

CMC congregational meeting - Nov. 13, 2016



Becky Horst report on LGBT inclusion statement discernment process

CMC has a history of trying to understand the relationship between homosexuality and Christian faith. Here is a brief summary.

- 1996-14-week study by whole congregation, In 1997 board of elders released a statement acknowledging a range of opinions in the congregation and stating that we will move slowly, "living with" MC USA resolutions.
- Six years later in 2002, a sexuality task force addressed a variety of sexuality issues, including policies and procedures on reducing the risk of sexual abuse for children at CMC. No congregational discussion of homosexuality was held, but one task force meeting was devoted to that topic. Members had widely diverse experiences and viewpoints. They recommended the congregation should practice discernment in this area in the future.
- Twelve years later in 2014, our pastoral team released a letter to the congregation explaining why they chose to sign neither pro nor anti-inclusion letters which were circulating in the denomination. The letter from our pastors came along with a series of four sermons on sexuality.

Some of you may remember that a congregational survey followed that sermon series. Responses to the survey were quite strongly in favor of openly welcoming LGBT Christians to participate at CMC. However, the survey sample size was small, and participants were not randomly chosen, but self-selected. So the pastoral team and church board do not believe that the 2014 survey accurately reflects the mind of the congregation.

Where are we now?

The 2015-16 Strategic planning process identified "Hospitality and Welcoming" as priority #1 out of three. In an April meeting, attendees gave the highest number of votes to the suggested action step: "Add an LGBT inclusion statement to the CMC website and order of worship."

Because of the sensitive nature of this proposed action step, the church board named a special task group to propose a discernment process for the congregation regarding a welcoming statement. They requested a discernment process that would promote strategic priority #3 Community & Unity as well as priority #1 Hospitality and Welcoming. Group members were: Becky Horst (chair), Seth Yoder (church board member), Daniel Yoder (pastoral team member), John Lederach, Naomi Lederach, Michelle Oyer-Fowler, Kent Beck, Claudia Granados, and Ann Kauffman.

Phil Waite was also planning to be part of this group, but timing was unfortunate. In May, Phil's four-month sabbatical began. Before he left, Phil met with Daniel Yoder (pastoral team representative) and Seth Yoder and me (church board members). Together, the four of us set up some principles to frame the work of the LGBT task group. These were helpful guidelines to tide us over while Phil was gone and to keep us from going down rabbit trails.

To our surprise, the group actually finished its work just before Phil returned. We had a total of six meetings from June to September. Meetings included prayer, engagement with scripture, learning about Mennonite Church policies and CMC's history, listening to each other's experiences, sharing books, articles and videos on the topic, and reviewing welcoming statements from other Mennonite congregations. The final report submitted to the board in September and addressed in their October meeting includes a proposed welcoming statement for CMC, which you will receive at the end of this meeting,

The LGBT task group was not all of one mind when we concluded our work, just as we know the congregation is not all of one mind. We are grateful that MC USA has adopted a stance of forbearance, encouraging members to respect each other's difference on the relationship between homosexuality and Christian faith without passing judgment. We are also encouraged to know that IN-MI conference is considering a proposal to accept variance among member congregations in regard to homosexuality. We do not believe that this issue needs to divide us. The New Testament shows us examples of the church working through thorny issues and respecting each other's differences.

Today our CMC discernment process is beginning, to determine what our welcoming statement will say and what it will mean. We do not expect that the discernment process will end with all of us thinking alike, but we do expect that all of us will increase our understanding of and respect for each other. We want to discover and build on what we have in common. Our goal is to bring the proposed welcoming statement to a congregational vote in March, 2017.

Between now and next March, there will be opportunities for all of us to increase our understanding of the relationship between homosexuality and Christian faith. We will have several opportunities, beginning today, to dialogue with each other respectfully, across our differences.

The task group recommended many different kinds of discernment activities for us to engage in, including Bible study, listening to testimony—stories of personal experience from each other, understanding Mennonite church policies, and learning together about the nature of sexuality and marriage. Near the end of today's meeting, you will receive a handout with the proposed welcoming statement and a tear-off form asking for your affirmations, concerns and suggestions for the discernment process. Your feedback will help to determine what we do between now and March, when we anticipate a vote.

You are probably wondering why we aren't beginning the discernment process by looking at the proposed welcoming statement. Why do you have to wait until the end of this meeting to see it? Church board leaders consulted with pastors of several other congregations who have embarked on discernment processes like the one we are starting. Two congregations began with the broader question of membership: What does membership mean? Who can be a member of our congregation, and who cannot? We liked this broader, more reflective approach to the issue, but we decided not to begin quite as broad as that. Instead, we will focus on hospitality at CMC. Who feels welcome in our congregation and who does not? Who do we have difficulty welcoming? We want to begin the discernment process with humility, practicing honesty, vulnerability and respect with each other.

A word about effective Christian discernment. It requires at least four things:

- FAITH - trust in God's Holy Spirit at work among us
- FREEDOM – to speak honestly, which results from respectful listening
- CLEAR INFORMATION - sent out in timely fashion and received thoughtfully
- CONSENSUS - aims not to change people's minds, but to discover common ground that is already in the group

The goal of this discernment process is not to change anyone's mind, but to uncover what we hold in common, the good news from Jesus that undergirds our reason for existing as a congregation.