

A Context for Kansas City

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This summer in Kansas City, delegates to our denominational convention will discuss five resolutions. The first resolution talks about our opposition to sexual violence, the second talks about our hope for peace in Israel-Palestine, and the third talks about what it means for American Mennonites to live in a country that uses drones to make war on other nations. Marilyn and Elizabeth Miller are the delegates from our congregation.

But in today's sermon and Sunday school we want to focus on the other two resolutions which speak about issues related to LGBTQ persons. At the end of this worship service, we will give you a packet of information that has these two resolutions. In this joint sermon, I'll offer some background to these resolutions, while Marilyn will focus on the meaning of forbearance that figures prominently in the resolutions. Then in the Christian education hour, we will form into small groups so every person from MYF up can say what you think about these resolutions. We'll gather all your responses so Elizabeth and Marilyn know how to represent us.

The Mennonite Church USA believes that Jesus is the center of our faith, that community is the center of our lives, and that reconciliation is the center of our ministry in the world. You could say these three beliefs hold us together as a denomination.¹ But beyond that we Mennonites are an extremely diverse group of people. We have the capacity to disagree about a lot of things. One thing we intensely disagree about is how to receive and respond to LGBTQ persons. That disagreement is also present here at Berkey.

One reason Mennonites disagree with each other about LGBTQ persons is that we aren't structured like some other denominations. The Catholic Church, for example, has bishops, cardinals, and a pope who decide what the church teaches; and if they want, those leaders can more or less make the rest of the church go along with that teaching. But we Mennonites don't have a pope or cardinals, and except for the Lancaster

¹ Ervin Stutzman, Executive Director of MC USA, in a presentation at College Mennonite Church, April 26, 2015.

Conference, we don't have bishops either. We have no group of leaders anywhere who can force the rest of the church to accept what they think is correct belief.

We're also not like the Episcopal Church, where liturgy mostly holds them together. If you go to any Episcopal church in this country, the worship services will be mostly the same, because every church uses almost the same words and scripture readings on a given Sunday. We Mennonites aren't like that, because each congregation decides what words, Bible readings, and style to use in their worship.

Nor are we like the Presbyterians and Methodists. Both those denominations have long, detailed manuals that prescribe in detail how they govern themselves. The *Methodist Book of Discipline* is a behemoth at 896 pages, while the Presbyterians have two books, the *Book of Confessions* at 477 pages and the *Book of Order* at 346 pages. Again, we Mennonites have nothing comparable. We have a *Vision Statement* that fits on a bookmark, a *Confession of Faith* of 110 pages in a small book format, and a set of *Membership Guidelines* that are only 3 pages long. These are barebones documents that leave a lot of things unsaid and unspecified. This means that when we get crosswise with each other, we have to figure some things out as we go along. Everything is not dictated for us on a piece of paper. We have to find a way forward by talking and listening to each other, preferably in face-to-face conversations. This leads to a certain degree of messiness in our life as a denomination.

When it comes to how we respond to LGBTQ persons, perhaps the most important document is the *Membership Guidelines* for MC USA, just 3 pages long. In these guidelines we say that congregations and even whole conferences have the freedom to take the principles and beliefs of the denomination and then apply them to their own context, as long as they do it in consultation with the broader church. Inevitably, this means that some congregations and conferences could decide to do things that other congregations and conferences find troubling, if not downright appalling.

This is exactly the situation we're in right now with LGBTQ persons. I'll take just one example: the decision about a year and a half ago by the Mountain States Mennonite Conference to license Theda Good, a pastor at First Mennonite, Denver, a graduate of

Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and a lesbian in a covenanted relationship with another woman. After prayer and discernment, Mountain States Conference decided that Theda is a follower of Jesus, displays the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and has clear gifts for pastoral ministry. So they licensed her.

This caused vigorous responses from others in the denomination. Some parts of the church were delighted while others were angry. Of course there's a moral and theological debate behind this ruckus, but there's also a procedural debate, or to use the best word for it, a polity debate. The polity question is this: did Mountain States Conference have the right to do what they did according to our denomination's *Membership Guidelines*? Some people say yes and others say no. Some say Mountain States was simply applying the teaching principles of the denomination to their own context, as the membership guidelines allow. But others say Mountain States did not take enough time to consult with other conferences and denominational leaders, as the *Membership Guidelines* also say they should. This is just one example of why our denomination is struggling over LGBTQ questions. We disagree over how to apply different understandings of the *Membership Guidelines*, and partly because of this disagreement, some congregations have decided to leave the denomination, including a few churches in our own Indiana-Michigan Conference.

In a meeting a few weeks ago for delegates, Ervin Stutzman, the Executive Director of MC USA, observed that our most basic impulse as Mennonites is to get it right morally. Ethics are hugely important to us. So if our primary impulse is to think we're morally right, and others are morally wrong, then what can we do when we disagree with each other in the church? That's the question Marilyn will now address.

Forbearance

Marilyn Rudy-Froese

1 John 4:1-12

A key part of these resolutions is the concept of forbearance. But what does forbearance mean? Does it mean we tolerate another's beliefs, even if we don't agree? Or do we live and let live, take a sort of "whatever" approach to conference and denominational life?

I did a web review of the definition of forbearance, and found that forbearance is defined as: Patient self-control; restraint or tolerance; refraining from the enforcement of something--a debt, right or obligation--that is due. In Law, forbearance is the action of refraining from exercising a legal right, especially in the enforcement of payment for a debt.

Synonyms are: tolerance, patience, resignation, endurance, fortitude, stoicism.

Forbearance originated in the area of debt repayment; it isn't the forgiveness of a debt, but refraining from enforcing the payment of the debt. Given these definitions, it seems forbearance has to do with restraint, refraining from something, not enforcing a legal right. If I think about the synonyms offered, endurance and fortitude perhaps come closest to what forbearance is.

But what is the difference between forbearance and tolerance? They are closely related, but if I think about tolerance, it has more to do with leaving someone alone to believe or do what they do; or if we develop a tolerance for some medications, we need higher doses in order for it to affect us. Forbearance isn't disengagement from those with whom we disagree. It isn't leaving them alone to believe their own thing, but continuing to engage them, even in our differences.

It strikes me that forbearance requires something difficult of everyone--we are not being asked to give up our beliefs, whatever they are, but we are being asked to refrain from enforcing them or imposing them on someone else. It's not that we don't voice our beliefs, but we do so in a spirit of love, grace and humility. And we do so, recognizing that the other holds as strongly to their beliefs as we do to ours.

Jim Reimer, the late professor of religion and theology at Conrad Grebel University College, says this about forbearance: "It is not tolerance of whatever people believe or do. Forbearance is the biblical notion that as we judge others, we will be judged, that we should first remove the beam in our own eye before trying to remove the splinter in our neighbour's eye. Forbearance is the Christian belief that we ought to bear each other's burdens, weaknesses, shortcomings, handicaps and sins. It is based on the biblical understanding of God--a God whose love, mercy, and compassion far outweigh the word

of judgement, a God who loves the world and bears its shortcomings, whose goal is to reconcile all things." (*The Dogmatic Imagination*, p. 88)

Forbearance asks us to continue to live together with those with whom we disagree; to enlarge the tent under which we live; to maintain relationship; to bear each other's shortcomings and weaknesses. It means that for a time, we will be sharing the same confession of faith, the same membership guidelines, the same denomination with those who believe quite differently than we do. And it is OK for us to be together in our disagreement for this time. Forbearance means living under the same tent recognizing all that brings us together, rather than creating new tents for the things that divide us. Forbearance means nurturing not severing relationships.

Forbearance is believing the best in the other with whom we disagree; believing that they are as faithful as we are; that they love God as much as we do; that they value the Bible as much as we do. Forbearance is placing ourselves at the feet of Jesus, along with our sisters and brothers with whom we disagree, and trusting that Jesus will receive us and love us. It is trusting that God is holding our denomination, our conference and our congregation in all of our differences because the church is God's, and God is ultimately in control of any outcome.

I think forbearance is a difficult concept for us to grasp and understand. In a culture of individualism and tolerance, of looking out for ourselves and distancing ourselves from those who are different from us, the idea of engaging another but not imposing our own agenda, or not trying to convince them that their way is "wrong" is a radical one. Forbearance recognizes ourselves as only a small part of the big picture. It rightly places the individual in the midst of a diverse community as only 1 small, but important, piece of a complex puzzle. Forbearance will require discipline, prayer and courage for each of us.

What might forbearance look like in our denomination? There may well be as many interpretations of these resolutions, or ideas of how to live them out as there are members of the denomination. Passing the resolutions is only the beginning of what forbearance will look like. But I think forbearance at its best, will look like respect, love and trust. I think it will mean that those who are strong advocates for same-sex inclusion in all its fullness will not impose their beliefs and try to force their views on others, or lobby to change the membership guidelines. It will mean those who believe same-sex marriage is wrong will not impose sanction or review on those pastors, congregations and conferences who choose to marry or credential those in same-sex relationships. It is in many ways, a ceasefire from the kinds of arguments and judgments that have been thrown across conference floors, social media and the pages of our denominational papers.

The scripture we read this morning directs our attention away from what divides us, and focuses us instead on what holds us together: 1 John 4:2--"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and

every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God." This is the basis of what brings us together--our confession that Jesus came in the flesh from God. It is that simple, and that complex. But that confession provides the foundation for our love for each other; love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. It isn't so much that we love God, but that God loves us, and Jesus came so that we might know what God's love looks like in all its fullness. Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love each other. It is as we show love for one another, that God's love is revealed in us, and lives in us. It is as we forbear one another, that God's love is revealed in us and lives in us.

Perhaps, during this time of forbearance, the most important questions are not: what side are they on? What do they believe about LGBTQ inclusion?

Maybe the most important questions are: Do they love God? Are they trying to live God's love, as evidenced in Jesus, to the best of their ability? Are we abiding in God's love for us and for our neighbors?

¹ John 4 ends with a few verses on fear and love--"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

This is a time of fear and anxiety in our church. We are being invited to trust in a different way, a way of love and forbearance; a way of restraint and endurance. May we trust in God's love for each of us and for this church; a love that is strong enough, wide enough and deep enough that it can encompass and hold our fears and our dreams.