

## **A Pink Place in History**

Pastor Cynthia Lapp  
Pink Menno Coming Out Sunday  
October 11, 2009

Psalm 22  
Hebrews 4: 12-16

Today we are observing a day that I have never before participated in: National Coming Out Day. This is a day when lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual people are encouraged to let a friend, co-worker or family member know who they really are. Pink Menno has designated this Sunday as “Pink Menno Coming Out Day,” asking allies who believe in the inclusion of GLBT people in the church to come out and be honest about their support.

For some, this is a day full of fear. Pointedly speaking to family or congregation for the first time about one’s own sexuality or orientation or about one’s support for inclusion of GLBT people in the church is risky. Although we like to think it is not dangerous to speak openly in this congregation, it is still unsafe for some of us with our families. If you choose today to come out to your family, know that you have this gathered body behind you and with you in spirit. For us as a gathered body today, it’s an opportunity to celebrate who we are as a congregation, to remember how far we have come and imagine the future.

Almost 25 years ago, this congregation began a conversation and exploration of human sexuality. In those days there was more diversity of belief and understanding among us. The statement adopted in June 1986 leans toward acknowledgement of this by saying: *The contemporary world confronts us with questions and choices, some of which are only indirectly, if at all, anticipated in*

*the biblical texts.* Among things the statement says we affirm is this: *For all of us, both married and single, expressions of love and affection with other persons should be guided by the Christian spirit of mutual respect and constraint.*

This “non-statement,” as one person labeled it, passed by 93 percent. (Included with the statement are [unattributed] comments by members who felt more explanation of their perspective was necessary.) After accepting the “statement on human sexuality” the congregation voted to welcome a gay man into membership.

Today there are not many people in the congregation that were here during the time of study and discernment. Reading the statement today, one wonders how we got from that “non-statement” that doesn’t mention homosexuality, lesbians or gays to where we are today. I think part of the answer lies in the final paragraph that quotes from Ephesians 4: *Our basic covenant of faith is not in question. Indeed that covenant impels us, when there are differences, to “make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace” and to labor together “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”*

While we were quietly inclusive, working toward unity in the congregation for a number of years, we were not public about our practice. In 2003 we had our own coming out, or were outed, in the Allegheny Conference. After a two-year process, it was determined by the conference delegates that our congregational practice is at variance with denominational statements. I understand that people

might come to that conclusion. I also believe that Jesus invited people to follow him and bring their whole selves. I understand our inclusive practice to be one that follows Jesus' example, one that allows "God's healing and hope (to) flow through us to the world."

Being out the past six years has allowed our congregation to advocate more widely for inclusion across the denomination, to work more closely with other congregations and leaders. We no longer have to hide this part of who we are. Now that we are out, we can better integrate our work for justice and peace. There is a new kind of integrity when we speak and act. It took years to get here, for us as individuals and as a congregation. And we should be honest that our life together has not been without pain and separation, as some people have chosen to leave the congregation and the conference chose to sanction the congregation.

This past summer I visited with some folks from a congregation in the Midwest. I thought we were meeting to talk about the Open Letter to MC USA and the many events around inclusion that happened at the biennial gathering in Columbus. I began by giving some history of the Open Letter. I talked about the delicate negotiations with the various groups and MC USA leaders at Columbus. I didn't get too far, thank goodness, before a woman broke in saying, "All of this seems so remote. I came to this meeting because I want to know if there is room in this congregation for me. I grew up here but is there room, now, for my partner and me?"

The tone of the conversation changed immediately from one of theoretical welcome and denominational politics to how a congregation includes those whom it loves, no matter their orientation. Thankfully the woman was reassured that she and her partner are valued and loved and very much welcome.

When we look at inclusion it is of the utmost importance to remember that **this is very personal**. This is not an issue. This is about people who live and move and have their being in the Spirit.

It is also helpful to remember that **this is bigger than one person**, bigger than our congregation, our denomination, bigger than the U.S. This intense effort to understand the nature of humanity, who God is and the character and mission of the church is part of the story of Christianity from the beginning. We are not unique, or alone in, what seems like, an unending uphill battle.

Over the summer I read a very helpful book by Phyllis Tickle. She calls this time that we are in (and the book) **The Great Emergence**. Tickle says that part of what happens in religions is that we hold a giant rummage sale every 500 years or so. She specifically writes about Christianity, but she says that similar patterns can be seen in other religions as well. She quotes Anglican Bishop Mark Dyer as observing that about every 500 years “the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”

The history that Tickle condenses into one small book I am summarizing in a few words. Very, very generally speaking, her observations of history go something like this.

About 2,000 years ago the Jesus followers found that there was no longer room for them within the Jewish leadership and tradition. Christianity was established and flourished.

About 500 years passed and as the Roman Empire crumbled, the Roman church struggled. There was infighting over the nature of Jesus' humanity and divinity as well as whether or not Mary should be called Mother of God. In the end, the church split, becoming what we now know as the Roman Catholic Church and the Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian and Syrian Orthodox churches. Gregory the Great became pope and helped to establish the monastic movement, which preserved the Roman church tradition for the next five centuries.

About 500 years later, in 1054, we have the Great schism when Rome and Constantinople excommunicated each other resulting in what we now know as Roman Catholicism and Eastern or Greek Orthodoxy.

Here's where we enter the story, though of course as Christians, all of it is our story. Another 500 years pass, give or take a decade. Martin Luther comes along with his 95 theses and the Great Reformation begins. Protestantism and Anabaptism are the result of this painful split with the Roman church. Indeed in each of these struggles people died violently, some lost their faith and others renewed their faith.

In fact, Tickle says that out of each of these rummage sales a “new and more vital form of Christianity emerges.” In addition, what was the dominant form of Christianity is “reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self — it is refurbished.” More importantly Tickle says “every time the incrustations of an overly established Christianity have been broken open, the faith has spread — and been spread — dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas.”

Tickle maintains that we are part of one of those rummage sales right now, The Great Emergence. We may be in the early hours of the pricing and reorganization; we may not see the final sale. But we know from looking around at Christianity, in this country as well as listening in on conversations and conferences occurring around the world that we are in the midst of a big shift.

It is not unusual to hear people say, “Homosexuality is going to split the church.” The current problems of the church are blamed on lesbian and gay folks, and once we work that out we will probably move on to blaming bisexual and transgender people. This is of course only one way to view the situation in the church today. It seems quite biblical to me to say that wealth is going to split the church. Or misplaced power is splitting the church. If we were Amish, we might say that technology is splitting the church.

The way we read the Bible does split the church. It has been happening for generations. We read in Hebrews 4 that: <sup>12</sup>Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from

spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The writer of Hebrews is remembering the early Israelites whose hearts were hardened. The writer reminds us that though our hearts are hardened the word can pierce us, dividing what seems indivisible: soul from spirit, joints from marrow. What we believe inextricably bound can be separated by the living active word. Closed hearts and minds can be opened by God's power.

While Hebrews says the word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword, Jesus says in Matthew 10: *I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*<sup>35</sup> *For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;*<sup>36</sup> *and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*

This sure feels like an accurate description of parts of the church today: Parents and children do not see eye to eye. Families are torn apart by their understandings of Jesus. The division rent by the sword of scripture is a painfully familiar occurrence for many of us. Similarly, the image that the writer of Hebrews offers — that of the soul and spirit divided by the word — seems to ring true. The soul of the church is divided from the spirit of the church.

Painful as our own experience may be, I find Phyllis Tickle's observations strangely reassuring. Throughout history, Jesus' followers have encountered and struggled with this two-edged sword, the word of God. And it is not the end of the church. It is often the birth of something new, a fresh working of the Spirit.

Do we have the **audacity** to believe that our struggle is part of the history of the church? Do we have the **temerity** to trust that our pink presence makes a difference in the Mennonite Church and inspires people across denominations to work for inclusion and justice?

Do we have the **humility** to recognize that we are only a small part of the history of the faith? Do we have the modesty to acknowledge that we do not have the whole picture? That we do not know how our actions today may be important or insignificant in the larger scheme of things?

Do we have the **courage** to call on the spirit of God that is living and active in the world? Can we find **God's strength** to continue the arduous process of working for more love and peace in the church and in the world? Can we **follow** the spirit as it calls us to ever more study and insight, ever more compassion, ever more faithfulness?

If we are serious about following Jesus, who was human and yet somehow divine, Jesus who knew what it was like to struggle — If we are earnestly seeking the way of Jesus — then we will recommit ourselves to this complex but joyful work of justice. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)