

# Wisdom on the Edges: Listening to LGBTQ+ Voices in Mennonite Church Canada

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In 2017, Bill White, an evangelical pastor in Long Beach, California, wrote an essay for *Evangelicals for Social Action* entitled, “How the LGBTQ Community is Saving the Church.”<sup>1</sup> The essay affirmed what I have cautiously argued for some time, that perhaps, the current grappling around LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church may in fact be a gift to the church at this time in its history. As difficult as it is, the current discernment and dialogue around LGBTQ+ inclusion in our communities may in fact be an opportunity extended to the church to examine their self-understanding and their longings and desires for the church and the world. This is not meant to be said glibly. I say this in full recognition and awareness of the hurt and pain that has been present in these difficult times of discernment, hurt and pain that is ongoing. And this is not to suggest that the only way for the church to rediscover its identity as the Body of Christ in the world, is on the backs of those who have been hurt, marginalized and oppressed (though sadly, this has been a frequent reality). But it is to suggest that engagement with those who frequently find themselves on the boundaries of the church offers insights and wisdom of what it means to *be* the church. Of course this should come as no surprise for a community who draws its identity from the life and witness of Jesus Christ,

who frequently found himself in the company of those on the periphery.

What follows is a reflection on the work of a project entitled, "Listening Church." In 2015, videographer Darryl Neustaedter Barg and myself travelled across Canada and interviewed LGBTQ+ people who were part of Mennonite Church Canada congregations. The interviews culminated in a video project called "Listening Church," a resource for use in Mennonite Churches as they discerned around LBTBQ+ inclusion. The purpose of "Listening Church" was to create space for Mennonite LGBTQ+ voices to be heard within the church.<sup>2</sup> While these interviews raised many issues around sexuality and gender identity and the church, what follows is more focused reflection on insights and wisdom of those we interviewed with regards to what, I believe, they opened up as to what it means to be the church.

### Who (or What) is the Church?

When we embarked on the Listening Church project we prepared ourselves for the worst. We assumed that we, sent by "the church" (MC Canada), would be the recipients of all the pain and hurt of LGBTQ+ caused by the church. While we certainly heard of difficult and painful experiences we were perhaps more surprised by the support and affirmation there was for the church and for the many positive experiences people had within the church. A deep love for the church and the Mennonite faith was sensed from many of the interviewees. Perhaps this wasn't surprising as we were interviewing those who were more active in the church. As one interviewee said bluntly, "if I didn't feel acceptance in the church I'd just leave." At the same time people were honest about their struggle with the church. Elie Wiesel once said, "the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference." We saw no apathy, no indifference. Participants valued the church with many recognizing the deep necessity of the church, so much so we considered calling the second section of the video "why we can't be Christian without the church." The interviewees, alongside the LGBTQ+ community constructively challenge two particular aspects of what it means to be the church.

First, LGBTQ+ people help the church to rethink the nature of the boundaries of the church. It has been claimed that the *idea* of "church" (ecclesiology) represents the very centre of Anabaptist theology and thinking.<sup>3</sup> Primarily this has been the point on which Anabaptism and Protestantism separated. The dominant theme in

the thinking of early Anabaptists was the recovery of the life and virtue of the early church. For the Anabaptist reformers, the biblical model of the Christian church was a community of yielded, regenerated, faithful, baptized, committed, and obedient believers – a community of saints. Arnold Snyder claims that the Christian community was the anchor of their theology and spirituality,

formed first by the spiritual, and then the water baptism of believers, maintained by fraternal admonition, and nurtured by the Supper of the Lord (celebrated as a memorial and a pledge only by those who had committed themselves to the church in baptism), by communal worship and visible expressions of love among the members of the body.<sup>4</sup>

Anabaptist Mennonites have a long history of associated the church as “pure, and without spot or wrinkle.” This comes from a passage in Eph. 5:27, a text addressing relationships between husbands and wives within the Christian household. Historically this has come to symbolize what Mennonites have sometimes believed about the nature of the church. Anabaptists, and Mennonites who came after them, have often maintained that the true church is a gathering of reborn and spiritually regenerated Christian called to be a community free from moral failure. More recently, however, many Anabaptist-Mennonites are questioning elements of this conceptual understanding of the church, in light of personal failings and painful church schisms, and are expressing doubts about its practical adequacy and theological tenability. Furthermore, this understanding of the church as pure and without spot or wrinkle has presented problems for a church interested in mission and in being hospitable. Those emphasizing the “pure church” placed strong emphasis on the boundaries of the church in attempt to define church identity clearly including who is in and who is not. This is significant if the primary interest is in conserving the purity of the church. For some time, Anabaptist-Mennonites have been concerned with this preoccupation of boundary issues and “inhospitable” practices of church discipline, resulting in a search for alternative directions that might be considered more at the heart of the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

The conversations with LGBTQ+ people challenged these understandings of the church and its need for boundaries in order to keep it “pure.” “Who won’t we accept?” asks one interviewee. However, this was in no way an appeal for the church to release its core values in favour of greater cultural accommodation. With tenacity, many interviewees spoke of valuing the church for its

distinctiveness – its commitment to be a light in the world, to reconciliation and love, to be the body of Christ.

Rather than an image of the church where the boundaries are protective walls with gatekeepers determining who can come in or not, another image is brought to mind. It is an image described by Romand Coles who imagines the Body of Christ as having both thick and permeable boundaries.<sup>6</sup> It's an evocative image – the church as having both thick and flexible and permeable boundaries. While it may be in a somewhat indefinite, unsettling description it is a remarkably truthful one. The image suggests the church is both simultaneously faithful and vulnerable.<sup>7</sup> Boundaries are not just inevitable but they are necessary in order that the church can be visible and is enabled to dialogue. Boundaries (an oft considered “dirty word”) enable identity to be sustained and allow the faith tradition(s) to be cultivated. Boundaries “thick and porous” envision a church whose membrane “at once *joins with* and *distinguishes from* the world.”<sup>8</sup> Those we interviewed resonated with these themes, calling for the church to continue to have a clear sense of identity and self-understanding and yet have a willingness to be vulnerable and to enter into the kind of vulnerability that LGBTQ+ people live with continually as they live within the boundaries of the church.

Secondly, LGBTQ+ people are helpfully challenging the church's understanding of the nature of the unity of the church. Many of those interviewed affirmed the multiplicity of viewpoints are LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church. They acknowledged significant difference with some who were within their church communities yet expressed willingness to continue to be in “communion” with them. There is an imagination for the church as a unified community where difference and ambiguity need not threaten the churches unity. This invites a willingness to acknowledge that church's unity resides on something more than agreement on all things. If the unity of the church depends on unity as being intellectual agreement on issues such as LGBTQ+ inclusion, what becomes critical for the church to be the church is good conflict mediators/negotiators to help the church agree on its various positions. However, in such an understanding of unity, is there is any need for Jesus Christ or the cross, which the church has professed to be theologically central to their identity? The engagement with the LGBTQ community is challenging Anabaptist-Mennonites to reclaim what has been seen by some, as more sacramental notions of unity and the church, where unity is not something that is earned or achieved but rather is something that is received, as gift. Unity is a gift given to the church by Jesus

Christ and the church is left to discover what it means to live into the unity, which has been made possibly through Jesus Christ. His is a more sacramental notion of unity than an ideological notion of unity.

The LGBTQ+ community brings the church face to face with its understanding of boundary of the church and questions of who is “in” and “out” and its understanding of where the church’s unity lies. These are critical questions for the church in this time and place and the LGBTQ+ community is encouraging the church to grapple with them.

### **“Listening” and Anabaptist-Mennonite Practices of Discernment**

As a practical theologian I continually struggle with what it means to engage my discipline well, with integrity. For most of my career I have stood between the disciplines of theology and practical theology – theology which has typically been more text-based research, and practical theology which is interested in practice, in what it is that Christians *do* and how their “*doing*” (that is, their *practices*) bears their theology. This requires practical theologians to read and listen not only to written texts (scripture, history, the theological tradition) but to faithfully read the texts of the communities, of congregations, of people of faith. This ecclesial ethnography begins with paying attention and honouring the wisdom of embodied, living communities. Simply put, this requires *listening* as a critical endeavour in doing any research with integrity.

The final questions that were asked of participants in the Listening Church project focused on their wisdom for the church as the Mennonite church discerns around LGBTQ+ inclusion. Again and again, participants replied, “listen.” It was an uncomplicated response and yet the frequency of the response suggests that listening has been a significant challenge for the Mennonite Church has sought to discern with integrity around questions of LGBTQ+ inclusion. Why has it been so difficult for the church to create space to listen to those most impacted by the decisions being made by church? Why, have they been excluded, even though they are part of the church, members of the hermeneutical community? In the words of one interviewee, “[we need] a church that can dialogue AND listen for the purpose of understanding.”

In the past decades there has been an increasing emphasis on the social location of the interpreter(s) and the particular inter-relatedness of communal traditions and personal traditions. Phi-

losophers such as Gadamer, Habermas & Ricoeur have been helpful in affirming the social location of the interpreter as well as the social location of the text. The integrity of the process of interpretation depends on bringing to surface that various loyalties and commitments (pre-understandings and pre-judgements), which Mennonite communities have been hesitant to name. Participants pointed out that the lack of inclusion of LGBTQ+ voices in the discernment process was due to the fact that they were considered “biased” because of their particular social location as LGBTQ+ people, and yet the church was hesitant to recognize its own social location, which impacted their ability to discern. Listening enables the church to remember that the church is both a theological and social body; it is both a way of thinking and a way of being.

### **Practicing a More Spacious Spirituality**

As we engaged the LGBTQ+ participants in the Listening Church project, we couldn't help but ask ourselves what keeps them going to church? What sustains them after the ill treatment many had received from people in the church or systemically, from the Christian tradition. Many spoke of deep spiritual struggle – an encounter with God/Jesus that sustained them. For a number of participants this required a kind of “letting go” of the church as their primary source of formation and sustenance, to deeper personal encounters with God, perhaps best characterized by a kind of spaciousness. “God is bigger,” said one participant, “God is bigger than the church.” In the field of Conflict Resolution/ Transformation studies, it is not unusual to talk of how conflict produces “contraction;” that is, things or people are made to feel small, reduced or diminished. Idioms connected to conflict such as feeling “up against a wall” or “cornered” attest to this sense of contraction, of feeling trapped. For LGBTQ+ people the language of being “in the closet” captures this experience of contraction. In contrast, many of the interviewees courageously spoke of “spaciousness,” of a spirituality and faith in God. And of communities of hospitality and church leaders that offered them room, enabling them to experience release from the contracted posture often experienced within the broader church.

I am deeply grateful for these encounters with our Mennonite LGBTQ+ community in Canada and the hope, tenacious courage, and deep wisdom that they carry for the church.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bill White, "How the LGBTQ Community is Saving the Church," *Evangelicals for Social Action* (April 17, 2017), <http://www.evangelicalsforaction.org/oriented-to-love-sexual-justice/how-the-lgbtq-community-is-saving-the-church/>. Accessed January 10, 2019.
- <sup>2</sup> See Listening Church: [www.listeningchurch.ca](http://www.listeningchurch.ca). The Listening Church project was initiated by Mennonite Church Canada as part of their "Being a Faithful Church" discernment process. The project strived to have representation from various parts of the church including each of the Area Churches that are part of Mennonite Church Canada (Mennonite Church British Columbia, Mennonite Church Alberta, Mennonite Church Saskatchewan, Mennonite Church Manitoba, and Mennonite Church Eastern Canada). The project aimed to have conversations with people of different ages and experiences and as much as possible, different gender identities. We focused on people who identified themselves as being Christian and within Mennonite Church Canada. Twenty-two people were interviewed, three of which were pastors. Unfortunately, the interviews did not include LGBTQ+ people who have left the church due to their lack of acceptance and inclusion in the church. The experiences of these people also need to be told and heard by the church.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), 116.
- <sup>4</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1995), 78.
- <sup>5</sup> See *Without Spot or Wrinkle: Reflecting Theologically on the Nature of the Church*, eds. Karl Koop and Mary H. Schertz (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000).
- <sup>6</sup> Coles writes, "A nourished body of Christ, like Christ, requires an extremely thick yet flexible, modulating, vulnerable, filamented, and porous (maybe even gelatinous?) membrane as the flesh that at once joins with and distinguishes it from the world." Romand Coles, "The Pregnant Reticence of Rowan Williams," in Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene: Cascade, 2008), 191.
- <sup>7</sup> Gerald Ens, "Ecclesiology Beyond Rigid Boundaries," Honour's Thesis, Canadian Mennonite University, April 4, 2013. I was the second-reader for Ens' thesis and while I was familiar with Coles, I was compelled by Ens' appeal to Coles as a helpful interlocutor for those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, particularly Coles' understanding of this paradoxical nature of the church.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*