

A CRISIS OF PRONOUNS

Melanie Morrison

WHEN I RETURNED TO THE United States after living in the Netherlands for five years, it was like starting over again. I considered “candidating” at various churches seeking a minister, and I explored teaching in a seminary. But I knew that my chances of obtaining either position would be greatly increased by hiding one important fact about myself—that I am a lesbian.

I hadn’t revealed my sexual orientation to anyone except my family and a small circle of

“single” (meaning as-yet-unmarried heterosexual) woman. I did not introduce myself to others that way, but I did conspire in the illusion. I was often asked, “Are you married?” and I answered with a simple “no.” The more difficult and just as frequent form of the question was, “Are you single?” I answered that question with a simple “yes,” even though I was in a committed relationship with a woman. Each time I answered “yes,” I felt a sense of deep betrayal of myself and my relationship

For years, I believed that secrecy was a necessary evil and my only real choice. I was aware of the costs of coming out. I was less willing to acknowledge the costs of my fear.

I would have thought it strange if someone had suggested that I was exhibiting “internalized homophobia” or that I was collaborating with the norms of a heterosexist society. Then, as now, I accepted myself as a lesbian. I was happy in a relationship that I considered not only healthy but grace filled. I just didn’t talk about it.

Because not talking about my sexual orientation or my

relationship appeared to be my only concession, I fooled myself for years. I denied the way I allowed fear to control my movements, decisions, speech, and relationships with others. The control took many different shapes:

▶ Although I value truthfulness and openness, my secret meant keeping people at arm’s length for fear they might ask uncomfortable questions. I didn’t want to have to lie outright.

▶ I longed to share with others my pride in the human being whom I loved and who loved me. Being unable to share my joy about this most precious gift caused me great pain. At times, I’ve felt excruciating envy for heterosexual couples who can talk freely about spouses.

▶ I systematically avoided lesbian sisters and gay brothers, except for a few close friends. At national church events, I did not

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Biennial BMC Conference

THIS YEAR BMC WILL HOLD ITS BIENNIAL CONFERENCE JOINTLY with two other like-minded organizations: Lutherans Concerned/North America, an organization for lgbt people and their allies in the Lutheran church, and Affirm United/S’affirmer Ensemble from the United Church of Canada. *Together in Toronto: Claiming an Open Spirit* will gather a diverse group spanning a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations from across North America. Hosted on the beautiful University of Toronto campus in downtown Toronto, Ontario, Canada, *Together in Toronto* is expected to draw over 400 participants from July 27-30, 2006.

“This first ever joint meeting of lgbtq (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/questioning) and allied groups from Brethren, Mennonite, Lutheran, and United Church of Canada backgrounds is a daring adventure that offers the promise of great creativity,” says co-chair Ralph Wushke. “The conference will deepen appreciation of the sacred intersection of spirituality, sexual orientations, and gender identities.”

“In these four days, you’ll have opportunities to rekindle old friendships, make new connections, be inspired by great speakers, share new ideas in

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IT'S TIME

Carol Wise

BMC IS ENTERING ITS thirtieth year of existence. We have come a long way from our beginning in 1976 when a small group of courageous gay men joined together for support and strength. BMC founder Martin Rock, who had been recently released from his position at the Mennonite Central Committee for being gay, organized BMC with hopes of changing the church's attitudes and practices towards gay people. He soon discovered that a more immediate concern was

healing the wounded souls and bodies of gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

So began a thirty year journey fueled by visions of dignity, respect and justice. The years taught us that honesty about our individual lives and an insistence upon the integrity and grace of each human person foster a strength that is deeply spiritual and good. BMC grew secure enough to welcome an expanding "queerness" that included a broad range of individuals and even whole congregations courageous enough to consider a wider understanding of God's creativity and love than is captured by our confessions and traditions. This welcoming movement has had a profoundly positive effect upon individual and community lives.

As lgbt people we understand that systems of discrimination and oppression that target us are hurtful. But what the civil rights movement taught us, and what we are beginning to understand at BMC, is that the harm extends well beyond its targeted prey. Oppression, with its corrupting and distorting nature, probably has its most profound effect upon those who perpetrate or seemingly benefit from the injustice. The hostility and fear that the church has directed toward lgbt people and our families has made life difficult for our community, but it has not damaged our soul nor compromised our witness in the way that it has the institutional church. The church's sacred language of love, hospitality,

justice, mercy, grace, compassion, and hope has increasingly been rendered hollow by its harsh attitudes and behavior, leaving the institution in desperate need of redemption.

The ball is firmly in the church's court. The lgbt community has done its work of sharing the story, doing the biblical exegesis, developing a comprehensive theology, and taking the risks that integrity and dialogue demand. It's time for those silent ones who profess to care about the soul of the church and lgbt justice to find a voice, step forward, and join the struggle. When we allow love to trump fear and grace to lead the way, what we discover is an amazing cloud of witnesses on a marvelous, life-giving journey. We welcome you.

(*"Toronto" continued from page 1*) workshops or worship, and sit back to enjoy the entertainment," says co-chair Shannon Neufeldt.

In addition to the shared events, BMC has time set aside to meet together. BMC will use this time to celebrate the work of special individuals in our community, convene a brief town meeting, and hold the traditional BMC auction.

Keynote speakers for the conference are Rev. Irene Monroe, an African American lesbian theologian from Harvard, and Dr. Martin Brokenleg, a gay Aboriginal professor at Vancouver School of Theology. Rev. Monroe is a religious columnist and motivational speaker with articles appearing in such publications as *The Advocate*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Venus* magazine. Dr. Brokenleg has co-authored several books and has extensive experience in

teaching religious, gender, and native youth studies.

Plenary sessions will explore various themes: *Claiming an Open Spirit: Gathering in a common place to meet, celebrate, play, and pray*; *Claiming our Heritage: Discussing how we can read and hear the Bible with a queer perspective and in ways that welcome, inspire, and create safe spaces*; *Claiming the Future: Empowering and equipping ourselves to lay claim to a better future*; *Claiming an Open Spirit: Going back to the places we each call home, empowered by and celebrating what has been experienced, daring to envision and create a more open spirit in*



the world.

Between sessions, attendees will be able to take part in a rich array of workshops and entertainment. A Saturday night dinner and gala, a

mini-film festival, an improv night, and even a quilting bee will all be part of this eclectic conference.

The gathering will be attentive to the needs of children and youth in queer families. Programming for children and teens will provide opportunities for participation at all levels.

A special focus will be on lgbtq students in college and university settings. Hospitality is extended also to allies and sup-

porters of lgbt people.

Together in Toronto: Claiming an Open Spirit offers attendees the opportunity to share in the vision of living from the resources of their spiritual traditions. Fulfilling the dreams of the civil and human rights movements and celebrating the variety of gender identities and sexual orientation, these three faith-based traditions gather for inspiration, community, and empowerment in the co-creative Spirit-led act of crossing boundaries and opening doors to claim a more humane church and society.

Scholarships are available. To register or find out more about *Together in Toronto: Claiming an Open Spirit*, visit www.openspirit.ca. If you are interested in leading a workshop, participating in a forum, or exploring the possibility of getting married at the convention, see page 4 in this issue of *Outspoken*.

EXPRESS TRAINS TO HEAVEN

Diversity and the Gospel of John

John Linscheid

“People, come to Jesus!” the subway evangelist calls as I step from the last car of the Broad Street line. “I tell you, no one—the Bible says ‘No one’—cometh to the Father but by me.”

It galls me to hear the gospel of the beloved disciple John used to damn strangers. As the man rails against adultery, abortion, homosexuality, I think, “What does this evangelist know about the life I’m living or the people I love?”

I hear in his call to conversion a demand for conformity. Yet both he and I live in a world of diversity—diversity of race, class, ethnicity, family patterns, gender, sexual orientation, and spirituality. For the subway evangelist who uses John to convince us that we’re all headed for hell, this diversity means that the world is falling apart. But in John, I find a Christ who embraces diversity, a Christ who calls us to heaven.

Classically, evangelical faith has used the gospel of John in a relentless attempt to drive people into heaven. In my world, however, such threats have driven the people I know away from the church. The people I know have diverse spiritualities. We discover God in a million places where typical Christianity finds

only danger of heresy. Most of us are or once were deeply committed to the Christian church. At one or another epiphany, we turned a corner in our lives. We experienced our turning point as a liberating new beginning in our spiritual as well as personal lives. But we found the church resistant, even hostile, to our new direction.

At first we tried to explain our choice of a new path. But the church ignored us or put up roadblocks and tried to steer us back to the familiar road that it found more comfortable. Our attempts to justify “alternate routes” just seemed to increase the church’s resistance. At best, we found ourselves condemned as wanderers, at worst as leading others to destruction. Finally, deeply wounded by the betrayal of a church more interested in old roads than new spiritual discoveries, we left the institution behind and followed the Spirit. In response, the church declared us lost.

Still, “One Way” remains the evangelical traffic sign, and evangelists issue their warning tickets from the gospel of John: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (3:3); “He that honoureth not the Son, honoureth not the Father

which hath sent him” (5:23); “I am the way the truth and the life, no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (14:6). But have the spiritual traffic cops ever *read* this gospel? As far as I can see, the gospel of John takes off in a thousand directions at once. Its road map provides diverse ways to get from here to there.

Like the apostle John, my friends and I live in a world faced with perplexing diversity. Our experiences of God differ significantly from each other’s.

“Propositional faith says Christ cannot be both friend and stranger, male and female, straight and gay. But the gospel of John pushes me toward just such a faith.”

My experience of Christ alone is diverse. I have known Christ as straight, as gay, as man, as woman, as stranger, as friend.

In my adolescence, Christ was a stranger, a sort of distant moral teacher who entered my life from time to time. I found Jesus mysterious and fascinating. I wanted to follow him, especially because of his “theory of non-violence” which seemed particularly relevant in the midst of the Vietnam War. The Christ of political change and nonviolence has stood me in good stead through subsequent years, though I still find Christ strange and a bit obtuse in the political arena, and somewhat hard to identify with the same Christ I now know as a friend.

In my first year of seminary, I began experimenting with prayer, specifically prayer to Jesus. Soon I found myself carrying on conversations that were not always one-sided. I began to

trust Christ’s companionship in times when I felt no other source of support. Today I find myself conversing with Christ as a matter of course—while riding the subway or working at my job.

As a gay man, I have found the encounter with Christ as lover to be fundamental to my religious experience. Jesus is my most intimate companion, skin- and spirit-close as only a lover can be. Sometimes, in certain crises, only his arms wrapped around me keep me from falling

apart. I talk to him, yell at him, berate him, thank him, listen to him, feel his spirit breathing upon me, wrap myself in his embrace.

In my dreams I have also met Christ as a woman. She has danced before me and beckoned me toward the earth and its abundance. I have followed her, fascinated, hoping to discover the secrets she holds in her hand. And I have received through her kisses of wisdom I cannot verbalize.

But I have also known Christ as a straight man—indeed, I knew him that way for the first twenty-five years of my life. I distanced myself from that incarnation over the years. Western civilization’s idolatrous equation of God with the straight Caucasian male eclipsed any authenticity I could find in such an embodiment. But in my church, through straight men

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John Linscheid is a writer, speaker, and an activist in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. He and his partner Ken M. White together explore the art of creating nurturing space for queer and progressive individuals on a journey toward liberation of the world, the flesh, and the spirit. For more on John Linscheid, visit “Outspoken links” at www.bmclgbt.org.

WELCOME TO OUTSPOKEN

BMC premiers new publication

For many years, *Dialogue* was an important BMC publication, designed to help the church in its understanding of lgbt people and the variety of experiences that encompass their lives. The publication not only aided the church, but also many lgbt people who discovered the story of their lives for the first time in *Dialogue's* articles and stories that talked about what it was like to be gay or lesbian as well as a Mennonite or Brethren individual.

The word "dialogue" generally refers to a conversation or an exchange of ideas between two or more people. There is a sense of mutuality and a shared vulnerability that is inherent in the concept. BMC chose this title in part as a response to the church's often stated call for "continued dialogue about homosexuality" in its various position statements. It is rather glaringly apparent that BMC has taken the church's statements about dialogue much more seriously than has the church, for the vulnerability and risk has overwhelmingly been on the part of lgbt people.

This disparity was understandable in the early years when lgbt people were mostly invisible within the church. In earlier times,

gay people usually left their more rural Brethren and Mennonite communities and moved to urban areas where they could be more safely themselves and spare their families from the hostility and rejection of their faith communities. The church could easily pretend that gay people did not exist.

But times have changed. Today over 97% of surveyed high school youth who are church associated claim to know at least one lgbt person. Books on lgbt history, culture, and interests are found in almost every community library or bookstore. Colleges regularly offer courses in gay/lesbian theory, and gay characters frequently appear in movies, on television, and in works of both fiction and nonfiction. Most professionals, particularly those in the helping professions, have likely participated in some sort of continuing education experience addressing the needs of lgbt students, coworkers, clients, or patients.

As BMC grows and matures, we find ourselves less interested in the one-way dialogue we have been having with a silent partner and more interested in speaking our truth from a place of power and love. We envision a more wholistic publication in

which addressing the needs of the church and promoting understanding is just one facet of our work.

The name of this new publication, *Outspoken*, indicates a shift from apologetics to a confident expression about who we are and what we are thinking as a multi-dimensional and diverse community. In these pages you will continue to find the theological reflection that characterized *Dialogue*. You will also be invited to celebrate the achievements and news of the BMC community that were once relegated to our lgbt-only publication *Connections*.

BMC welcomes Randall Friesen as its editor. From the Mennonite Brethren tradition, Randall brings an impressive toolbox of publishing experience and knowledge, and we are excited about his work with us. We are also delighted to welcome Jay Theissen as the community news editor. Jay has been involved with BMC for many years and has an appreciation and understanding of the BMC community that is truly unique and will enrich our publication.

Welcome to *Outspoken*! I think you are going to like what you see and hear.

Toronto Conference Opportunities

Together in Toronto is soliciting workshop proposals that will: encompass the diversity reflected in the vision statement; include leadership from two or more of the sponsoring denominational groups; display creativity; use varied modes of presentation; touch on different aspects of who we are in secular and church spheres, nationally and internationally, in the personal, political, physical, and spiritual. Surprise us!

To lead a workshop, please download the workshop proposal document from www.openspirit.ca and submit it to the conference planning committee by April 10, 2006.

As a part of *Together in Toronto's* mission and goals, members from a number of groups are invited to give themselves a voice through various forums. Whether you are a young adult grappling with issues of an emerging gay identity, a bisexual dealing with issues of acceptance, a participant from outside North America, a parent of a lgbt person, transgender with few opportunities to speak openly, or just someone with a diverse point of view interested in discussing any your issues in a forum, please consider signing up for an Open Spirit Forum when registering for *Together in Toronto*, or contact register@openspirit.ca.



The 2005 BMC Men's Retreat was held on the beautiful fall weekend of November 18-20, 2005, at the Claymont Center near scenic Charles Town, West Virginia. The weekend consisted of hiking, wine-tasting, great food, campfires, and fellowship with our BMC brothers. Standing: (l to r) Fenton Fox, Chris Chang, David Bachman, Michael Good, Keith Schrag, Jonathan Miller, Keith Collins; seated: Christian Yoder; back row: Don Horn.

New Affirming Communities

The Supportive Communities Network (SCN), a program of BMC, is an affiliation of congregations and other church-related communities who offer a public welcome of affirmation to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. The “Publicly Affirming” designation indicates a commitment on the part of the community to lgbt justice and signals a “safe place” for lgbt people and allies. BMC welcomes the following new publicly affirming SCN Communities:

The Group (That Meets at Palmyra Church of the Brethren) in Palmyra, Pennsylvania, is an ecumenical group that offers social and spiritual support to lgbt persons, their families and friends and reaches out to the community as advocates for justice. *The Group* has been meeting for five years and is an important source of support and education for individuals in the Lebanon Valley.

The Mennonite House Church of St. John's, Newfoundland is a growing group of Mennonite individuals who have organized to share together in worship, community events, and social justice activities. They are the fourth SCN community in Canada and the furthest east of any on the map.

The Fellowship in Christ Church of the Brethren in Fremont, California, is also stepping forward as a publicly affirming congregation. This very supportive congregation has a history of peacemaking ministries.

Assembly Mennonite Church Inclusion Team of Goshen, Indiana, is a group of Assembly

members/participants who have been encouraging dialogue and welcome for lgbt people for many years. The Inclusion Team provides “graced safe places” for anyone who may need support, understanding, or just a listening ear.

Goshen Area Connecting Families of Goshen, Indiana, offers a “safe and welcoming space for families with members who are among the sexual minorities and for supportive friends.” The group shares a strong desire to see the Mennonite Church USA and its congregations become more welcoming to all.

Common Spirit Church of the Brethren of Minneapolis, Minnesota, is a new church project that has been meeting for approximately two years. The group “seeks to empower each other to live lives that reflect the love, justice, service and commitment to peace that Jesus taught” and includes within its core values a commitment to welcome, non-violence, and challenging systems of oppression.

Evanston Mennonite Church of Evanston, Illinois, is a congregation whose public affirmation of lgbt people is but a further expression of their deep commitment to peace, justice, and a radical hospitality.

We welcome these courageous, compassionate, and life affirming communities. Further information about them, plus contact addresses, can be found at www.bmclgbt.org. If you are interested in helping your congregation or community to join this spirit-led movement, please contact Carol Wise at (612) 343-2060 or exdir@bmclgbt.org.

EDITOR

A Place of Power

Randall Friesen

When Executive Director Carol Wise and board member Rodney Harder asked me to evaluate the publications of BMC last year, I had no idea I would be pulled back to my Mennonite Brethren roots so vigorously. Reading through back issues of *Dialogue* and *Connections*, I unearthed a new, comprehensive history of myself, an integrated history in which the person I am blended harmoniously with the culture and denomination of my blood. I knew this resonance was not exclusive to me and that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Brethren and Mennonite people have experienced this same sense of integration through these pages for years.

Responding to this integration BMC so gainfully cultivates, the board decided it was a natural progression to merge the two BMC publications, *Dialogue* (mailed to the general readership) and *Connections* (for lgbt readers), into one unified periodical. They imagined a newsletter which explored the ideas, both theological and cultural, of the lgbt experience as lived by Brethren and Mennonite people, while at the same time continuing to cultivate community amongst its members. It was also important that the newsletter be accessible to lgbt supporters and allies as well as the gay and lesbian readers. The result is *Outspoken*, a new, brave voice built to propel the vision and goals of this vital organization.

A publication is the face of its organization to the world. This is a humbling thought and an immense responsibility. Through the instigation of Rodney Harder, the leadership of Carol Wise, and the support of the board and its readers, *Outspoken* has the unique opportunity to place the ideas and vision of BMC into the hands of people who would otherwise never know that people such as you and I even exist. Speaking from a place of power, *Outspoken* both represents and is represented by we who come from a place of commonality and authority.

With this first issue, as we work out the kinks and search for our stride, we do so with deep respect for our brothers and sisters and a passion for the message and work of Brethren Mennonite Council. Along with Jay Thiessen who covers the community and events subjects in these pages, I look forward to your comments and critiques. Jay and I want to know what you want to see in these pages, how you want to be represented, how we can serve you as you grow with your community and as your own person.

“Since we are to conform to the image of Christ, how can we fight our enemies with the sword?... Spears and swords of iron we leave to those who, alas, consider human blood and swine's blood of well-nigh equal value...”

—Menno Simons 1539



Meet
BMC
Volunteer
Katie
Hochstedler

by Carol Wise

If you have ever called the Office of BMC, you were probably greeted by Katie Hochstedler. What you may not know is that, in addition to answering your calls, Katie coordinates Kaleidoscope, a BMC program that provides services to LGBT youth and young adults, with a particular focus on students at Mennonite and Brethren colleges and universities. Recently Katie established an Alumni Listserve Group to connect students and alumni. We sat down to find out more about Katie and her work with BMC.

BMC: Tell us a little bit about you.

Katie: I grew up on a farm near Kalona, Iowa, in a church-oriented Mennonite family. I went to Iowa Mennonite School for high school and then did a year of Mennonite Central Committee's SALT (Serving and Learning Together Program) in Eastern Cape, South Africa. These experiences, coupled with my social work major at Goshen College, heightened my awareness of social justice issues from a religious perspective. In college, I spent a lot of time going to protests and doing student organizing around peace, justice,

women's and LGBT issues. I like to think I have an NSA file.

What drew you to volunteer for BMC?

I heard about BMC during my second year of college. I enjoyed the activities offered by BMC and noticed the important role that BMC plays not only in the lives of individuals, but also in the larger church as a prophetic voice for change. As I became aware of the disconnect between my strong Mennonite and Anabaptist identity and an institutional church that was not welcoming to me as a queer person, I came to a point where I needed to either shake the institutional dust from my shoes or actively claim my place in the church that made me who I am and with which I identify so strongly. BMC offered a way to do this. Interestingly, the volunteer program which sponsors me here at the BMC office is through the Lutheran Volunteer Corps, partially due to the fact that neither Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS) nor Mennonite Volunteer Service (MVS) would recognize BMC as a service placement. It feels a little strange to have to go

Student and Alumni Listserve

BMC's Kaleidoscope Program announces the creation of college and university student and alumni listserve groups for Mennonite and Brethren colleges, universities, and seminaries. LGBT and supportive students, faculty, staff, administration, and alumni are welcome to join these Yahoo groups to connect with others related to these colleges. For example, alumni can use listserve groups to meet up with others at homecomings or reunions, and students can use the groups for networking and advocacy issues.

The stated purposes of the groups are:

A. Increase the visibility of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender alumni, faculty, staff, and students.

B. Improve the LGBT student experience by connecting with alumni and creating professional and social network opportunities.

C. Communicate events of interest to the LGBT community and supporters.

D. Provide opportunities to share information and resources to encourage advocacy on behalf of LGBT alumni and students.

E. Increase support of LGBT interests on campus, support the activities of LGBT campus groups and their allies, and help effect positive change in campus policy and programming.

To join your college's Kaleidoscope Alumni listserve, go to "Outspoken links" at www.bmcglbt.org and click on Kaleidoscope Student and Alumni Groups. The following organizations are currently participating:

Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Bethany Theological Seminary, Bethel College, Bluffton College, Bridgewater College, Canadian Mennonite University, Conrad Grebel University College, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Eastern Mennonite University, Elizabethtown College, Goshen College, Hesston College, Juniata College, Manchester College, McPherson College, and University of La Verne.

through a Lutheran organization to be able to serve Brethren and Mennonites. My volunteer term is only for one year and ends this summer.

What are some things that you are working on at BMC?

Besides the usual challenges of developing resources, networking, keeping in touch with college students, and general office tasks, I have been focusing on three major projects. The first

is updating and expanding our Safe Zone Trainings. These trainings help non-gay people better understand what it is like to be LGBT in a heterosexist society and explore ways that they can be supportive and welcoming. In April, I will be going to Kansas to lead safe zone trainings at McPherson College and Bethel College.

I also set up the Kaleidoscope Alumni Listserve Groups for each of the

Mennonite and Church of the Brethren colleges, universities, and seminaries in the U.S. and Canada. These offer a place for students, alumni, faculty, and staff to connect with each other for organizing, networking, support, and advocacy. There are over fifty people already connected through these lists, and I hope that number continues to grow.

Finally, I have been dealing with the Spring Retreat/Queer Camp fiascos. Before I started, Camp Friedenswald made a decision to stop renting space to BMC primarily because they were offended by our use of "queer" to describe our spring retreat. During my tenure, Camp Alexander Mack also denied us space, also citing concern about the "queer" designation. I am pleased to announce that Assembly Mennonite Church is

They have to figure out who they are on their own, and this can be really difficult. Then they have to figure out how and whether they are going to relate to the church and how much they are going to open themselves up to the possibility of judgment and rejection.

What are you hopeful about?

It is becoming obvious that younger people have very progressive attitudes towards queer people. Most young people know at least one queer person, and there is an openness and interest that was not present in past generations. While we have a long way to go, the direction seems positive. Straight people are going to continue having gay children who are going to come out younger and younger in the church. The church is going to

"The church is going to have to change or risk losing any credibility that it might have."

willing to host Spring Retreat/Queer Camp in their facility, and we are looking forward to gathering on March 10 and 11 in that space.

What do you see as some of the challenges that remain for Mennonite and Brethren lgbt youth?

Because the church is so uncomfortable talking about sexuality in general and lgbt issues in particular, youth who are gay have neither mentors nor a church community that really welcomes and affirms them.

have to change or risk losing any credibility that it might have in terms of its understanding of human sexuality.

Rumor has it that you are a great cook. Is this true?

I really enjoy cooking and people claim to enjoy what I make. I did have a cooking column in the *Goshen College Record* called "Mama Ho's Kitchen." Someday I would really like to start my own restaurant using produce and meat that I either raise myself or is locally grown.

Applications are now being accepted for the Kaleidoscope Coordinator Position at BMC. This is a volunteer position with responsibilities including coordinating support and advocacy outreach to Mennonite and Brethren lgbt youth and young adults, empowering lgbt organizing on college campuses, developing program and resources for youth and young adults, and assisting with general office work. This offers a wonderful opportunity to travel, promote justice, and make a difference in the world. Room and board, a monthly stipend, and health insurance are provided. The position will be available in August 2006. Contact Carol Wise at exdir@bmcglt.org

BMC Happenings

BMC Board President **Zandra Wagoner** was recently awarded a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from the Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California. Zandra's dissertation, *Unlikely Partners: Feminist Theology and Feminist Theory*, explores the value of bringing feminist theology and feminist theory into mutual conversation. Zandra is also the General Education Program Director at the University of La Verne in California.

BMC Board member **Will Burnfield** and his partner, **Harry Wiebe**, recently welcomed a new son, Jotham, into their family. Jotham joins his big brothers Piers and Evan. The family lives in Toronto.

The BMC board welcomes two new members to its ranks:

Glenn Kauffman, from Harrisonburg, Virginia, is a member at Park View Mennonite Church. He taught in the Chemistry Department at Eastern Mennonite University for thirty-eight years until his retirement in 2003. Glenn is also a poet, musician, and philosopher of science and religion and will be serving as the new BMC Treasurer.

Ralph McFadden has served the Church of the Brethren in several capacities, including a long tenure as the Parish Ministries Executive for the Church of the Brethren General Board. More recently, Ralph served as the Shared Services Coordinator for the Association of Brethren Caregivers (ABC), working primarily with church related retirement communities. A trained chaplain, Ralph also has extensive experience with hospice and HIV/AIDS ministries. Ralph is a member of the Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren and lives in Elgin with his partner, Keo.

Outspoken would like to hear what's happening with you or other BMCers. Please email us about significant events in your life, such as weddings/commitment ceremonies, graduations, promotions, births, deaths, awards/recognition, etc. Email your "happenings" to editor@bmcglt.org. If you have a photo of yourself, we'd like to see that, too!

Get Married in Toronto

The *Together in Toronto* conference takes place in Canada, a country which permits same-sex marriage. If you would like to celebrate your marriage during *Together in Toronto: Claiming an Open Spirit* conference, a wedding coordinator will be available to match couples with a pastor in their geographical area who will support and guide each couple in the decision to get married while at the conference. For more information on getting married at *Together in Toronto*, contact weddings@openspirit.ca.

Confronting Compassion

W. S. Coffin

It's easy to forget how frequently compassion demands confrontation.

Confrontation is necessary to shake up the complacent, the "good people" who are indeed "good" but within the limits of their inherited prejudices and traditions. Someone has to play Hamlet to their Horatio ("There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."). Someone has to recall to them Jeremiah ("Woe to those who say 'peace, peace' where there is no peace.") and Jesus, too ("I came not to bring peace but a sword."). Surely, he was referring to the sword of truth, the only sword that heals the wounds it inflicts.

Now comes the really hard part, the part only gays and lesbians can play. The feminist movement in Norway has a slogan: "Not to do to them what they did to us." In other words, if you are gay and people are screaming at you that you are a moral pervert, can you so speak and act as to rob their position of any moral cogency?

Gandhi and Martin Luther King have shown that it is the temper and spirit with which a movement conducts itself rather than a particular action that makes the greatest difference. Divested of moral pretensions, a prejudiced person becomes as Samson with his locks shorn. Nonviolence does not mean turning yourself into a doormat so that people can walk all over you. It *does* mean returning evil with good, with nonviolence, and hatred with a love that is obliged to increase upon pain of diminishing.

Because all this he understood so profoundly, King, the great agitator of the '60s, won the Nobel Peace Prize, and most of America now celebrates a national holiday in his honor. Because they too, in Christlike fashion, returned evil with good, both Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer have statues in their honor in the center of the very city where they were banned and hanged.

The good tidings are that we live in a moral universe. "God is not mocked." The former foreign minister of Israel, Abba Eban, once remarked, "Human beings really do the right thing, but only after exhausting all alternatives."

Excerpted from "The Heart is a Little to the Left," 1999.



Kelly Lerner (far right) and her local work crew in rural northeast China.

Habitat Award Honors BMCer Kelly Lerner

BMC member Kelly Lerner, of One World Design Architecture, recently returned from Jakarta, Indonesia, where she was awarded the 2005 World Habitat Award at the United Nations World Habitat Day Celebration. This award, (one of two given each year), was presented in recognition of her work on the Straw-Bale Energy Efficient Housing Project that provides sustainable, seismically resistant housing to rural areas of cold north-eastern China.

Over the past seven years, Ms. Lerner has worked with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) introducing straw-bale construction technology in China. The project has built over 600 straw-bale houses and three straw-bale schools. Walls built from straw bales require 68% less heating coal than the standard brick houses, thereby improving living conditions through reduced fuel costs, carbon dioxide emissions, and air pollution.

In addition to her international development work, Kelly Lerner has a private practice in Spokane, Washington, and designs sustainable, ecologically friendly housing throughout the Pacific Northwest. Originally from the Midwest, she started her career in architecture while living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Raised Mennonite by her Brethren mother, Kelly attended Goshen College. She cites her Brethren and Mennonite background as playing a key role in her commitment to the local, regional, national, and international communities. Recently named one of the top ten eco-architects for 2005 by *Natural Home and Garden* magazine, her soon to be completed book, *Natural Remodeling for the Not-So-Green House: Bringing Your Home into Harmony with Nature*, co-authored by Carol Venolia, will be released by Lark Books in June 2006.

Outspoken Links

To read more about many of the articles found in this edition of *Outspoken*, visit "Outspoken links" at www.bmclgbt.org.

The Biology of Support

Paul Hawkins

Just as most life forms on earth require three essential elements—air, water, and nutrition—BMC also requires three essential elements in order to remain healthy and viable—prayer, financial support, and nurturance.

As the human brain requires oxygen, BMC requires constant prayer support for guidance, wisdom, and strength.

In the same way the human body necessitates constant hydration, BMC needs consistent support through financial contributions. Without this support, BMC suffers in its ability to fund programming that affects individuals as well as congregations and churches across the U.S. and Canada.

Finally, just as the body requires a balanced combination of nutrition from the five basic food groups, so does an organization like BMC need a balanced combination of the following: mission and vision; programming; communication; active participation; and members and supporters.

The BMC mission and vision is to form community and build alliances, to nurture the spirituality of Brethren and Mennonite lgbt people and its allies, and to advocate for justice as a prophetic witness within its denominations.

BMC programming comprises the provision of resources, retreats, Supportive Communities Network, con-

ferences, denominational activities, and personal support with a fiscal operating budget of nearly \$146,000.

BMC communication vehicles include the online NewsNet, the newsletter *Outspoken*, and www.bmc.lgbt.org. Additionally BMC members themselves are vehicles of communication when they share with individuals, churches, and other organizations the effects of BMC in their lives and the lives of those who are touched.

Participation opportunities in BMC include involvement in the BMC listserv, area groups, regional gatherings, or bi-annual conferences. Other prospects include serving on the board of directors, submitting articles to BMC publications, organizing for change within congregations, and bearing witness to the importance of lgbt justice within the

church and society.

The most important element for growth lies in the organization's members and supporters. The gifts of prayer, wisdom, financial contributions, and personal involvement enable BMC to thrive as an organization that offers life and hope to lgbt people, their allies, friends, and the church.

Please consider all the ways you can further the mission and vision of BMC—engage in BMC programming, share and promote BMC communications, participate locally, regionally or help increase the number of BMC members and supporters. Keep BMC in your prayers, and regularly contribute to its financial support. To learn more about helping support BMC, contact Paul Hawkins, BMC Development Coordinator, at (260) 341-6387 or pwhawkins@bmc.lgbt.org.

Small Groups Gather

Historically, a cornerstone of the Brethren and Mennonite traditions is fellowship—getting together with those who share your culture and your outlook on life. With BMCers scattered across Canada and America, there exist ample opportunities to meet together with like-minded people, either in your geographical area or when travelling to other regions.

BMC local groups and networks hold informal meetings for fellowship, potlucks, business, or worship. Some meet regularly, others sporadically, but all provide excellent opportunities to strengthen friendships and build strong social circles.

In many locales, BMC has a volunteer who has agreed to be accessible as the contact person for that region. Whether you live in that area or are travelling to it, you can contact this person for information on local BMC activities. Some groups have created websites or Yahoo groups for their own local area. All this information can be found by visiting www.bmc.lgbt.org and clicking on the “Local Groups” link. If you do not have internet access, you can call the BMC office at 612-343-2060, and someone there will connect you with the BMC group in that area.

Connecting Families

In cooperation with BMC, Connecting Families will hold its Connecting Families Weekend this year at Antiochian Village in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. *Beyond Fear* will take place April 21-23.

Special guests for the weekend include educator, counselor, and minister Walter Friesen, and Cindy Lapp, a pastor at Hyattsville Mennonite Church, a congregation that has recently faced disciplinary action for its welcome to lgbt people.

Connecting Families welcomes families, friends, and supporters of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, as well as lgbt persons themselves. *Beyond Fear* is intended as a safe, relaxing time to share common concerns regarding sexual minority issues as they affect family, friends, churches, and each other.

For information on Connecting Families Weekend, visit “*Outspoken* links” at bmc@bmc.lgbt.org.



(“Pronouns” from page 1)
participate in workshops on lesbian and gay issues because I feared being seen and identified. I thereby cut myself off from a community of support and nurture that I very much needed.

► Occasionally, in sermons, I alluded to justice issues for gay and lesbian people—allusions that were mostly illustrative and quickly passed over as items in a series of other violations of human dignity. I was careful not to speak about lesbian and gay persons as “them” (thereby completely distancing myself), and yet I could not, would not, talk about “us” or “me.”

In the summer of 1982, I responded to a short article in *Sojourners* magazine, expressing my dismay at the position taken with regard to lesbians and gay men. Speaking of my concern for lesbian and gay “friends,” I did not have the courage to speak in the first person.

When the July 1985 issue of *Sojourners* arrived, I was outraged and offended by a feature article on sexuality, in which the author suggested that lesbians and gay men within the Christian community have only two “moral” options: to change their sexual orientation or to embrace celibacy. The author had not only impugned my integrity as a Christian who joyfully affirms her sexual orientation but had presumed to call my partnership

with a woman “sinful.” I wanted to respond to this article and express my shock and outrage. I couldn’t bear to write once again in the third person about “lesbians I’ve known.” Yet I wasn’t ready to write in the first person, letting the people at *Sojourners* know that the author had been speaking about *me*.

I had to face the fact that I had lost my voice. I could no longer write or speak with integrity without saying “I” or “we.” I had alienated myself from my people. I was filled with confusion and shame.

In retrospect, the convergence of these different events proved to be a decisive turning point. I came to understand that I was experiencing a crisis of pronouns, unable to speak and write in the first person. Pronouns are the most telling words in a person’s vocabulary: we can distance ourselves by speaking of “them,” or we can express identification and solidarity by saying “we.”

The most significant decisions often come down to a choice of pronouns. Faith is a personal call, addressed to us by name. We can’t answer that call without the pronoun *I*: “Here am *I*.” For years, I tried to avoid using pronouns—until I realized that without them we can’t tell our own stories or speak in our own voices.

After I returned to the

United States, I decided that before I entered into a new round of job interviews, I needed to find my own voice. And that required a long, hard look at the price that fear had exacted from me. I went into retreat for a year of solitude and reflection, taking with me the writing of women such as Barbara Deming, Carter Heyward, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde. I tried to identify and name the messages and the threats that fear so long had whispered in my ear.

people will label you and write you off. They will know you as the “lesbian minister.” (Why aren’t others identified as “heterosexual ministers”?)

Don’t talk about it, because you’ll be seen as a single-issue person. You’ll lose your authority to talk about other important matters.

Don’t talk about it, because you won’t be able to work in the church. Even members of a congregation who presume that you are lesbian may not mind as long

“I can’t say what the Christian faith means to me without revealing my life context of oppression and liberation.”

I discovered that fear’s fundamental message to me was: “Whatever you do, Melanie, *Don’t talk about it*. Don’t talk about the fact that you are lesbian.” This warning was spoken by friends who genuinely believed they were looking out for my wellbeing. I often repeated it to myself. In a heterosexist society, the worst offense a lesbian or gay person can commit is to be “self-avowed” and proud. Talking openly is seen as disruptive, flaunting, distracting, and indelicate. The “don’t talk about it” messages take many forms:

Don’t talk about it, because it will cause you to lose your credibility.

Don’t talk about it, because

as you don’t “flaunt” it by talking about it.

Don’t talk about it, because it’s no one else’s business anyway. It’s a private matter, a bedroom issue. Heterosexual people don’t feel it necessary to talk about their private lives in job interviews.

To counter these messages, I had to learn to speak in my own voice. I’m still learning, but I’ve begun to talk back.

Even if I were to lose all credibility and not be allowed to address any other matter, is anything more important than this? This is *my* oppression, and it has everything to do with other forms of oppression.

If I’m seen by others as a sin-

(Continued on next page)

Willamette Valley Brethren Mennonite Council for Gay and Lesbian Concerns presents “Healing the Wounds, Empowering Hope,” featuring Roberta and Harold Kreider. It will be held April 1, 2006 at 7 pm at Peace Church of the Brethren, located at 12727 SE Market Street in Portland, Oregon.

Roberta Kreider (see page 12) is the author of several books: *Wounded Hearts: Faith Stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People and Those Who Love Them*; *Together in Love: Faith Stories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Couples*; and *The Cost of Truth*. Roberta and Harold are both octogenarians and live in rural Pennsylvania. Every one is welcome.

Writers Wanted!

Outspoken is looking for writers. Upcoming issues will feature articles of interest to the lgbt Brethren and Mennonite community and its supporters as they relate to current events, theology, and lifestyle issues. We’re interested in the following types of articles:

First-person articles or “think pieces” on lgbt and Brethren and Mennonite issues; Theological/philosophical articles exploring issues of the lgbt Brethren and Mennonite community as relates to biblical/spiritual issues; Opinion pieces, humorous articles, or other types of feature you feel might be appropriate for *Outspoken* are welcome.

Please contact editor Randall Friesen at editor@bmclgbt.org.

(Continued from previous page)

gle-issue person, the problem lies in their perception. I know that I'm not a single-issue person.

To speak openly about who I am and the person I love is not flaunting. Heterosexual people talk freely about who they went out with last weekend and who they find attractive. They wear wedding rings and proudly show pictures of their spouses. They embrace and hold hands in public places. If my partner and I do any of these things, people look askance and ask: "Maybe they can't help who they are, but why do they have to flaunt it?"

To say that I am a lesbian isn't a purely private matter. It isn't a bedroom issue. To say that I am a lesbian sets me free to build community and express solidarity with sisters and brothers, reaching out to individuals and families who live isolated

lives for fear that sharing their secret will bring reproach and rejection. To say that I am a lesbian is to join with others to work against our oppression and to say clearly that I believe in the gospel which liberates us from fear. It involves recognizing and using the gifts I have to offer others and the church not in spite of, but by virtue of, being a lesbian in this society.

During that year of solitude, wrestling with the demon of fear, I realized that I had to come out to any future search committee. For I can't tell my story and account for my life choices without saying that I am a lesbian. I can't explain why I live here rather than there, why I'm doing the work I am doing, and why I love the person I love without talking about my sexual orientation. I can't say what the Christian faith means to me, who Jesus and God are for me,

and what the scriptural stories say to me, without revealing my life context of oppression and liberation as a lesbian.

Since I decided to remain silent no longer, some doors have closed but others have opened. Because I've risked visibility, other people have felt free to share their stories with me. We can now support and hold up hope to one another. Each time I see human beings turn from self-hatred and fear toward the conviction that they, too, as lesbian or gay persons, are beloved children of God, I witness grace at work. I've been blessed with the love of friends, family, and strangers who accept me as I am. I've found wonderfully diverse communities of lesbian sisters and gay brothers.

The costs of coming out are real. Each of us must weigh these costs and roll away the stone of secrecy only when she

or he is ready. I can only testify that the freedom I now know far outweighs the costs. When I am able to act on the conviction that not rejection, hatred, rupture of friendships, loss of a job, or threatened violence can separate me from the love of God, I know once again that resurrection is real.

Melanie Morrison is director of The Leaven Center, a retreat and study center in Michigan, USA. She is also an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. Leaven's mission is to nurture the relationship between spirituality and social justice. "A Crisis of Pronouns" is reprinted with permission from The Grace of Coming Home: Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Struggle for Justice, published by The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 1995. To learn more about The Leaven Center and its programming, visit www.leaven.org.

("Express Train" from page 3)

who are exploring their own authentic spirituality, I am coming to appreciate the sometimes-straight image of God. And I am rediscovering Christ as a straight man in ways still too foggy to articulate.

Propositional faith says Christ cannot be both friend and stranger, male and female, straight and gay. But the gospel of John pushes me toward just such a faith. In it, Jesus celebrates friendship, yet remains in some respects inaccessible to the disciples (15:15; 16:29-32). Jesus is Son and one with the Father (10:30), at the same time being the Word, the incarnation of feminine Holy Wisdom (1:1-18). The gospel affirms a bodily closeness and companionship as one of the identifying features of Jesus' relationship with the disciple "whom he loved" (John 13:23-25). It affirms a sensuous relationship to women as well

(12:1-8). Christ is found in the midst of Samaritans and in the midst of Jews (4:39-42; 11:45). The Christ of John's gospel is even more diverse than the Christ of my limited experience.

No wonder that love becomes the theme of this gospel's faithfulness. Love is a term of relationship. It embraces rather than excludes. It grows and changes with each new encounter.

Yet as it takes off in a thousand directions, this gospel claims a peculiar unity. Though Christ's followers meet Christ in diverse locations and on myriad paths, they recognize a shared experience. They glimpse, in holy moments, a commonality breaking through barriers. They realize that, though God comes to them in many ways, fundamentally their God is love. And love creates bonds of fellowship in the most unlikely circumstances.

The other day I stood on the platform waiting for the train. Across the tracks, a subway preacher waved his Bible, proclaiming, "No one cometh to the Father..." Suddenly from the other side of the platform, I heard a woman's voice declaring that we were all "on an express train to hell, sinner!" As they neared each other, raising their voices against one another in their bid for an audience, they looked at each other and chuckled. The laughter spread lightly through the crowd, perhaps the only moment of shared

spirituality that I will ever experience with all those diverse people heading toward a thousand tasks. For one instant we shared an ironic moment of truth. And the laughter became an express train to heaven.

This article was first published in The Other Side magazine. The full-length version of this article can be found on "Outspoken links" at www.bmcgbt.org.

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Women's Retreat

The Connecting, Outreach, Resources, and Education (CORE) Committee of the BMC board is responsible for organizing retreats and conventions. The Women's Retreat, a retreat for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women is held every other year. CORE would like input on where to hold the retreat this year. If you have a suggestion, email the BMC office at bmc@bmcgbt.org.

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Upcoming Events

March 10-11 Spring Retreat/Queer Camp Assembly Mennonite Church Goshen, Indiana	July 5-9, 2006 Mennonite Church Canada Annual Assembly Edmonton, Alberta
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April 1, 2006 Oregon BMC Event Peace Church of the Brethren Portland, Oregon	July 27-30, 2006 Together In Toronto Conference University of Toronto Toronto, Ontario
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April 21-23, 2006 Connecting Families Weekend Antiochian Village Ligonier, Pennsylvania	For additional information about these events, please contact BMC at Brethren Mennonite Council PO Box 6300 Minneapolis, MN 55406
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July 1-5, 2006 Church of the Brethren Annual Conference Des Moines, Iowa	612-343-2060 bmc@bmcglt.org www.bmcglt.org
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If your church or small group has an event coming up that would be of interest to the BMC lgbt community, or if you would like to advertise in Outspoken, please email editor@bmcglt.org. Check "Outspoken links" at bmcglt.org for publishing schedule and guidelines.

Reason Number 8 of:

Fifteen Reasons Why I Have Changed My Mind

Roberta Showalter Kreider

8. Testimony of parents of gays and lesbians.

I never before realized how many children of this sexual orientation are born to families who are highly regarded as sound "Biblical" families in our Mennonite Churches. These sons and daughters are neither rebelling against God, their families, or the church. I have been much impressed by the quality of relationships among these family members. Most of the parents we know are very supportive of their children. My husband and I attended a BMC Connecting Families Weekend recently. This is a group of families from Brethren and Mennonite Churches (a few were present from other denominations) who meet together once a year to learn from and support one another. One couple we met had been members of a Mennonite Church, but when their lesbian daughter was not accepted, they supported her by going to a denomination that would welcome them all. How sad that such gifted persons needed to find fellowship elsewhere! I had the privilege of sitting in with a small group of mothers who have lesbian daughters. Each mother shared the gift that her daughter has been to her. The relationships expressed were, without exception, very loving and warm.

From "Fifteen Reasons Why I Have Changed My Mind" by Roberta Showalter Kreider (copyright©May 1995). For all 15 reasons, go to "Outspoken links" at www.bmcglt.org.