



## Unity, Christ's Love, and Faithfulness in Discerning Matters of Sexuality

### Background

The calling/vocation of the church is to seek to understand the desires of God for our times and share this good news. Mennonite Church Canada is now in the 7th year of a discernment process to strengthen our capacity to be the church even while we consider difficult issues that face congregations. At this time the BFC process is considering sexuality in broad terms, and more specifically same-sex committed relationships. The documents and the Assembly affirmations in the BFC process to date can be found on the Mennonite Church Canada website at [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1930](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1930). At Assembly 2014 delegates considered a paper on Biblical perspectives on sexuality (BFC5) as well as the feedback summarized in BFC 5.1 in which the following trends were identified:

1. In spite of congregations not being able to reach consensus, responses stated a deep desire for unity and that challenges of same-sex relations should not cause divisions at congregational, Area, or National church levels.
2. A significant majority of responses reflect the historical affirmations as implied in the Resolution on Sexuality (1986 & 1987) or Article 19 of the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995). At the same time the responses express a desire to be more compassionate and welcoming of those individuals who are same-sex attracted.
3. Beyond this majority of responses, there were two contrasting sets of significantly smaller numbers of submissions: a) responses that oppose any revisiting of the historical understanding of biblical sexuality, and b) responses that call for more inclusion of persons in same-sex relationships, including welcoming them as members, leaders, and as committed same-sex partners.

From the beginning of the BFC process we have prayed for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We have invited congregations to surround their discernment in worship and prayer and we have seen much evidence of that. Although BFC 5 did not request a specific response to same sex relationships, many comments were received. The responses have revealed significant differences of understanding of the will of God relating to same sex relationships even while Scripture has been the foundation. The responses also clearly indicate that the Spirit of God has placed a deep felt desire for unity in our hearts. We yearn to be together in congregations, Area Churches, and the National Church. Is the same Spirit leading us to differing understandings of faithfulness in regards to same sex relationships? Is the challenge for us now to see the fruit of this discernment as also being led by the Spirit of God?"

Delegates at Assembly 2014 affirmed (90% in favour) that three important questions emerged from the feedback received. Processing these questions will be the work of BFC 6. Responses also requested that additional resources be identified to enhance congregational discernment.

This BFC 6 discernment guide identifies each of these three questions with additional comments and sub-questions to enhance your discussions. The discernment guide also includes a list of resources which may be of assistance.

**The BFC Task Force asks for your feedback by Feb 28, 2015.  
Please send responses to:**

**Willard Metzger, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd, Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4  
or by email: [wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca](mailto:wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca)**

Please include with your responses, your answer to the following question:

I / our group / our congregation would consider sharing our response to the BFC process beyond my congregation.

I give permission to be contacted for further discussion: \_\_ Yes \_\_ No

## Discernment Questions

### Question #1:

**God's gift of unity is not invalidated by our disagreement. How shall we maintain our unity in Christ as congregations, Area Church/National Church while understanding matters of same-sex relationships differently?**

This question probes the essence of unity.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul exhorts us to:

...make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond (chain) of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

We can presume that this appeal to unity was needed because there was disagreement in the communities that received this letter. In the face of disagreement, their task was to maintain the unity that they had been given by God's Spirit. Christ had linked them together by a chain of peace.

Paul identifies several links necessary to strengthen unity in the face of disagreement: humility, gentleness, patience, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness (4:2-3). Such unity in the face of disagreement equips the Body of Christ for service (4:12), and correct understanding (4:13f) so that it grows and is built up in love (4:16).

It seems from the responses received to BFC 5.1 that respondents have reflected this dynamic relationship between unity and disagreement. On the one hand, the responses do indicate a sincere yearning for the unity of the Spirit while, on the other hand, the responses reveal significant disagreement in our understandings of same-sex relationships in the church. Paul's challenge to us is to be willing to chain ourselves together in peace in order to maintain the unity we desire.

Rather than a focus on agreement, the passage (and **Question #1**) repositions unity as a character of relationship.

- a) What important characteristics are necessary to maintain unity while acknowledging different understandings in matters of same-sex relationships?
- b) How has your congregation dealt with disagreement on other matters in the past? What has worked well in your discernment in those moments? What did not work well?
- c) What would be necessary to create sufficient space to acknowledge our disagreements on matters of sexuality while continuing to work at our common larger vision and mission?
- d) How can we honour those within our church who disagree with a widely-held viewpoint?

### Question #2:

**Most responses indicated a desire to better understand individuals who are same sex attracted and to demonstrate the love of Christ towards all people.**

Congregations may express this desire in different ways. For example, your congregation may wish to strengthen your expression of Christ's love to those of same-sex orientation while continuing to embrace Mennonite Church Canada's historic understandings of sexuality [as defined by the Saskatoon Resolution on Sexuality (1986) and the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective].

Or, in this desire to show Christ's love, your congregation may find itself pushing up against the traditional understandings of sexuality (as defined in the denominational documents) and feel led by the Spirit and their study of Scripture to move to a new place of greater acceptance of same-sex relationships.

We look forward to receiving a more complete description of what our congregations would look like as they live out Christ's love in the area of human sexuality.<sup>1</sup> We hope that we can share these descriptions across our denomination.

### Question #3:

**Based on your reflections in questions 1 and 2 above, what additional counsel do you have for the Area/National church?**

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<sup>1</sup> The following suggestions come from feedback received: Does it mean seeking a better understanding of the best medical, scientific information available regarding same-sex orientation? Or hearing from non-heterosexual Christian brothers and sisters about their experience with Christ and the church? Or coming to understand better how the Bible is interpreted both within the historical understanding of the church and by Christian brothers and sisters who favour a more inclusive attitude to committed same-sex relationships? Or becoming more welcoming in ways that in your estimation remain within the parameters of the historical understanding?

## Resource Opportunities for Individual, Group and Congregational Study

The BFC Task Force wants to alert you to resourcing opportunities in three broad categories, each category containing several available resources.

### 1) General and Specific Resource Collections:

#### a) Mennonite Church Canada Resource Centre

(<http://resources.mennonitechurch.ca/Home>)

This Centre has ample resources that have been collected over many years. These resources have been chosen according to certain criteria that the Centre uses for acquisitions. These resources represent a broad range of writings, videos, and teaching materials.

Some helpful resources specific to sexuality can be found at: [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2385](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2385)

Biblical hermeneutics: [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2345](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2345)

#### b) Educational Institutions:

##### i) Resource Suggestions from AMBS

[www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2414](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2414)

##### ii) Dr. Loren Johns website: tracking the sexuality debates in our churches:

Dr. Johns is one of our teachers of New Testament at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. He has taken a special interest in the discussions about sexuality for decades, and has tracked these discussions in helpful ways. He has paid special attention to ways that the Bible is (or isn't) used in the conversations regarding sexuality. It is a valuable resource for all wishing to understand the biblical discussions more profoundly. <http://ljohns.ambseu.org/menu.htm>

#### c) Resources to help us understand better the LGBTQ understandings of sexuality and Christian faith.

The resources on this website have been recommended by the Pilgrim Group, a ministry of Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. <http://bethelmennonite.ca/temp/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Suggested-Resources-revised-June-2012.pdf>

#### d) Mennonite Church USA:

i) **“Seeking God’s Will Together.”** This is a 6 session online video and study guide dealing with many of the same questions the BFC process has wrestled with. Congregations wishing to use this online resource can find it at [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2437](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2437). Or, if you prefer to purchase a DVD with the teaching sessions, please email Shana Peachey Boshart ([shanaboshart@centralplainsmc.org](mailto:shanaboshart@centralplainsmc.org)) directly.

##### ii) Resource Suggestions from MC USA:

[http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Biblical\\_TheologicalResources.pdf](http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Biblical_TheologicalResources.pdf)

### 2) Mennonite Church Canada Commissioned Resources regarding the themes under discussion:

#### a) “The Unity of Christians in the Body of Christ”

Presentation of the Faith and Life Committee of Mennonite Church Canada for the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 2007. At the time, this presentation was designed to address the issue of some congregations wishing to be “Area Church Only.” The Committee addressed questions such as:

- What does it mean to be a faithful Mennonite Church?
- What binds us together?
- Is organizational unity and unity in Christ synonymous?
- When does diversity destroy the unity of Christ?
- How are we mutually accountable in the body of Christ? [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2429](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2429)

#### b) Video on Homosexuality and Biblical Interpretation, requested by the BFC Task Force and produced by Dr. Loren Johns and AMBS.

This video is a very brief overview (37 minutes) of the various texts and issues raised by the biblical witness in regards to understanding the current conversation about same-sex commitment. Dr. Johns also indicates key characteristics of an Anabaptist way of reading the Bible. As indicated earlier, Dr. Johns has been tracking this conversation for many years, and this is a summary of what he has seen.

[www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2399](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2399)

#### c) Resources produced by the BFC process:

We remind congregations that 3 resources (Part 1, 4.1, 5) may be especially helpful to continue the present conversation.

[www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1930](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1930)

