walk with a long-time pastor who recently ‘came out’ as lesbian. MCEC, bound to the official rhetoric, had no choice but to offer two employment options with respect to this pastor for consideration by the congregation:

- 1) Congregational ministry without the credentials of the broader church, leaving the option of commissioning to be decided by congregational process;
- 2) Licensing for Specific Ministry (rather than toward ordination). This credential would be specific to [the pastor’s] ministry ... and would require that she not enter into a same-sex relationship (Martin, 2003).

Public Statement with Respect to Sexual Minorities: Ottawa Mennonite Church

The Ottawa Mennonite Church, as a member congregation of MCEC and MC Canada, implicitly supports the Confession of Faith, and the other statements and resolutions on 'homosexuality' that are upheld at the conference level. In practice, however, OMC prides itself on being a diverse community, with an openness to, and respect for all people who wish to worship and participate in congregational life. "This diversity is enriching and challenging.... Our congregational life is defined not so much by its boundaries (defining who is in and who is out) as by what is at the centre (what we hold in common and what goals we are moving toward)" (Ottawa Mennonite Church, 2004, *Our Character*). By not defining its opinion on issues related to full participation of queer individuals in congregational life, OMC has managed to create a space where most people hopefully feel comfortable worshipping together.

The Guiding Principles of our congregation outline the elements of faith we consider important. The opening statement of the Guiding Principles states: "The Church of Jesus Christ is identified more accurately by the life of its people than by any creed or statement of faith." Like a ship whose intention and destination can be guessed at but not determined while it is sitting in harbour, so the church must be observed in action to discover what is its real purpose, and where it is heading (OMC, 2004, *Our Covenant*).

In a recent sermon the pastor, Don Friesen, reiterated this attitude of welcome: "Jesus demonstrated that the welcoming arms of God are much wider than we could have guessed. To children, who know instinctively what it means to belong and how much it hurts to feel excluded, Jesus said: 'Let (them) come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.'" (Matthew 19:14)" (Friesen, 2004, p. 5).

It might be argued that this approach has historically been successful, because there have been few explicitly discriminatory acts perpetrated within this community towards queer individuals. I would argue, however, that silence allows space for discrimination to be exhibited without accountability. The lack of a strong, specific message of welcome to people of sexual minorities may lead people to assume explicit allegiance to the official statements of faith as defined by the larger conference bodies. This assumption allows for an understanding of the community as one that would condone a personal statement of condemnation towards people of non-heterosexual orientation, as was exhibited one Sunday morning during a public community prayer. If OMC were to publish an explicit statement of welcome to all believers, and specifically to individuals who may feel excluded elsewhere due to their sexual orientation, then such hurtful behaviours would be less likely to occur.

Beginnings of Community Action – OMC Sexual Minorities Discussion Group

A connection that some OMC members had with the Calgary Inter-Mennonite Church (CIM) led to the formation of a small discussion group at OMC in 2000/2001, to develop an awareness of the issues surrounding sexual minorities and the church. CIM, after many years of self-study and open conversation within its membership, had decided to make a publicly affirming statement of welcome to individuals who identify as queer, by joining the Supportive Congregations Network. "For its acts of solidarity and inclusivity CIM [was] excommunicated from two Mennonite conferences and marginalized from Mennonite Church Alberta" (Braul, 2003), with limitations placed on youth involved in leadership at conference camps, and removal of licensing for the co-pastors. As members of a church within the same national conference (MC Canada - that remained silent despite punitive and exclusive

action taken at the provincial level), concerned individuals at OMC came together for study to unpack underlying beliefs and understandings of this contentious issue within the church. Stated goals of the group were:

1. To explore our current thoughts, feelings, and knowledge about homosexuality and bisexuality. To uncover the origins of our current understanding (what are our beliefs and opinions founded upon?).
2. To provide a forum for honest exploration and dialogue.
3. To explore the Mennonite church position regarding homosexuality at congregational, conference, and broader church levels.
4. To examine the Bible as it relates to sexuality and interpersonal relationships.
5. To explore sociological, psychological, and medical perspectives (causes, genetics) on homosexuality.
6. To understand the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual persons in society and, more specifically, in the church.
7. To consider personal or corporate actions arising from the learning experience (Farris-Manning, C. & Farris-Manning, P., 2000, p. 1).

One recognizes the basic tenets of community action for social change in the goals of this group. The initiators of the small group, Peter and Cheryl Farris-Manning, were 'developing community' from within, and working as internal community workers. In his comparison of paid and unpaid community activists, Ife presents the "unpaid community activist [as one who] cares about her/his community, wants to do something about it and is committed to working towards an alternative society" (Ife, 2002, p. 269). In her discussion of social change, Sue Kenny highlights one level of social change as "the ideational level, where participants begin to understand their interdependence and the value of mutuality, reciprocity and compassion" (Kenny, 2002, p. 291). It is clear that the initiators of the group were seeking social change at this level, as concerned members of the community.

The process that this study group followed embodies some of the key concepts of Paulo Freire's approach to education. Freire believed in "the [human] capacity for creative thinking and, hence, potentially at least, the capacity to transform rather than merely adapt to reality" (Blackburn, 2000, p. 5). The structure of the group involved eight sessions, with group members sharing expert information and personal stories, as well as listening to guest speakers presenting their perspectives. This format encouraged a 'dialogical' process (Blackburn, 2000, p. 8) in which participants engaged in a creative exchange of ideas with presenters and each other. Through the act of sharing and reflection (which Freire called *praxis* (Blackburn, 2000, p. 7)) within the dialogical process, the group members experienced *conscientization*, which Freire described as "the process by which humans become more aware of the source of their oppression" (Blackburn, 2000, p. 7). Members of this study group became aware of the oppression that queer individuals experience within the Mennonite church.

This small group met in the home of the facilitators, which provided a comfortable setting to develop a sense of trust and openness. The group totaled about 15 people, thus allowing for dialogue and sharing

within the group as a whole. Although the entire community of OMC was not involved in this small group exercise, the model of the group could be described as following the women-centred model: “Within this type of organizing there is an emphasis on community building, collectivism, caring, mutual respect, and self-transformation (Barnett 1995)” (Stall and Stoecker, 1998, p. 33). The organization of this small group was seen as a first step in exposing members of the larger community to a process of self-reflection and education, and in creating an impetus for future social action. Although this group was not necessarily representative of the church as a whole, it did take action on one level. By the end of the eight months, group members composed a letter that they sent to the CIM, expressing support for their struggle and affirmation for CIM’s open and affirming approach to queer individuals who chose to worship with them. The letter went so far as to indicate a desire for continued dialogue between CIM and the conference bodies, with the hope for a unifying resolution. Individual group members, as well as the OMC pastor and other individuals within the church membership, signed the letter, which was copied to the Mennonite Conference of Alberta, MC Canada, MCEC, and the national Mennonite journal: *Canadian Mennonite*. Please see Appendix A for a copy of the letter.

Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests (BMC) – Supportive Congregations Network (SCN)

A supportive community for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals within Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches was established in 1976. This community identifies its objectives as follows:

- 1 To provide support for Mennonite and Church of the Brethren gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual people, their friends and families
- 2 To foster dialogue between gay and non-gay people in churches
- 3 To provide accurate information about homosexuality from the social sciences, biblical studies, and theology

BMC supports all people as they seek to know God's will for their lives, including those open to same-sex relationships, those seeking a life of celibacy, and those exploring questions of sexual orientation. We also believe that God does celebrate the love shared in same-sex relationships (BMC, 2004).

This community of believers provides a forum for sharing, discussing, and challenging the status quo within the Brethren and Mennonite faith communities. BMC offers a space for discussion about tolerance and diversity issues that are specific to the church – subjects that are often left to the social service sector to tackle. As Anne Breckbill highlights: “Variance is difference. Variance is the “other” embodied. When I worked in the non-profit social service world, difference was called diversity and was highly desirable. In the Mennonite Church, difference is called variance and is highly undesirable” (Breckbill, 2003, p. 2). Breckbill’s thesis is that the culture of fear within the church dominates the discourse around intolerance of difference with respect to the queer community. She describes “the culture of fear that feeds the need to secure and contain, the wish to placate and avoid, the impulse to silence dissent and a longing for less ambiguity” (Breckbill, 2003, p. 3). She points out that “In an effort to maintain the unity of the body, moderate Mennonites are violating their own beliefs and values about inclusion, diversity and the ongoing revelation of God” (Breckbill, 2003, p. 4). Breckbill argues that this fear of rejection leads individuals, who personally might wish to be open and welcoming, to silence their support of queer folk, in deference to dominant messages of exclusion, at the expense of their family members and friends.

This conversation revolves around one's understanding of community, and the complexity inherent in how one defines community. Sullivan reflects that:

the assumption that community is based on commonality – common identity, a common political goal, or a set of commonly held beliefs and practices – makes for all sorts of problems, divisions, and exclusions because such a notion of community cannot really tolerate difference (Sullivan, 2003, p. 142).

What is needed, according to Sullivan, is “both a recognition of difference... and the invocation of an overarching singular and unified entity called ‘our combined community’” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 143). The challenge, however, is defining the ‘combined community’. BMC offers opportunity for discussion about the complexities of these definitions, allowing for diverse views and challenging perspectives to be shared amongst Mennonites and Brethren from many smaller communities.

BMC also offers a support network for individuals and churches seeking to be open, affirming and inclusive of queer individuals, through the Supportive Congregations Network. By publicly identifying their support of queer individuals who wish to worship within the Mennonite and Brethren faith communities, churches are engaging in:

1. Support of queer individuals
2. Living with integrity (‘walking the talk’)
3. Creating a ‘normal’ perspective of difference in sexuality
4. Embracing the gifts and spiritual wealth of a diverse community.

This last point is particularly important to highlight. Often the argument for tolerance is premised on an assumption of benevolence and good will – the ‘love your neighbour’ argument. This is good, but it should be more than that. Kerby Lauderdale draws our attention to the fact that people who identify as queer have a perspective that is valuable for the community as a whole:

[T]he gift of my homosexual orientation has given me an opportunity, and perhaps a necessity, to notice the overwhelming diversity of life forms and behaviors, which the Creator has brought to life on earth... to see it all with a kind of neutrality, with a kind of openness, and ultimately with tolerance....this world...God's creation...is awesome, and extraordinarily diverse, in numbers of life form and behaviors (Lauderdale, 2003).

The role that BMC plays in the development of a welcoming community for queer individuals within the Mennonite and Brethren communities is significant. As is evident in the BMC Vision Statement (see Appendix B), its mandate is trifold: developing community, nurturing spirituality, and advocating for justice and Shalom within the Mennonite and Brethren faiths.

Social Change at the Local Level – OMC

Those interested in social change within the Mennonite church have a wealth of resources, information and support offered through BMC upon which to draw. Members of OMC took the first step in a conscious effort to becoming an understanding and welcoming community, through the ‘Homosexuality

and the Church' study group. The letter of support to CIM was an honourable public statement of welcome. The argument to display our attitudes of welcome through actions rather than creeds can be understood as a way to avoid conflict and potential divisions. To live with integrity, however, we have a moral imperative to voice our concerns about the discrimination and exclusion that individuals experience within our own community, and the larger communities to which we belong. The process to becoming a publicly affirming congregation - one that is not afraid to speak out in support of diversity (with respect to sexuality *and* other differences), is a long and potentially painful process. The following ideas are suggested as possible next steps for the OMC to take in its journey towards inclusion of all believers:

1. The following 3rd verse was written to be included in an oft-sung congregational hymn. The text from the original hymn is included here to demonstrate the theme of inclusion already evident in this hymn. The additional verse was written with specific attention to potential uneasiness for some in the congregation with language that might be too blatantly 'queer'.

*Here in this place, new light is streaming, now is the darkness vanished away.
See in this space, our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day.*

Gather us in the lost and forsaken, gather us in the blind and the lame.

Call to us now, and we shall awaken, we shall arise at the sound of our name.

We are the young, our lives are a myst'ry, we are the old who yearn for your face.

We have been sung throughout all of hist'ry, called to be light to the whole human race.

Gather us in, the rich and the haughty; gather us in the proud and the strong.

Give us a heart so meek and so lowly; give us the courage to enter the song.

Now we join hands and welcome each other, here find your voice to come join the song.

Love that is shared between sisters or brothers, in God we should all find a place to belong.

Give us the ears to hear loving voices, strengthened by God we need not sing alone.

All who believe come join in communion, weaving new harmonies into the song.

Here we will take the wine and the water; here we will take the bread of new birth.

Here you shall call your sons and your daughters, call us anew to be salt for the earth.

Give us to drink the wine of compassion, give us to eat the bread that is you.

Nourish us well, and teach us to fashion lives that are holy and hearts that are true.

Not in the dark of buildings confining, not in some heaven, light years away,

But here in this place, the new light is shining; now is the Kingdom, now is the day.

Gather us in and hold us forever, gather us in and make us your own.

Gather us in all peoples together, fire of love in our flesh and our bone (Haugen, 1992, p. 6).

2. Education and consciousness-raising are critical in the development of an understanding and welcoming attitude towards people who identify as queer. It is suggested that a series of adult

Sunday School (discussion hour) sessions should focus on this issue, broadening the scope of education from the small group setting to the larger community. A format similar to that of the small group could be utilized, although typically the length of series for Sunday School is usually only three or four sessions, rather than eight. Resources should be used from 'queer-friendly' organizations such as BMC. Local resources for GLBT education and support should also be utilized. One access to local resources is through the Ottawa GLBTQ community centre that is in the process of being established on-line (Ottawa GLBTQ Community Centre, 2004).

3. Another concrete method of provoking thought and potentially changing attitudes is through story-telling. Stories can reach a wide-range of people, both young and old. The OMC distributes an internal community newsletter periodically, entitled "The Forum". A story such as the one included in Appendix C might contribute to the dialogue as readers engage in conversation with their children in response to the story.

Closing Remarks:

The enduring nature of exclusionary rhetoric at local, provincial, and national levels within the Mennonite Church demonstrates the extent to which full participation of queer individuals in congregational life is limited. It can be argued that the OMC only tacitly adheres to the doctrine of the wider church, choosing rather to provide witness to its welcoming stance through the actions of people who make up the church. Diversity is celebrated in the life of this congregation, with involvement of all worshippers in the daily activities of the church. It is my contention, however, that despite our genuine attempts to be inclusive, our silence with respect to church doctrine implies consent to the messages that are relayed through conference statements. Concrete actions such as those listed above are examples of necessary steps to be taken before members of OMC can entertain proceeding with more radical social action, such as joining the SCN. Undoubtedly divisions will arise within the OMC community when faced with the need to clarify its stance in relation to the involvement of queer individuals in the life of the church. It is critical that the pace of social change in this arena be slow, allowing time and space for people to embrace new ideas and to challenge the incongruities between social justice and religious doctrine. This community needs to remain a safe and comforting haven for those who find it so, while at the same time confronting the ways in which it condones discrimination against people of sexual minorities.

Endnotes:

1. The use of the term 'queer' identifies gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgendered individuals. Anne Breckbill defends her choice to use this term which, "reclaimed and adopted by the glbt community, aptly describes both the playful and profound difference of glbt people's experience in a heterosexist society" (Breckbill, 2003).
2. For the purposes of this paper, the Mennonite Church is defined as the conference of Mennonite Church Canada, and its associated partner, the Mennonite Church of North America.
3. The term 'homosexuality' is generally recognized within the queer community as negatively associated with pathology. The terms 'queer' and 'sexual minorities' are understood to be more positive and inclusive terms. The use of the term 'homosexuality' in this paper is when it pertains to documents and constructs that have prior existence.
4. A Network of Mennonite, General Conference Mennonite and Church of the Brethren congregations which welcome gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual members. [Http://www.bmclgbt.org/scn.html](http://www.bmclgbt.org/scn.html).
5. The term 'homosexuality' was not understood by group leaders and members to have negative connotations at the outset of this study group. It was through the education process, with guidance from a guest speaker at one of the sessions, that we became aware of the preference to use the term 'sexual minorities' instead of 'homosexuality'. The term 'queer' was not introduced at that time.

Appendix A

June 23, 2001

To the Members of the Calgary Inter-Mennonite Church:

We are writing to you as friends within the context of the Mennonite Church of Canada, fellow Christians with a similar perspective on faith and life. Many of us, as members and adherents of the Ottawa Mennonite Church, Ontario, met as a study group during the past year to explore the subject of sexual minorities and the church. The group was formed out of concern over the actions taken by the Conference of Mennonites in Alberta in response to your publicly affirming stance toward sexual minorities.

We came to this study group with different views and experiences regarding this issue, but one common view held by the group's members was a desire to live in a loving and accepting way with all of God's people. The issue of sexual minorities and the church has often sparked divisive debates, and we seek to engage people in dialogue which is open and honest, and non-judgmental.

We are very disturbed by the way in which the Conference of Mennonites in Alberta treated you. We do not agree with the punitive action that the conference has taken against you. We feel especially saddened that your young people have been denied Christian leadership and service opportunities. It is our hope that your actions will encourage other groups like our own, throughout the conference, to help to foster a better understanding of the issues facing sexual minorities within the Mennonite church.

We affirm the way that you have listened to and welcomed the gay and lesbian Christians who have chosen to worship with you. We hope with you that ongoing dialogue will result in eventual unity, mutual respect and acceptance of all people whether they be "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, (Gal 3:28)" gay, lesbian or straight.

We encourage you to remain loving and giving to those who join you in your walk with Christ. "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (Gal 6:25).

Yours in Christ,

Cc: Mennonite Church of Canada, Mennonite Church of Eastern Canada, Conference of Mennonites in Alberta, Canadian Mennonite

Appendix B

BMC Vision Statement

To Form Community:

- 1 By embracing our Anabaptist heritage
- 2 By forging an inclusive organization and environment
- 3 By reaching out and inviting in those who share similar concerns, and by building alliances for the years ahead
- 4 By providing a graced safe place of caring, support and healing for all persons; and by affirming our sexuality, our diversity, and our humanity
- 5 By remembering and celebrating those who with courage and conviction have gone before us

To Nurture Our Spirituality:

- 1 By validating our present experiences
- 2 By being open to our own authentic faith/spiritual journeys, and accepting the strengths and values of our spiritual heritage
- 3 By claiming our spiritual giftedness
- 4 By respecting the right of opinion and faithfulness of all persons, without denying our own beliefs

To Be Prophetic:

- 1 By advocating issues of justice on behalf of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, being in dialogue with the larger denominational community, and by collaborating with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender groups of other denominations
- 2 By acknowledging the connection between heterosexism and social justice issues such as racism, sexism and classism
- 3 By reclaiming the power that is ours and that we have, in the past, given to our denominations
- 4 By envisioning and living out Shalom

Adopted by the BMC Board of Directors May 1996 (BMC, 1996, *BMC Vision Statement*).

Appendix C

The Girl Who Liked Orange

by Cheryl Farris-Manning

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Shara. She lived in a lovely red brick home with her mother, father, sister and brother (she was in the middle). She had a happy life. Her mom and dad took them camping in the summers and tobogganing in the winters. She loved sipping on hot chocolate on a cold winter's day in front of the fire!

Her family went to church. They belonged to a wonderful church, with lots of other families, and other people like University students and grandmas and grandpas. She liked going to church – she sang in the choir, played games some Saturdays with her friends, and loved having people over for dinner. They learned about ‘loving your neighbour’ and helping out people in the world who needed food and clothes and stuff like that.

Shara also loved to paint, and colour, and draw. She got to do lots of that at Sunday School, where she painted pictures of nature, and her family and friends. The only thing was she was not allowed to use the colour orange – and she LOVED the colour orange! If she had the choice, she would wear orange socks, orange shoes, orange pants, and orange shirts every day!

But she wasn't allowed. It was BAD. Nobody wore orange. Nobody painted with orange. Nobody used orange crayons. At least nobody at her church. They thought that painting with the colour orange was a sin.

So...

Shara wore blue. And green. And black. And brown. And grey. And white.... But not orange.

And she painted pictures of sunsets with red and yellow, but not orange.

And she made pictures of fruit bowls with apples and bananas and grapes and watermelons, but not oranges.

And she drank apple juice.

Sometimes when she was at home, she coloured her picture with her special, secret orange marker that she kept in her sock drawer. It was sooo beautiful! The sunset glowed and was warm and wonderful. She felt so good – she smiled and danced in her room with the picture in her hand. Then she painted over it with green, or red, or blue, and the orange went away. Sort of.

One day her mom came in to her room to put her laundry away and found a picture of the most beautiful orange sunset you ever saw in Shara's drawer, beside her secret orange

marker. She was shocked. And confused. How could Shara be colouring with orange when she knew that that was not allowed? She decided not to say anything.

As Shara grew older, she became more and more frustrated with things. She began colouring her socks orange, with washable markers so that it would come out. On days when she had her orange socks on, there was a spring in her step, and she skipped to school.

When she was a teenager she bought an orange T-shirt! She wore it under her blue sweatshirt so no one would notice. It made her feel good about herself. If she was feeling down or lonely, she thought about her orange T-shirt and smiled. She wished people could see her for real, orange T-shirt and all! No one really knew her – did they?

But her mom had been noticing. On days when Shara had orange on, even if you couldn't really see it, Shara seemed happy. She smiled more, she stood taller, and she seemed to be full of energy! How could this orange be bad for her?

One day Shara went to school wearing her orange T-shirt under her blue sweatshirt. She took her sweatshirt off when she got hot. Some of the kids from her church were there, and they turned their eyes and walked away from her. She felt awful. How could she go to church on Sunday – everybody would be laughing at her and talking about her behind her back.

When she got home from school, she was so sad and angry, she was stomping around and slamming doors. Her mom came into her room and sat on her bed. She reached out and hugged her, and asked Shara if she had ever noticed that the sunset had beautiful shades of orange in it. She wondered out loud if anyone had ever painted it orange before – usually people just use red and yellow.

Shara slowly got up and reached into her sock drawer, pulling out her bold, glorious orange sunset, and showed it to her mom. Her mom took her hand, and told her that she thought there were other people who loved orange too – in fact, one of her friends at church loved wearing orange at home! She asked if Shara would like her mom to invite her over? Shara took off her big blue sweatshirt, showing her mom her bright orange T-shirt, and smiled.

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Shara... The only thing about Shara was that she liked girls...

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