

# ***Communion in the Midst of Diversity***

## **A statement to Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference after being charged with officiating at a same-sex wedding**

July 25, 2014

*[On July 18, 2014, I received a "Statement of Charge against Karl Shelly" from the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference Credentialing Committee. It noted that Assembly Mennonite Church had informed the conference that I would perform a same-sex marriage ceremony on May 28, 2014, and that I "followed through and performed the same-sex marriage." Because the Mennonite Church USA membership guidelines state that pastors may not perform such weddings, and those who do are subject to having their pastoral credentials reviewed, I received this charge.*

*This was the first time this conference had to pursue such a charge, and they chose to adapt the process they normally use when addressing other kinds of pastoral misconduct. Therefore, I was summoned for an interview before the 6 member committee and asked to submit a written statement explaining my actions. What follows is that statement.*

*In sharing this statement, I hope to offer a coherent, accessible example of how one can take the Bible seriously and conclude that marriage among gay and lesbian Christians is worthy of the church's blessing. Helping each other understand how we come to our conclusions on this divisive issue was noted as a worthy goal at the 2014 annual session of IMMC, and I hope this contributes to such understanding. – KSS]*

Greetings to you, sisters and brothers in Christ on the IMMC Ministry Credentialing Team. I greet you as a fellow servant in God's kingdom and on behalf of my congregation, Assembly Mennonite Church, where it has been my privilege to pastor for over 15 years.

### **My congregation**

Assembly has been a part of Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference for all of its 40 years of existence. Today it is the spiritual home to over 300 members and participants, one-third of whom are youth and children. It is a place where God's Spirit is alive and doing wonderful things. In fact, our growth is leading us to expand our building in order to accommodate all those who want to worship with us. But more important than numerical growth is the work of God's Spirit in people's lives. Here at Assembly, youth and young adults are getting baptized, families are dedicating their newborns to God, young and old are giving themselves to Christian service in the local community and abroad, and many are actively witnessing to the biblical message of peacemaking and non-violence. We have over 25 small groups that meet regularly for prayer and community-building, and our worship is vibrant and provides opportunities for all to lead, preach, and testify to the work of God in their lives.

By God's grace, many have found Assembly to be an inviting, Spirit-led, and safe place to worship. I am especially grateful that we have been able to provide a worshiping home to people who have been wounded by past church experiences and told their gifts are not welcomed. To them and to all who come our way, we preach the Good News of God's saving love told throughout the Bible and in the person of Jesus Christ.

### **My story**

I was dedicated to God as a young child at Neil Avenue Mennonite Church (Columbus, Ohio). In church and at home I was taught the stories of God's abundant love. I was baptized as a teenager in Trinity Church of the Brethren (Detroit), after an adolescence in which I became captivated by stories of how God's Spirit continues to move in our day and – reminiscent of the Israelites in Egypt – among people yearning to be free. I was too young to have any first-hand memories of the African-American freedom movement of the 1950s and 60s, but I read all I could, studied its leaders, and sought to learn its lessons. My undergraduate studies in theology and political science were clearly an extension of this interest.

One of my enduring questions from this fascination with the Civil Rights Movement was, "Where were the Mennonites – the people who taught peace, who endured persecution, who practiced nonviolence? Why

were Mennonites largely absent in this movement of the Spirit?” I think I decided then to pay attention to where the Spirit of God’s justice was moving in my lifetime and not to miss it like many of my ancestors had. This interest also influenced my vocational pursuits. I was occasionally tapped on the shoulder and asked if God might be calling me to pastoral ministry, but I was not interested. My observation was that ministers, like most Mennonites, were willing to pray for peace, but rarely willing to be active peacemakers. So I went to the place where I understood advocates for peace and for justice were trained – law school.

While I continued to run from suggestions to enter pastoral ministry, I was nonetheless using my legal training largely within the context of church-based organizations. That changed when Assembly offered me a unique opportunity to test this calling, inviting me to pastor in areas of mission, peace and justice. After significant prayer, I accepted Assembly’s call and made the transition to the pastoral team in September 1998. Since then I have studied at AMBS, was ordained, and have continued to grow as a servant of God.

All of this is preface to the story of how I came to hear God’s call to show no partiality to believers born with a particular sexual orientation, and how my journey eventually became part of Assembly’s parallel journey. This movement toward impartiality led to my blessing in marriage two members of the congregation, known and loved for who they are and for their many gifts, who were seeking the church’s blessing to live a life of covenanted faithfulness and love to each other. The fact that they were of the same sex was not seen as reason to withhold such a blessing. Nearly thirty years of congregational discernment and about as much personal study and discernment led the congregation and me to this place.

### **My theology – Diversity and Communion**

Like many of you, I read the ongoing theological debate raging in Mennonite periodicals, letters-to-the-editors, blogs, and elsewhere, and generally I find it dispiriting. It seems little new gets said about the subject of homosexuality; we only shout our perspectives ever louder. Perhaps this is because an increasing number of people have made up their minds and aren’t interested in listening to another perspective.

Yet you’ve invited me to share my Biblical and theological understandings, and I trust your thoughtful consideration even if it differs from your own careful reflections. I thank you in advance for that gift. My goal in writing is not to try to convince you of my perspective (that’s too high a bar); but to present a brief and hopefully coherent summary of how a God-following, Bible-believing Mennonite can, with integrity, recognize our LGBTQ sisters and brothers as whole, gifted, beloved children of God; worthy of the same respect and opportunities given those who are born heterosexual.

My theology starts in the beginning, with creation. The early chapters of Genesis speak of God the creator – the One who created vegetation of every kind, fruit trees of every kind, plants yielding seeds of every kind, birds and fish of every kind, sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, creeping things and cattle, and wild animals of every kind. In fact, the phrase “of every kind” appears ten times in Genesis 1 painting a picture of rich and vast diversity; rich like a coral reef; vast like a rain forest.<sup>1</sup> The culmination of this creation was human beings. Today there are over 7 billion people on earth – all made by God -- and no two are made the same.

The learning for me is that our God is wildly in love with diversity, difference, variance, uniqueness. God seemingly has little interest in sameness. We celebrate the handiwork of God when we celebrate the variety of God’s creation. The impulse for uniformity and conformity – favoring one part of God’s creation to the detriment of another -- is rebellion from God’s original design.

Throughout the two testaments of the Bible, we read much about this rebellion to God’s plan. From Cain’s jealous murder of Abel to the first-century exclusion of Gentile believers, we see the human tendency to exclude, marginalize, segregate, judge, build walls, attack, hate, de-humanize, and even kill those who are in

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<sup>1</sup> See “The Journey Toward Reconciliation,” chapter 8, John Paul Lederach (1999)

some way different. The testimony of this temptation is written not only throughout the Biblical canon, but throughout human history. There seems to be no sin more primal than this.

And yet, the Bible is our source of Good News because it offers a path of redemption. In book after book, chapter after chapter, we see how God is working out God's salvation; saving us from sin; calling us to reconciliation, making the Kingdom of God an ever richer, fuller, more diverse reality. This is the biblical theme of communion – calling us to join together in an ever larger, more diverse body of believers.

**Communion in the midst of diversity** is what I currently understand to be the major theme of the Bible. It is God's deep desire for shalom in God's beautiful but fractured world. What follows is a brief look at how this theme is woven throughout the Bible.

### **The Old Testament**

Key parts of the Hebrew Scriptures make the case of God's desire for shalom and the reconciliation of those who have been separated and marginalized. This foundation is what Jesus and New Testament writers later build on. Here are a few examples of that Old Testament narrative:

- God hears the cries of the oppressed and sets the captives free (Exodus 5ff.)
- God provides protection for the most vulnerable people in the community (Deuteronomy 24:19-22)
- God commands God's people to love the outsider, "for you were once outsiders" (Deuteronomy 10:19)
- God seeks the reconciliation of enemies (Genesis 32:3ff)
- God lifts up prophets to reconnect worship with justice (Amos 5:21-24)
- God requires justice, kindness, and humility (Micah 6:6-8)

### **The Gospels**

For Christians, the apex of God's work in the world is made manifest in Jesus Christ, the light of the world. In Jesus we see this ministry of communion and reconciliation not only embodied in human form, but focused on those seen as the least valuable parts of God's good and varied creation. Jesus makes this plain in his inaugural address, announcing good news for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18). And his ministry of inclusion continues through parables, examples, metaphors, sermons, debates with his detractors, nonviolent actions, and ultimately crucifixion. Again, here are just a few examples of this that stand out to me:

- Jesus offers hospitality to the outsider, the unclean, the despised (Luke 19:1-10; Mark 5:25-34; Matthew 15:21-28)
- Jesus compels us to journey outside our comfort zones, to the land of the other (Mark 4:35ff, 6:45ff)
- Jesus admonishes us not to judge or condemn (Luke 6:37)
- Jesus risks the condemnation of religious authorities by associating with "sinners" (Luke 15:1-2)
- Jesus receives the rejected with joy and without judgment (Luke 15:20)
- Jesus teaches us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-47)
- Jesus compels us invite and associate with the outcasts (Luke 14:12-14)
- Jesus breaks rules to bring healing and hope (Luke 13:10-17)
- Jesus welcomes all who confess him as Lord; even those convicted and dying on an adjacent cross (Luke 23:39-43)

### **Acts and the Epistles**

This inclusive ministry of communion does not die with Jesus but continues to be advanced by the faithful remnant after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. We see this in the following stories of the early church and the teachings in the epistles:

- At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit knocks down walls of division and misunderstanding between people of different tribes, ethnicities, and cultures, enabling them to understand each other. (Acts 2:1-12)

- Through a dream Peter is transformed to understand that God’s call for communion includes those he previously thought Scripture condemned: “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28)
- At the Jerusalem Council, Jewish followers of Jesus reverse centuries of law and welcome Gentiles as fellow believers (Acts 15)
- In writing to the Ephesians, Paul proclaims that Christ “has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Eph 2:14). As a result, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but one body, made to drink of one Spirit” (Gal. 3:28).
- Even a Eunuch – the sexual minority of antiquity – is highlighted in the stories of the early church; not, as one might expect, to be condemned, but to be brought into the fold through baptism after hearing the Good news of Jesus proclaimed (Acts 8:26-40).

### **The continuing work of the Spirit**

As believers would expect, this communion work of God, recorded throughout the Bible, did not end with the close of the last chapter. In fact Jesus tells us that this movement will continue in forms that could not be foreseen in biblical times. *“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, that Spirit will guide you into all the truth. ... For the Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you”* (John 16:12-15).

We know this to be true. As mentioned above, Gentiles – who were once kept outside of the fold based on a reading of Scripture – are now recognized as whole members of the body of Christ. Women – who were marginalized and whose gifts were denied on the basis of Scripture -- are now recognized as whole members of the body of Christ. Racial minorities -- who were once enslaved and seen as sub-human on the basis of Scripture – are now recognized as whole members of the body of Christ. And God’s Spirit continues to move, advancing the full inclusion of immigrants, the poor, those with disabilities, etc.

### **The “sin” of homosexuality**

Yet, many Christians argue that people who are LGBTQ are an exception to this movement of the Spirit. They cite a handful of biblical verses<sup>2</sup> purporting to establish that gay people are sinners in the eye of God; and as such, they are unworthy of the types of responsibilities, rites, pastoral care, and privileges given to others. This sin, they argue, overrides the biblical themes of diversity and communion set forth above.

However, a growing number of Christians are questioning this conclusion. They contend the weight of the biblical witness and the movement of the Spirit point in a different direction. “For Christians, the problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with scripture passages that condemn it, but how to reconcile the rejection and punishment of homosexuals with the love of Christ” (Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr.).

I believe sin is real. I believe sin leads to discord, destruction, injustice, and death. We are called to confess our sin and repent, and God will forgive a contrite heart and deliver us from evil. All of this stems from my understanding that Jesus was serious about sin; he was serious about that which separates us from God, and separates love of God from love of neighbor. God’s people in the Bible were also serious about sin. In fact, at times their zealotry about sin took them too far. At times, their desire to be good and please God led them to craft rules that suffocated the Spirit (Matthew 23:23-24). At times, they ascribed sin to things that are not sin; e.g. infertility (Deuteronomy 23:1), a man born blind (John 9:2), the eating of shellfish (Leviticus 11:10), etc. Similarly, at times our desire to be good and please God has led us to craft rules that suffocated the Spirit, as when we denied a place for divorced and remarried people in the church; when we denied leadership opportunities for women in the church; when we condoned slavery; etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 19:1-11; Judges 19:22-30; Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13; Romans 1:24-27; I Corinthians 6:9-11; I Timothy 1:9-10

After years of discernment and dialogue, I have come to conclude that being born with a same-sex sexual orientation and entering into a life-long covenant of fidelity and love with another human being is not sin. In fact, it is worthy of blessing. It is one part of the grand design of diversity and communion.

Even though this understanding is still a minority position in Mennonite Church USA, it is broadly recognized that many other Mennonite leaders, pastors, members, and congregations subscribe to it. There can be little doubt that whatever consensus once existed on this issue in Mennonite Church USA, much less in western Christianity, is gone.

Much has been written about how biblically-minded Christians have come to this new understanding. Rather than write my own treatise, I will simply point to some of the arguments I find most compelling:

- The biblical witness regarding sexuality is very diverse. In the Bible, there is no one sexual ethic. Sections of the Bible permit and do not condemn polygamy and concubinage, levirate marriage (where widows have sexual intercourse with their brother-in-law), sex with slaves, and prostitution (Genesis 38:12-19; Joshua 2:1-7). At other places it condemns or discourages intercourse during menstruation, marriage with non-Israelites, nudity, and birth control. Many Christians today would not agree with any of those cultural perspectives which were recorded and, in some verses, commanded in the Bible.<sup>3</sup>
- The most significant themes running through the Bible include the ethic of love, hospitality, covenant-making, forgiveness, and compassion. The condemnation of homosexuality is not only *not* a major theme, it arguably runs counter to the primary narratives. In fact, as far as we know, homosexuality is something Jesus never spoke about even though forms of same-sex relating were present in his culture.
- The seven verses<sup>4</sup> that people point at to condemn homosexuality either address other issues (e.g. hospitality) or do not speak to what we know today of loving, mutual, same-sex relationships that grow out of an innate same-sex orientation. Books have been written on these verses for those who want to study this in more depth.
- A key biblical test of discernment is whether God's Spirit is evident. "Come and see," Jesus says. "Tell John what you have seen and heard." (Luke 7:15-23). Testify to whether the fruits of the Spirit -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control -- are present in a person (Gal. 5). If so, "can anyone withhold the water for baptizing those who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47). The presence of these attributes in many LGBTQ Christians raises the question of why full recognition of their gifts and humanity are being withheld.

### **Breaking the rule**

Finally, despite all that is written above, I'm aware some may want to simply jump to the fact that an explicit Mennonite Church USA rule was broken ("Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony") and conclude that such a clear violation warrants a significant sanction. In this final section, I wish to offer a few reasons why I think that would be a mistake.

We who are Christian know that "Did s/he break the rule?" is never the proper standard. We worship each Sunday one who was charged and crucified for breaking rules. Jesus modeled much for us, but never strict rule-following.

However, that does *not* mean we have a community ethic in which anything goes because rules are optional. Rather, it means our inquiry needs to go beyond legal questions of guilt or innocence and examine the fuller context:

*Why was this done? What care and forethought were given before taking this action? Did the action grow out of one's faith, prayers, and congregational discernment? Was there some greater good sought*

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<sup>3</sup> See "Homosexuality and the Bible," Walter Wink (1996)

<sup>4</sup> see footnote 2

*in taking this action? What will be the effect of requiring strict uniformity on this issue? How is our response to this variance consistent with the other variances in practice across the conference? Where is the Spirit leading us and the church?*

These are the questions I believe the MCT must grapple with.

If we fail to do so – if we simply conclude a rule was broken and therefore there must be punishment -- then I fear we condemn our Anabaptist foremothers and forefathers who sought to follow the Spirit of the Living Christ rather than the rigid rules of their time; we condemn the prophets of the Bible and those who follow in that tradition, whose actions and words dare to offer a new way of faithful living; and we also condemn Jesus who was hounded by the authorities for breaking rules and associating with sinners. Again, this is not a plea for the MCT to wink at rule-breaking; rather it is a plea to let your inquiry address the right questions.

Perhaps the most important question for you to consider is not the ramifications of this for me; but the fate of the church today and its future. Mennonite Church USA, like other denominations, is embroiled in conflict over the place of LGBTQ Christians in the church. We know a) that this conflict has led much of secular society to see Christians as judgmental, hypocritical, and homophobic;<sup>5</sup> and b) that the younger generation is leaving the church in droves, in part because of the church's condemning attitude toward people who are LGBTQ.<sup>6</sup> I believe many in the church – those who aren't at the extremes -- are begging for an alternative to a) the condemnation that has only exacerbated the conflict on the one hand, and b) church-wide approval of inclusion which the church is not yet ready for on the other hand. You have an opportunity to offer the church a third way.

I am not asking you to endorse my and my congregation's blessing of LGBTQ people; just as you don't endorse other common variant positions practiced by IMMC pastors and congregations. But I am asking you to allow space – legitimate space – for congregations that offer such a blessing. I say that out of my sincere love for the church and my hope for its future. I believe the future of the church will be irreparably harmed by a continued punitive response to those whose conscience leads them to be LGBTQ inclusive. Such a punishing approach will not stem the conflict nor will it satisfy churches threatening to leave. What I believe is needed is space, flexibility, and time to tell if the blessing of marriage covenants between same-sex Christians is of human origin -- because if it is, it will fail -- or if it is of God. If it is the latter, "you will not be able to overthrow it; in fact, your efforts to stop it may even be found to be fighting against God" (Acts 5:38-39).

I am grateful for the opportunity to share my testimony with you. I pray that while we all see the way of God on these matters as in a mirror, dimly, and while our best attempts to be faithful to God's Spirit lead us in some different directions, that you will be able to respect the ways I and Assembly have been called to "nurture, share, and live the good news of God's love as known in Jesus Christ" (from the Assembly Mission Statement). God's blessing upon you as you discern.

-- Karl S. Shelly

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<sup>5</sup> see "UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity," research conducted by the Barna Group (2007)

<sup>6</sup> see "Religion Among the Millennials," Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life (2010)