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Where does Mennonite Church Canada stand?

A report on our understanding of the church's position regarding same-sex issues

by Henry Krause, Moderator, and Dan Nighswander, General Secretary
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Because perceptions about the actions of Mennonite Church Canada General Board and delegates at Assembly 2003, St Catharines, have been raised as concerns, we believe it is important to clarify how MC Canada has dealt with issues of sexuality and specifically around the question of homosexuality and same sex marriage.

As all are aware, there is diversity in our churches on a wide variety of theological and ethical issues including matters of sexual ethics. Not least of these are the set of questions around appropriate ethical behaviour for Christians who are attracted to persons of the same sex and the set of questions around the church's relationship with the values of the non-Christian society in which we live. While all are committed to following Jesus Christ in obedience, the form and content of faithfulness continues to be debated, even though the consensus of the majority is clear. While discernment and testing continue, that consensus is defined in statements such as article 19 ("Family, Singleness, and Marriage") in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and the statements on sexuality made by our denomination. ("Resolution on Human Sexuality," General Conference, Saskatoon, 1986, and "Resolution on Sexuality," Conference of Mennonites in Canada, Stratford, 1998). These statements name same-sex relationships and other sexual activity outside of consensual relations in a heterosexual monogamous marriage as outside of God's plan and will. They also declare a covenant "to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other," "to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other," and a commitment "that we call for and acknowledge the integrity of the same commitment [of faithfulness to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, according to the light that God has given us in the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit] on the part of those who disagree with us." (Full statements are attached.)

The Board believes that it has always acted according to what has been decided by our national church, through its delegates. All decisions and statements that the General Board and staff of Mennonite Church Canada have made in regard to sexuality and homosexuality have been consistent with the denominational statements.

Some actions that happened at the annual delegate assembly of MC Canada in St Catharines this summer have raised concerns about whether the General Board of MC Canada still holds to the statements our denomination has accepted. These concerns have been raised by the actions and high profile taken by the Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual and Transgender Interests in Canada (BMC). We want you to know that these actions were not sanctioned by MC Canada General Board, Program Committee, staff or assembly volunteers.

One of the offending actions was the unauthorized use of our Mennonite Church logo by BMC on their t-shirts together with the BMC logo, and the unauthorized use of the MC Canada assembly theme. Permission to use the logo had not been requested from nor granted by the General Board or staff. Furthermore, the t-shirts were sold at the bookstore which was operating on campus by a private business at the invitation of the assembly planners. The normal operation of bookstores at assembly is that we request that certain books be promoted and made available, primarily publications by Herald Press and Faith and Life Resources or writings by Mennonite authors (including this year the best-seller at the assembly, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment*, by Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary professor Willard Swartley [Herald Press, 2003]). Bookstore operators always sell other items that they believe assembly attendees will want to buy. In this case, the bookstore operator did not ask us for authorization or notify us that the shirts were being sold there; that appears to have been a last-minute decision because the sale of all items was prohibited on campus except from the bookstore. In future years we will be more definitive of what can and cannot be sold in the bookstore.

There were also concerns about the prominent presence and activity of BMC members in the halls during the Assembly, including the prominence of signs and posters. Our location on a public university campus did not

serve us well in this regard. We look forward to meeting in facilities in the future where we can control the use of the space.

A letter was sent to BMC in August objecting very clearly to the misuse of the logo and identifying some of the other BMC actions were not acceptable behaviour at our assembly.

This year, as every year, BMC offered to present or co-present seminars and requested a display table for literature. The General Board, however, declined both the offer and the request. There were no workshops presented by BMC as a part of MC Canada's programming nor was there any information or a display table provided for BMC by MC Canada. The only commitment MC Canada has to BMC is that representatives of the General Board will have a conversation with them on an annual basis, which we believe is consistent with the commitment of our denominational statements.

MC Canada General Board recognizes that issues related to the presence of homosexual persons in our churches and in our communities are important for the church to discuss. This year two seminars planned by the General Board addressed these issues (see report in *Canadian Mennonite*, August 4, pp. 14-15). One was a theological and pastoral conversation about how Christians should relate when they disagree on the ethical appropriateness of same-sex relations. The presenter, one of our leading theologians, declared his understanding that scripture and theology do not support same-sex relationships, but that the pastoral and relational stance of "forbearance" should characterize our debates. The second was a panel discussion where several congregations reported on the process they had used to discern how to minister to and receive same-sex-oriented persons in their congregation. Two congregations reported; we regret that the third congregation that had been invited was unable to participate because of schedule conflicts. In addition to these two, a related seminar was offered by one of our historical theologians on the Mennonite experience of using confessions of faith to address conflicts. He demonstrated that throughout Mennonite history, confessions of faith have caused division when used to enforce boundaries and have brought cohesion when used to express common identity and as the basis for ecumenical and missional conversation.

A related matter from this year's assembly was "resolution 6," on writing to the Government of Canada on changing marriage legislation. An earlier letter (copy attached; see also *Canadian Mennonite*, August 15, p. 19) reported on that event and what people have said about why those who voted against it did so.

Prior to the assembly Sven Eriksson, our Denominational Minister, sent a letter to MC Canada pastors articulating MC Canada's response to the same sex marriage legislation being proposed by our Federal Government (copy attached; see also *Canadian Mennonite*, August 4, p. 9). This letter articulated the actions already taken by MC Canada and pointed to some further actions that could be taken by our congregations. This letter addressed the substance of what was later formulated as "resolution 6" at the assembly. It is important to recognize that any letter on MC Canada letterhead and signed by a senior staff person is an official representation of the denomination. This particular letter, though carrying only one signature, was formulated in consultation with other denominational leaders, and since it represents positions endorsed by the General Board and delegates in the past, this letter clearly represents the consensus of MC Canada on this issue.

From time to time concerns are expressed by various individuals and churches about where MC Canada General Board and staff stand in relation to the question of homosexuality. Our commitment is to work within the understandings we have agreed to as a church and to work with the area conferences and congregations in mutual accountability to our shared discernment of where God is leading Mennonite Church Canada. We trust that God will guide and give wisdom during these days and that we can continue to be a people who together seek to be faithful to Christ and the Gospel.

Available from <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/news/statements/ssm/>

- Article 19, Family, Singleness and Marriage, from *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*
- "Resolution on Human Sexuality," General Conference, Saskatoon, 1986
- "Resolution on the issue of homosexuality," Conference of Mennonites in Canada, Stratford, 1998
- "Resolution 6: On writing to the Government of Canada on changing marriage legislation"
- "Why did people vote "no" to resolution #6 at the St. Catharines assembly?" letter from Dan Nighswander, July 25, 2003
- Open pastoral letter from Sven Eriksson, June 27, 2003