

Portland Mennonite Church  
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TO: Portland Mennonite Church Community  
FROM: Ralph

Dear Friends,

For several years, this congregation like most congregations, has been pressed into rethinking common assumptions regarding homosexuality. We confront the issue in a variety of ways and places: personally, some of us are gay or lesbian, or have gay/lesbian family members; in our work places and friendships with gay/lesbian persons; our church's immediate neighborhood is primarily identified as a lesbian community; the political agendas represented by ballot measure 13 confront us in the larger community.

It is apparent that this issue can be focused in a variety of different ways. It becomes critical to identify the question we are attempting to answer. "What does scripture teach?" "How would Jesus respond?" "Does scripture address the current issue?" "How should Christians respond to each (of the above) circumstance?" "What sort of issue is this: moral, ethical, biblical, political, justice, all of the above?"

In the past 3-4 years, I have had many many conversations on these issues. I have read, studied, written, spoken and prayed. I have listened to gay/lesbian persons of sincere integrity who can not understand why Christians reject them. I have listened to pleas from others who equate tolerance of homosexuals as tolerance of sin. I have listened to persons who have left the church and refuse to identify with the church as long as the church refuses to welcome and affirm homosexuals. I have listened to others who have left the church because the church has not condemned homosexuality. I am aware that many of you reading this have communicated with others that you are prepared to leave the church depending on what is communicated regarding homosexuality. In our elders group, the exploration of this issue has revealed we are sharply divided in our opinions. The single thing held in common by these expressions is that they are usually held and expressed with extreme emotional content!

I find myself in a place I have never been before. And, I am very sad. Many of you have asked directly or indirectly my thoughts regarding homosexuality. I recognize that as a result of all of the above, I have and am moving in my perspectives. I have little hope of Portland Mennonite being able to come to consensus regarding this issue. I have decided that in my role and vocation as pastor I will not attempt to tell the church what it should do, nor how you each as individuals should respond to any of the questions above. I would like to take the opportunity to share with you where I am at personally, at this point in my journey. I invite your responses and dialogue. I understand that considerable risk is involved. I will disappoint many of you (at both ends of this conflict). I am choosing this route because of my commitment to live openly with you, and in so far

as I am able, to tell the truth. I also believe you have the right to ask and know my perspectives. In a spirit of disclosure and an invitation for discussion I offer the following statements. If persons feel the church should pursue particular positions, that initiative will need to come from you.

1) Regarding Ballot Measure 13: Mennonites have a history of being victims of oppression, and a history and theology of peacemaking, non-violence, compassion and justice. I think this ballot measure is wrong, and I oppose it. While there is a diversity of conviction regarding homosexuality, this ballot measure has not, and will not result in compassion, mercy or justice.

2) I am continually growing in my understanding and identity as a pastor. I want to be able to relate to any and every person God brings to the church. I believe I should welcome gay and lesbian persons into the church. Whatever sin they bear is no worse than mine. I would continue to walk with people looking for God's presence in their lives regardless of sexual orientation.

3) I confess I do not fully understand the "whys" of homosexual orientation. I do not believe homosexual orientation is a result of sin, nor of choice. I do not know what to completely expect from a committed Christian who is homosexual. I do believe God is able to lead any of God's own followers in paths of faithfulness. I believe that in time these things that are difficult for me now will become more clear. I believe should I error, I should error towards mercy and compassion, rather than be anyone's stumbling block.

4) I believe the teaching of scripture regarding homosexuality is primarily to be understood in the context of Old Testament "holiness codes". Romans 1 may be an exception. Whether we can assume current sexual orientation issues are addressed by the text is far from clear to me. The weight and impact on people's lives from relatively sparse scripture is disturbing to me, especially when compared to other issues more directly addressed in scripture (wealth, the poor, marriage, divorce, adultery, lust, killing, war, envy, jealousy, gossip, just to name a few...) As Christians we have a history of gross sin in some of our zealous attempts of faithfulness. I want to cling to Jesus and walk carefully in my responses regarding this issue.

I believe as a congregation we could accept a diversity of conviction on homosexuality, as well as other controversial issues. We could differ and still approach one another with grace and humility. We could represent a way of being peacemakers by embodying peacemaking. I believe we could join together in lighting candles rather than cursing the darkness. Towards that end, please know that these expressions are shared with you in love and hope.