

# ASSEMBLY'S JOURNEY TOWARD LGBTQ INCLUSION<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

- This is a story of how Assembly Mennonite Church – a congregation which makes decisions by consensus -- chose a path that was not supported by the wider community, not supported by the vast majority of Mennonite churches, and for a long time could not gain sufficient support within the congregation.
- It's a story about years and years of study, discussion, and debate; and of a congregation moving slowly against the wind and toward becoming an LGBTQ inclusive congregation. That long, arduous voyage shaped who we are today and how we've been viewed by others.
- It's a real-life story, and real-life stories are complex; they are told differently by different people. They often contain both triumph *and* loss; joy *and* pain. This telling, which aims to be accurate, is not the only way to tell this story. There is no *one right way* to tell this story. But it begins with a people who formed a congregation 50 years ago; a people committed to discernment; to seeking God's will. They wanted to be faithful disciples of Jesus - the one who calls us to live holy lives, the one who hears the cries of the oppressed.

## CONTEXT

- This part of Assembly's story starts in earnest in 1985. It was then that the Mennonite denominations initiated a church-wide study on human sexuality, and in response, the first Assembly worship series which addressed the subject of same-sex relationships happened in Spring 1986. The series included presentations on various angles of this topic including a biblical case for the inclusion of gays and lesbians in church membership.
- Inclusion was not a popular sentiment at the time. In fact, homophobia was rampant in the U.S. This was a time when many people lived closeted lives. When the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Georgia laws criminalizing "gay sex" (1986).<sup>2</sup> When over 80% of Americans opposed gay marriage. When President Reagan's communications director described AIDS – which had killed nearly 21,000 Americans -- as "nature's revenge on gay men." In 2024, it can be easy to forget how widespread and pervasive anti-gay convictions were not that long ago.
- The Mennonite context was not particularly different in its hostility to inclusion. The two major Mennonite denominations (pre-MC USA) adopted statements declaring that sex outside of a traditional man and woman marriage is sin (1986 and 1987). John Linscheid – a Mennonite pastor in Kansas who came out as a gay man – had his credentials suspended (1983). Ames Mennonite Fellowship – a small church in Iowa -- was expelled from their conference in 1988 after declaring their support for gays and lesbians. And when the Mennonite Church USA denomination was formed, it adopted Membership [Guidelines](#) solely focused on "issues related to homosexuality" which reaffirmed the previous exclusionary positions and stated that pastors "may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony" (2001).
- Yet despite the conservative atmosphere, seeds of change were also being planted. The Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests (BMC) formed in 1976 to provide a safe and supportive space among gay and lesbian people. Some gay and lesbian people took the risk of coming out to their families and congregation. And the first major U.S. denomination, the United Church of Christ, started ordaining openly gay clergy (1972) – well ahead of the rest of us.

## AMC STUDY AND DISCERNMENT

- Assembly, as was noted, began talking about some limited form of inclusion in 1986. And talk and study and debate it did! In relatively frequent intervals. With growing intensity each round. With various incremental changes made over time. And this kept going for a good 30-year period! The

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<sup>1</sup> This partial history is a slightly edited version of what was shared in worship on April 7, 2024 as part of marking Assembly's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

<sup>2</sup> Bowers v. Hardwick

conversations were both internal and, at times, external with our two area conferences and in denominational settings.

- Assembly held its second round of study sessions in 1988. And then in 1990 members drafted a progress report announcing that agreement had been found on one aspect of the debate: that “some people have an *innate* same-sex attraction.” That was progress at the time, but they could not reach consensus on the morality of same-sex unions.
- 1994-96 brought about another especially intense time of study and discernment – which started with a 40-day period of prayer and fasting, and ended with frustration and exhaustion when the congregation could still not agree on whether to extend membership to those in same-sex unions. At this point, members took a vote – something never done before or since at Assembly – on a proposal to take a 7-year sabbatical from further decision-making on this matter; with the stipulation that during this break, provisional membership could be offered to partnered gay and lesbian folks. The proposal needed 80% approval to pass; it got 82.6%.
- Some people thought this went too far and left the congregation. Some people thought this did not go far enough and left the congregation. Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference said this *definitely* went too far and suspended Assembly’s voting privileges for two years. We became one of six Mennonite congregations in the U.S. at the time disciplined for moving toward LGBTQ inclusion.
- During our sabbath period, some Assembly participants found creative ways to continue to build support for LGBTQ inclusion. They formed the Inclusion Ministry Team, and drafted a Welcoming Statement which was adopted by the congregation in 1999.
- Three years after that, as the sabbatical time was ending, the congregation was polled and stated strong congregational support for inclusive membership practices (2003). Two years later (2005) we made changes in the AMC building rental procedures clearing the way for same-sex weddings at the meetinghouse.

#### AMC & THE LARGER CHURCH

- Our movement toward greater inclusion – sometimes painfully slow, sometimes radical for the time -- shaped how we saw ourselves and how we were seen in the denomination. And as a result, we became a target of the conservative majority in the Mennonite Church who wanted to “discipline” and expel inclusive congregations and their pastors.
- There are many stories to tell about the long, at times bitterly contested debate in the denomination. But today we just note that Assembly members played a significant role there too. We had members active in BMC advocating for a place at the table. One of our pastors played a leading role in the “Inclusive Mennonite Pastors,” a group formed to affect change in the denomination. And Assembly folks participated in Pink Menno, a young-adult led movement for a fully inclusive denomination (2009).
- Assembly’s increasingly resolute movement toward inclusion was shaped by the growing number of people identifying as LGBTQ participating in the congregation, as well as by allies for whom this mattered. Inclusion started to become less a question to be discerned in the congregation and more an identity that we sought to live into.
- In 2010 we finally reached consensus to officially become a member of the Supportive Communities Network (SCN) – a Mennonite and Church of the Brethren network of Inclusive congregations and communities. That step felt like an important point of arrival.

#### AMC & SAME-SEX WEDDINGS

- In 2011, Assembly hosted its first same-sex wedding ceremony, with an Assembly pastor presiding – two years before the U.S. Supreme Court recognized the legitimacy of gay marriage.
- In 2014, after the second such wedding at Assembly, Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference issued a “statement of charge” against Pastor Karl Shelly, and initiated a nine-month investigation into whether his credentials should be revoked.

- On the day “the verdict” was to be revealed, and before we knew the decision, members of the congregation brought home-made pies as gifts for all those who sat on the credentialing review committee. It was a way to try to take the high road in the midst of intense conflict.
- The credentialing committee was split 3-3 on whether to revoke credentials or not. Without a majority in favor of revocation, Karl kept his credentials (2015). Soon thereafter a great many conservative congregations started leaving Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference, and leaving Mennonite Church USA altogether. The polarization and separation happening in the wider culture was mirrored in the Mennonite Church.

#### MOVING TOWARD TODAY

- Assembly's vision for inclusion widened in 2012 when a member of the congregation shared her coming out story as a transgender person. This created new opportunities for education, for hearing from transgender advocates, and for embracing the "T" in LGBTQ.
- In one sense, Assembly was clearly a publicly affirming, inclusive congregation now. And yet Assembly still had work to do in being faithful to God's welcoming, loving, empowering kin-dom. Even today, people in our congregation don't always feel fully accepted and valued. Are we as inclusive as we sometimes think we are?
- When we look back, we need to acknowledge that people who were most vulnerable sometimes got hurt, were made to suffer indignities and humiliation, and continue to carry emotional scars from our long process. How shall we carry that part of our story?

#### CONFESSION

Confessing past wrongs does not come easy. We often wish to forget the sins of our past, the sins that we've justified as necessary to get from there to here, the sins that complicate what we like to tell as a feel-good story. But today, as we remember our congregational work of inclusion over the last 50 years, we also make space for confession – space to tell the truth about where this congregation missed the mark and harmed others.

In Psalm 62, the psalmist tells us that our deliverance comes from God, and entreats us to “*pour out our hearts before God*” (62:8). In this confession, we will pour out our hearts with words, and ritually with water.

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- A. We confess that despite the words we say when we read our covenant, we have not always “nurtured and cared for each other;” and we have not always made space for “God’s Spirit to transform, empower, and guide us” in the ways of God’s “redeeming love.”  
*Lord have mercy, (Christ have mercy)*
- B. We confess our congregation’s many years of hedging on our willingness to unequivocally stand with marginalized people when society was attacking and actively de-humanizing our Queer siblings in Christ.  
*Lord have mercy, (Christ have mercy)*
- C. We confess that on the slow road to greater inclusion, we talked for years about intimate aspects of people’s lives while weighing the pros and cons of their worthiness; pondering whether some could be counted as equals in the Body of Christ.  
*Lord have mercy, (Christ have mercy)*
- D. We confess to being more responsive at times to how church institutions might judge our congregation than to how LGBTQ people were being demeaned and disparaged by those institutions.  
*Lord have mercy, (Christ have mercy)*

- E. We confess that we have not always named and celebrated the unique ways that queer people enliven and expand our collective understandings of gender, sexuality, and false binaries. We've too often rejected the voices that can bring healing and liberation to us all.  
*Lord have mercy, (Christ have mercy)*
  
- F. We confess to telling our congregational story of inclusion in the past in an overly triumphant way that highlights the fortitude of the congregation to move toward inclusion, and not how the congregation also at times failed LGBTQ people.  
*Lord have mercy, (Christ have mercy)*
  
- G. We confess to how we too often fail to recognize that where we are today is not the final destination; that the Spirit still has more work to do in us; that we continue to inflict pain when we speak of "us" and "them," when we misgender others, and when we promote hetero-normative ways of being and acting.  
  
*Lord have mercy, (Christ have mercy)*

We pray to You, O God, to forgive us, to heal us, and to make us the strong, inclusive people You call us to be. Amen.

Karl Shelly  
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