

Hope Mennonite Church has, since its inception in 1988, wrestled with being more welcoming of those on the margins of our church and society, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) persons. We continue on this journey, recognizing that we often fail to be hospitable. Since 2005 we have been more intentional about discerning what it means for us to be a faithful church in relation to our LGBTQ participants and members. The most recent result is a Consensus Document that reflects as honestly as possible who we as a congregation have become in 2012.

## **Consensus on LGBTQ Welcome and Affirmation**

Adopted by Hope Mennonite Church on November 11, 2012

*Hope Mennonite Church desires to follow Jesus' example of welcoming all people to God's table. In our context, this includes welcoming lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people and affirming their full participation in the life of our church.*

### **Background**

LGBTQ Christians have long been active in Hope's congregational life. However, for a variety of reasons, there was discomfort in the congregation with this state of affairs. Some people were uncomfortable that no formalization or discussion or any sort of decision about this was ever made by the congregation. Some people were concerned about the implications to our relationship with the broader Mennonite community and to the conferences to which we belong should our openness become publicly known. Some people were uncomfortable with the fact we were so quiet about this. To be so tentative was perhaps convenient for the congregation, but it was less than fully supportive of LGBTQ people, even hurtful.

As a result, in 2005 Hope started a process of dialogue, education and discernment for several years on the subject of including LGBTQ persons in the life of our church. This process consisted of a variety of sessions, including education about LGBTQ terminology, exploring how LGBTQ Christians experience the church, understanding Scripture, and many opportunities to process and discern in both small and large group settings.

Over a series of consensus-building sessions, the congregation expressed its desire to work towards fully including LGBTQ people within the life of our church, while also continuing to engage the broader church in dialogue on this issue. In further sessions, there was broad agreement that a person's sexual orientation or gender identity should not be a barrier to engagement in congregational life, including marriage, baptism, and church leadership.

## **Welcoming and Affirming Diversity**

Our welcome is one way to show love and offer healing to all in the church. We know that some families and church families are torn apart when people learn someone is LGBTQ. Some people, who do not believe they will find peace between their church and their sexual orientation or gender identity, turn away and find new communities. Others hide these aspects of themselves. Others commit suicide; in Manitoba and around the world. At Hope, our beliefs are not all the same but we have decided not to tear and separate when people say they are LGBTQ. Instead, we have decided to stay together, to include, welcome and celebrate all kinds of diversity for our benefit and others', and for the benefit of the church as whole. This is one of our ways to express the peace of God.

**“We want to make sure that in the congregation we always have room for discussion and disagreement.”**

### **Foundational Principles**

The Bible has been the cornerstone of Mennonite reflections and discussions on sexual orientation and gender identity. For us, it is clear that Scriptural passages which refer to LGBTQ issues must be understood within the context (i.e. the time, place and culture) in which they were written and then adapted to speak into our context. In doing so, we follow the example of Jesus, who consistently challenged the traditional Holiness and Purity Codes which had been handed down in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Sabbath laws, speaking to women, touching untouchables, eating with sinners, etc.), just as the prophets had previously challenged traditional understandings of, for example, the sacrificial system.

As Jesus invited his hearers to consider the broader themes in the Hebrew Scriptures, we follow in the Anabaptist tradition (and in the tradition of the early church, which changed its thinking on Gentiles) in considering Scriptural passages and themes through the lens of Jesus. Jesus challenged the traditional understandings of his time on the basis of the broader themes of love and compassion, of justice and equality, of the intrinsic worth of every human being as created in the image of God and of God’s call to all human beings to become more fully human. These overriding core values led Jesus to welcome all to his table, especially those who were marginalized in the society of his time.

As we consider the broader themes of Scripture through the example and core values of Jesus, we see that all humans were created in God’s image within a community of relationships (male and female). That image includes our sexual orientation. In Biblical times there was no concept of sexual orientation, only sexual practice, so as we adapt the broader themes of Scripture to speak into our context, we must also consider the research and best thinking of the scientists, psychologists and sociologists of our time. That best thinking suggests that all humans are on a male-female continuum of sexual orientation. Where people are on that continuum is genetically, psychologically and sociologically

determined. Same-sex orientation and relationships cannot therefore be understood as moral deviancy but as a variant on the continuum of sexual orientation.

Similarly, a person's gender identity is today understood to mean something different from what it meant in the past. Based on current knowledge and best thinking, we now understand that concepts of gender (men/male/masculinity and women/female/femininity) are strongly influenced by social and cultural constructs based on stereotypes and expectations of a person's assigned sex at birth. It has become more evident today with current knowledge that people can identify themselves in non-stereotypical roles, defying the gender binary of men and women, and this may also include identifying as a different gender identity from the sex they were assigned at birth.

As we bring Jesus and Scripture to bear on the best thinking of our time, we see that we are called to respect the image of God in all people, to show love and compassion to all people and therefore to invite all who wish to follow Jesus to full participation in the life of our congregation, regardless of who they are. But we also believe that every member of our congregation, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, is called to be in a relationship with others that respects the other and reflects God's shalom, demonstrating the fruits of the Spirit which Paul lists in Galatians 5:22-23. This two-fold calling is a key witness in our desire to fulfill the wider calling to bring hope and healing to a suffering world.

### **Where To From Here**

The conversation is not complete, for the work of discernment is not a process with a beginning and an end. When exchange and engagement ends between us, so does mutual learning, growth and dynamic connection. As we invite and encourage full participation for all in the life of Hope Mennonite Church, so too do we invite and hope for the conversation to continue, both within the congregation and the broader church, so that we may explore, with honesty and deep respect, one another's perspectives and insights, deepening our connection to one another. It is both our prayer and our commitment: that we hold each other up in God's grace, celebrating our diversity and respecting our differences; that we continue, as Jesus calls us, to engage in the often-times difficult conversations of relationships; and that we invite and welcome the Holy Spirit to breathe into that space, bringing peace and understanding.

**“We can't know what might happen. We have to move forward with excitement, and let the spirit move us.”**

For Hope Mennonite Church, the road to this place has been long, winding and sometimes painful. However, we now look ahead in joyful anticipation, knowing that living into God's kingdom and being faithful followers of Christ's call is both difficult and a discipline, and knowing that as Christians we all seek to walk this road together, humbly with God.

