

Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the  
Mennonite Church USA

By

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## Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the movement for LGBTQ inclusion within the Mennonite Church USA, a Christian denomination of just under 100,000 members. Mennonites are part of a nearly five century Christian tradition known as Anabaptism, known for an ethic of nonviolence. Yet Mennonite communities and institutions have been and continue to be sites of intense patriarchal and gendered interpersonal violence. While LGBTQ Mennonites and their supporters have been engaged in visible advocacy and grassroots organizing for the past forty years, they continue to struggle for recognition and acceptance within a denomination that mirrors many other U.S. Christian groups in its sharp divisions over sexual politics. Mennonites' polity tends towards congregational rather than hierarchical arrangements, and church policies are determined and debated at congregational, regional, and national levels through processes known as "discernment." Discernment is seen as a peaceful approach to settling communal conflict. However, LGBTQ Mennonites often experience such processes as abusive and violent. Thus Mennonite conflicts over LGBTQ inclusion are also struggles over how violence should be defined. This study draws on interviews, oral histories, ethnographic fieldwork, and archival evidence from the past four decades, arguing that LGBTQ Mennonites and their allies have played an integral role in subverting and revealing the hidden abuses of power enabled by Mennonite communal discourses. It brings together a feminist and queer theory-based analysis of discursive violence with a critique of de-historicized multiculturalism in institutional life.

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## Introduction

*Before any progressive or resistant reimagination of community will be efficacious, we need to account for the relentless return of the dominant discourse and practice of community. What is the motor driving this discourse ever onward, despite our best efforts to shift it?*

—Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*<sup>1</sup>

*Many Mennonites spend a lifetime*

- a) *in service to others*
- b) *working for the church*
- c) *getting over the fact that they're Mennonite*

—Craig Haas and Steve Nolt, *The Mennonite Starter Kit: A Handy Guide for the New Mennonite*<sup>2</sup>

In 2009, the year I began a PhD program with the intent of writing about U.S. Mennonites, the Mennonite Church USA was a denomination of 110,000 people. Today, as I write in early 2015, that number is down to approximately 97,000. Reviewing these numbers has served to remind me of a spark of realization that I had in 2007, the year I first began to consider getting a doctorate, before I even knew that American Studies was the field in which I would find an intellectual home. What I realized was that I wanted to write about the ways that Mennonites talked about their own collective survival.

At the time that I had this realization, I was in the throes of various attempts to work out in writing why Mennonites felt so inescapable to me. Furthermore, I wanted to understand why that inescapability seemed to manifest as an agonized longing to *say something*, to have a voice in making meaning out of Mennonite experiences, even though I had ostensibly departed from the Mennonite church and Mennonite institutions that shaped my childhood and early adulthood.

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<sup>1</sup> Miranda Joseph, *Against The Romance Of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxxi.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Haas and Steve Nolt, *The Mennonite Starter Kit* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1993).

Once, in the outline of an essay, I scrawled, *What I'm really trying to say: Get over it, Mennonites. You're not special.*

It was an ironic statement, given that my fixation with Mennonites as subject matter was tied closely to that very sense of cultivated otherness that I wanted to critique. I grew up in south central Kansas, one of a handful of locations in North America in which Mennonites were numerous and culturally prominent enough to be called an enclave. During my childhood in the 1980s, when progressive, white, baby-boomer Mennonites like my parents were complaining about Ronald Reagan, worrying about the arms race, sending relief missions to Central America, and sponsoring Vietnamese refugees through their churches, I learned to think of Mennonites as categorically different from the other people I knew, more peaceful, more just, less consumed with, well, *consuming*. It was an easy illusion to sustain in that small-town, working-class Midwestern setting, where the excesses that my parents most despised about the conservative, white, U.S. culture in the eighties and nineties—materialism, militarism, disdain for the poor and marginalized—felt as though they went overwhelmingly unquestioned by everyone but the people I went to church with.

In addition, the Mennonite adults I knew were vocally concerned about the rise of the Christian right, not only its electoral politics, but also its preoccupation with individual salvation narratives and eschatology over compassionate communal ethics. They worried particularly about the right's influence over Mennonites. Throughout my childhood, the judgment I heard most commonly of other Mennonites was that they were drifting towards the culture of televangelism, fire-and-brimstone preachers, and obsessions with abortion and homosexuals. This was not to say that abortion and

homosexuality were particularly acceptable even to more liberal-leaning Mennonites, but rather that they viewed fixation on these subjects by religious conservatives as excessively judgmental and unreasonable, and felt that Mennonites were more rightly concerned with other things, such as challenging U.S. militarism and serving the poor. For the first eighteen years of my life, the most educated, justice-oriented, and politically liberal people I knew were Mennonites.

While this dissertation deals with history that was happening during my growing-up years—sometimes just down the street from me—I was largely oblivious to it. My understanding of Mennonites as exceptional in matters of justice underwent some challenges when I attended a Mennonite college, however. The seeds of my own disillusionment with Mennonites were sown largely through my college friendships with queer people, whose lives were made more difficult not only by conservative homes and surroundings but also by cautious Mennonite moderates on campus, who feared that too much gay visibility on campus would scare away conservative donors.

At twenty-five, I married my Mennonite boyfriend in the same Mennonite church in which I grew up. It was an act of heteronormative privilege to marry in that church without vocal judgment, and while we knew that on some level, it didn't stop us. If we hadn't married in a Mennonite church, it would have caused our families pain; at the time, this seemed like adequate justification for doing, essentially, what was expected of us. Our pastor gave us the required premarital counseling, but she did so in the apartment we were already sharing, and graciously left out the questions she was supposed to ask us about premarital sex. In actual fact, we were as much in violation of the letter of the Mennonite sexual law as any of our queer Mennonite friends, most of whom had left the

church already or were barely hanging on. But no one seemed to particularly mind. This was in 2001, and nationally speaking, Mennonites were engaged in serious conflict over if and how heterosexual supremacy would be codified into their newly-formed denomination. The focus of the denominational border policing was not on our bodies or our choices. Despite our fairly half-hearted commitments to the church, our straightness allowed us to have the ceremony that seemed natural and inevitable by the dominant standards of our Mennonite families.

As years passed, both my spouse's and my social and professional circles grew progressively queerer, and with that came more critical thought about the role of Mennonite church affiliation in our lives. We were no longer attending church regularly, but somehow I couldn't resist reading denominational publications, despite the rage they incurred in me. The Mennonite Church USA had imposed what was called a "moratorium" on any writing about the "issue" of LGBTQ people in the church within its denominational magazine, *The Mennonite*. But the more I read, the more I came to recognize the established codes for disparaging LGBTQ justice work: admonitions to resist the influence of "the world," or "the culture around us"; suggestions that Mennonite focus on a "shared missional vision" rather than on "divisive issues"; disparaging comments about "secularism." It was a complex hybrid of evangelical theology and the more moderate approaches of Mennonites who had no great problem with LGBTQ people but believed that the church had better things on which to focus.

"Leaving the Mennonite church was like leaving an abusive spouse," a college friend wrote to me during this time, shortly after coming out as transgender. *The Mennonite* never allowed on its pages such frank assessments of what its church was

doing to queer people. It is difficult to pinpoint when, exactly, I decided to be done with Mennonite church attendance, given my strange dabbling in Mennonite publications, but underlying that decision was the nagging contrast between the church represented on those pages and the church that my queer Mennonite friends described.

As it turned out, Mennonites had a narrative to explain the motivations of those of us who stopped attending. I knew its rough shape, but I encountered it explicitly in a book that I read as a primary source for my master's thesis on Mennonite congregational singing.

The deforming influences of secularism have considerably weakened the faith and commitments of many in the church. In a time when people seek direct experience of the spiritual world, some have left their congregations in search of spiritual vitality elsewhere. Others have simply drifted away and succumbed to the lure of materialism and secularism.<sup>3</sup>

Ah, I thought. Okay. That's where they think we've gone.

That was the beginning of my fascination with Mennonites not talking about power.

### **Mennonites, community, and violence**

I do not open with my experience in order to assert it as typical or universal of Mennonites. No such experiences exist. In fact, it's the specificity of my experience that makes it informative, because so much of what follows in this dissertation consists of stories of Mennonites who discover how little they have in common with one another. In

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<sup>3</sup> Marlene Kropf, Kenneth Nafziger, and John Bell, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 104.

terms of social location, theological inheritance, ethnicity, political affiliation, and personal beliefs, Mennonites are far more disparate than many readers might expect from a group of people who exist in popular U.S. imagination primarily as an ethnoreligious sect. Yet most Mennonites hold strongly to the notion of community as a religious ideal, albeit one with perpetually contested definitions.

It is impossible to talk about Mennonite understandings of community without also talking about violence. Nonviolence—which has been called “nonresistance,” “pacifism,” or “nonviolent resistance,” depending on the era and prevailing Mennonite theories of political engagement—is a core theological precept for most Mennonites. The most visible manifestation of this nonviolent theological bent has been Mennonites' refusal to serve in militaries. This and other religious practices such as adult baptism (or “believer's baptism”) have, at various points in history, contributed to making Mennonites targets for state-sponsored, revolutionary, or vigilante violence. Historically, separatism into ethnically bound communities has been the primary Mennonite tactic for avoiding violent engagement with external forces. Thus violence, and the avoidance thereof, has been foundational for Mennonite notions of community.

What separatism as a tactic for violence avoidance neglects, however, is the violence that Mennonites commit against one another. The degree to which Mennonites are able to acknowledge this as a problem is, predictably, dependent on social location. Among those who have named the problem most directly have been advocates for survivors of domestic and sexual violence. For instance, in her introduction to a 1992

book of feminist theological analysis,<sup>4</sup> Mennonite theologian Gayle Gerber Koontz writes, “Historically most Mennonite peace theology and ethics has been questions of and arguments for Christian pacifism in the face of violence that was being justified by others.” Nonviolent ethics, then, developed in response to other Christians who ethics allowed for the justification of war. But domestic and sexual violence were another matter: Koontz argues that Mennonites share with other Christians both the experience of and the silence around such forms of violence, even (and perhaps especially) when the perpetrators are within their own churches. Ruth Krall, a clinician whose work on behalf of sexual violence survivors is well known in Mennonite feminist circles, puts it more starkly: “We do not see that our addiction to, internal tolerance for and denial of sexual harassment, sexual violence and domestic abuse have gutted the living peace witness of our denomination... We do not seem to collectively comprehend that the presence of affinity violations demands individual and communal accountability as the price of healing.”<sup>5</sup>

My college friend’s use of domestic violence as a framework for understanding of his relationship to the Mennonite church as a queer person was not glib or facile. As I learned in the course of researching this dissertation, LGBTQ Mennonites often experience church as violent and abusive. In naming it thus, LGBTQ Mennonites have become part of a subjugated knowledge base within the Mennonite church, made up of

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth G. Yoder, *Peace Theology & Violence Against Women* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Krall, “The Elephants in God's Living Room,” *Volume Four: Bearing the Unbearable; A Collection of Conversational Essays* (Enduring Space: Transforming Cultures of Violence One Person at a Time, One Moment at a Time, 2014), <http://ruthkrall.com/downloadable-books/volume-four-bearing-the-unbearable-a-collection-of-conversational-essays/>.

the experiences and analyses of feminist women, people of color, people with disability, sexual abuse survivors, and others whose life experiences have led them to challenge dominant Mennonite definitions of violence. The title of this dissertation, “Pacifist Battlegrounds,” refers both to the long fight for LGBTQ inclusion in Mennonite churches and to the related ideological struggles among Mennonites over how to define violence, nonviolence, and community.

### **Mennonites and Anabaptism**

The Mennonites I am writing about are not an ethnoreligious sect; they are a U.S. Christian denomination, Mennonite Church USA, that in terms of organizational identity and practices bears a resemblance to mainline denominations such as the United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church, albeit at a drastically smaller scale. At the same time, the denomination’s small size, horizontal ecclesiology, and sectarian roots give it some level of kinship with traditions that have a more fundamentalist past or present, such as Southern Baptists, Churches of Christ, and Seventh-Day Adventists. Mennonites trace their origins to the sixteenth-century European religious movement known as Anabaptism (also referred to by some as the Radical Reformation), which took adult baptism as its central tenet. Over time, Anabaptists also became known for a theology of nonviolence, adherence to principles of simple living, separatism, and a history of internal schism. For those invested in maintaining a viable Mennonite denomination amid constant threats of a conservative departure over LGBTQ issues, that history of schism is a source of insecurity and worry.



Richard Niebuhr wrote in 1927 that Mennonites' sectarian infighting had guaranteed their larger irrelevance;<sup>6</sup> he was neither the first nor the last to make that critique.

Due to that history, Anabaptism has produced more groups and sub-groups than I can describe here. Within the United States, the Amish are probably the largest Anabaptist group; a number of smaller conservative Mennonite groups also exist outside of the Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA). In terms of size, denominational structure, and culture, within the United States, MCUSA is probably most similar to the Church of the Brethren (COB), another Anabaptist denomination. Mennonites have a history of ecumenical cooperation with COB as well as with Quakers, all of which identify within a North American tradition known as "historic peace churches." COB members in particular have worked together extensively with Mennonites in the area of LGBTQ justice, primarily through the Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBT Interests, an ecumenical network that figures prominently in the story I tell in this study. It is also worth mentioning that while the Amish do not suffer from the same membership decline as does MCUSA, due to a high birthrate and separatist practices, Mennonites are a traditional refuge for ex-Amish, as well as for defectors from a number of other conservative, plain-dressing Anabaptist groups. Among multiple generations of LGBTQ Mennonites, I have met people from Amish or other sectarian Anabaptist backgrounds; like many other queer and queer-supportive Mennonites, they often have wavering commitments to MCUSA churches, as they wait to see if the denomination will become more or less hospitable to them. Their presence has always reminded me that the

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<sup>6</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources Of Denominationalism* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004).

decisions that MCUSA makes in regards to its LGBTQ members has more far-reaching consequences in the Anabaptist world than its leaders acknowledge.

### **Central questions**

The basic assumptions of this dissertation are three-fold. The first theoretical statement is that, from the historical-cultural location from which I am writing, binaries are a primary means through which people order the world. The second is that binaries generate violence. The third is that definitions of violence are contested.

My understanding of the first statement owes much to Susan Harding's anthropological work on fundamentalist Christian vernacular as a discursive practice capable of what she calls "generative power." Central to Harding's analysis is her focus on the binary that molds popular understandings of fundamentalism and modernity; just as those who identify with modernity need "an occasion feast of Fundamentalists"<sup>7</sup> to articulate and define their own subjectivities against a pre-modern Other, so do right-wing Christians need identifiably corrupt forces of modern secularity against which to define themselves. What is most important about Harding's analysis for my purposes is her demonstration of the malleability of this dualism in the hands of fundamentalist preachers. Enabled by a "decentralized organizational structure,"<sup>8</sup> fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell were able to rhetorically stretch and mold binaries to make the multivocal,

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 264.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 274.

hybrid, and permeable world of right-wing Christianity into “a compelling illusion of unity across myriad lines of theological and subcultural difference.”<sup>9</sup>

Few if any of the Mennonites I write about here would identify as fundamentalists along the lines that Harding describes (though many would identify as evangelicals, and their denominational culture bears the marks of encounters with Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority and other right-wing Protestant influences<sup>10</sup>). But Mennonites do use binary logic with a fluidity that scholars of the fundamentalist/modernist construct will recognize. In focusing on the impact of Mennonite dominant discourse in the lives of queer people, I saw this fluidity manifest most clearly in the binary of the individual and the community. Overwhelmingly, queer Mennonites found their identities and experiences mapped onto “individualism” in Mennonite speech. Because Mennonites are theologically wedded to the notion of “community” as the vehicle through which God’s will is mediated, charges of individualism bear a particular sting. In a similar vein, I repeatedly heard from anti-gay Mennonites the charge that LGBTQ Mennonites and their supporters placed undue weight on “personal experience” as a barometer for sexual ethics. When, in an interview, I once pointed out to one conservative leader that he had just referred to his own positive experience with heterosexual marriage and family as a

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 274.

<sup>10</sup> In asserting this, my intention is not to conflate evangelicalism and fundamentalism; Harding in particular challenges this conflation, while at the same time recognizing the ways in which these concepts and identities overlap and constitute each other. Nor is it my intention to suggest that evangelical influences on U.S. Mennonites were entirely or even primarily white. Latino and African-American evangelicals have arguably had a greater overall impact on U.S. Mennonites than have right-wing white-dominated movements like Moral Majority. See Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*. (For another discussion of the tense relationships and exchanges between U.S. evangelicals and fundamentalists, see Kathryn Joyce, “The Next Christian Sex-Abuse Scandal,” *The American Prospect*, accessed February 3, 2015, <http://prospect.org/article/next-christian-sex-abuse-scandal>.)

justification for his disapproval of queer sex while at the same time claiming that LGBTQ advocates relied too heavily on personal experience, he chuckled and acknowledged my point. At the same time, perhaps because his own marital/sexual/familial experiences were well within dominant norms, he seemed able to unproblematically graft them onto something larger—and therefore more credible—than the realm of the individual or the personal.

In a denomination that declines in membership by the year, the individual/community binary also serves as a convenient mechanism for explaining the regular departure of Mennonite young people who were born, raised, and in many cases baptized within Mennonite churches and families. This may provide some context for why a thoughtless statement about secularism in a seemingly innocuous book about Mennonite congregational singing could hit an ex-Mennonite like me in the gut. In that context, “individualism” serves as a symbol for what is both wrong with and alluring about non-Mennonite society, often described in Mennonite shorthand as “wider culture,” “secular society,” “the culture around us,” or, more broadly, “the world.” While one version of this rhetoric is deployed to explain the action of those who leave church life entirely, I have heard related versions of the same binary used to interpret the decisions of Mennonites who join non-denominational or independent Bible churches that focus is on “personal salvation” over communal ethics.<sup>11</sup> If the “wider culture” is portrayed as an entity that caters to the need of the individual as a thoughtless, self-obsessed,

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<sup>11</sup> My ethical framework for interrogating the idealization of community owes a great deal to the work of Miranda Joseph, particularly in her insistence on investigating the ways in which communal formations can collude with capitalism. See Joseph, *Against The Romance Of Community*. See also Gerald W. Creed, *The Seductions of Community: Emancipations, Oppressions, Quandaries* (School of American Research, 2006).

inappropriately consuming pleasure-seeker, community can be then be defined as a countercultural alternative, which for Mennonites has great theological currency.

Over the course of my research, I came to see the mostly unacknowledged malleability of the individual/community binary as a primary factor inhibiting rigorous discussions of power among Mennonites. Because the binary itself held so much historical and theological meaning, it was hard to demystify it. I encountered my own tendency to participate in the idealization of community along lines that supported my politics; I found myself wanting, again and again, to defend the communal credentials of queer Mennonites. But I also came to see the binary as a tool to legitimate some communities, individuals, and experiences over others. Over and over, Mennonites left me asking, who is allowed to be an individual? Which expressions of individuality can be acceptably woven into “the community”; which ones cannot? How do bodies matter—for surely they do—in determining the answers to these questions? And finally, what is lost in the collective disdain of individualism? To whom does this disdain do violence? What are the ethical underpinnings that enable us to determine who, in the context of a particular communal formation, is allowed to have what Judith Butler calls a livable life? The individual/community binary does violence everywhere in U.S. society, but because Mennonites embrace it so explicitly, their experiences can, I hope, be instructive for those seeking to understand more generally how to dig for the hidden meanings within in.

As a researcher, I have wrestled throughout this process with how to navigate the contested terrain of defining violence. In Mennonite settings as in others, claims of violence are mapped on to particular political agendas. In a world in which marginalized collectivities must first prove their marginalization in order to advocate for and end to

that marginalization, a legitimated claim of violence is inextricably linked to a legitimated identity. Throughout the time I have spent observing, writing about, listening to, and speaking with Mennonites on sexual politics, I have observed three relevant varieties of violence claims:

- 1) Claims of rhetorical, spiritual, structural, sexualized, gendered, or racialized violence referring to collective and historically situated experiences of marginalization.
- 2) Defenses against the above claims of violence that identify the claims themselves as a form of violence against those who might be implicated by them.
- 3) Appeals for an end of claims of violence that effect a standpoint of impartial reason to suggest that excessive claims of violence from partisan actors are doing violence against a shared community and that generally speaking, everyone is doing violence (theologically, this traces to the leveling claim that everyone is a sinner), and therefore, essentially, no one is doing violence that needs specific identification.

When I realized that violence was in fact what I was writing about, I felt overwhelmed by the task of assessing what claims of violence I should legitimate through my own authorial voice. In his ethnography *Imagining Transgender*, David Valentine outlines the problem as I encountered it:

How does one “take sides”—and more importantly, act—in disputes between different groups with divergent, if valid, analyses of what action is required? The demand that anthropologists act on behalf of their study population and against the facts of violence, then, is deeply complicated by the terms by which that

population is defined, who defines it, and what strategies are seen as valid.

Moreover, as I will discuss next, anthropological practices, even those motivated by good intentions, can themselves be seen as violent.<sup>12</sup>

Valentine does not make this claim in the context of refuting the demand that anthropologists should act against the facts of violence to their study populations. But the rigor with which he acknowledges the potential of his own potential to harm these women through his work has served as something of a guide for me. When I was completing my application for human subjects approval for this project, Ben Chappell, one of my ethnographer mentors, suggested that the way I articulated the ethical parameters of my project would undergird my methodology. In a similar vein, I eventually concluded that my understanding of what constituted violence was inextricable from my imperative as a researcher to do no harm. *Not doing violence* was the core imperative of my search for the right methodology; I have tried as best I can to let specific practices flow from that source. From the beginning, this has meant taking queer Mennonites as authoritative voices, not only on their own experiences, but also on the power structures that subordinate, violate, and oppress them. This is not the same thing as giving away all of my own interpretive authority. Nor is it an elision of the reality that queer people, like all people, have complex subjectivities and multiple social locations and are thus capable of doing violence themselves. It is rather a persistent turning towards the epistemology I learned primarily from Black feminism: oppressed people know more about power than powerful people do, and if the subject of one's study is power, one cannot just listen to powerful people.

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<sup>12</sup> David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 216.

The potential travesty of embracing this maxim as a Mennonite writing about other Mennonites who deny their own capacity for violence has not escaped me. When I looked at Mennonite processes for “dealing with” the conflicts presented by sexual diversity, I saw repeatedly how easy it was for people concerned with peacemaking to convince themselves that once they embraced the appropriate dogma and methodology, they were delivered from the capacity to do violence. Academics doing work around social justice contend with the same dangers in our theoretical commitments. Any success I have had in avoiding such mistakes is largely due to the queer people who have surrounded and sustained me at every stage of this process: friends, colleagues, informants, mentors, and sometimes, more than one or all of the above. Their counsel, above all else, has helped me assess when I should speak and when I should listen.

This is also a study that sheds light on what it means to be moderate—not only in the electoral-political sense but in one’s general approach to power and conflict. While I do not explicitly take on this idea in terms of its representations in the U.S. body politic, the practices of Mennonites trying to build and sustain church-related agencies, schools, and other institutions are strongly related to those of administrators and managers in other institutions that are premised on social good. How, in such institutions, have moderating managerial practices come to be seen as reasonable, desirable, and *the only way forward*? How is it that institutions that claim diversity and inclusiveness at the core of their identities still continue to exercise power and manage resources in ways that reinscribe straight, white, able-bodied masculinity at the heart of what it means to be acting for the common good? What kinds of material, historical experiences lead marginalized people



to experience diversifying, inclusionary practices as yet another form of silencing, of violence?

In many ways these questions trace us back to another layer of interrelated binaries: *modern/pre-modern*; *reason/emotion*; *civilized/primitive*; and perhaps most trenchant for present-day, neoliberal institutional life, *civility/incivility*. In understanding the impact of these discourses in their own institutions, Mennonites are often held back by their own most beloved theological dualism, that of *church/world*. At the simplest level, this split makes them susceptible to believing that power, privilege, and their effects are things that happen elsewhere, and that Mennonites have a particular bulwark against them. The overarching project of this dissertation is to demystify binaries, to illuminate the power relations that they obscure.

A few particular threads of theory guide my approach to these questions. One is Sara Ahmed's work of examining how the diversity is enacted and managed in white-dominated institutional life.<sup>13</sup> Related to this is M. Jacqui Alexander's essay on white, masculine administrative behavior in the context of direct, anti-oppression mobilization by contingent faculty and students of color at the New School.<sup>14</sup> Both of these sources have informed my interpretations of white Mennonite church leaders employing what many of my Mennonite informants call "divide and conquer" tactics that seem designed to foster division and infighting among marginalized groups within their denominational body. Haunting is another theoretical undercurrent in my study, informed by Avery Gordon's work on the manifestations of hidden and repressed forms of social violence.

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<sup>13</sup> Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham; Duke University Press Books, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

As much as anything, the concept of haunting has guided me methodologically to pursue inklings and hunches, to listen for words almost but not quite said. My final chapter on sexualized violence is the fullest treatment of this methodological orientation.

Finally, this study also contributes to the growing body of ethnographic work on LGBTQ Christians. Works by Tanya Erzen<sup>15</sup> and Michelle Wolkimir<sup>16</sup> on ex-gay ministries have contributed to my understanding of conservative Christian sexual discourses, particularly their emphasis on narratives of addiction, captivity, and conversion. Dawne Moon's ethnographic study of Methodist conflicts over gay and lesbian membership made me more attentive to the uses of pain and emotion in debates about homosexuality, as well as the politics of renouncing the political. Her work has also reminded me to exercise wariness when theological statements are presented as expressions of a united front.

### **A note on abortion**

My dearth of analysis concerning abortion is worth a mention in this introduction, and many readers and scholars of conservative sexual politics will no doubt note its absence. The 1995 document that MCUSA recognizes as “foundational,” the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, mentions abortion in the following context: “We witness against all forms of violence, including war among nations, hostility among races and classes, abuse of children and women, violence between men and women, abortion,

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<sup>15</sup> Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Michelle Wolkimir, *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

and capital punishment.”<sup>17</sup> While this may seem definitive, the reality is that no violation of an item on this list has triggered the kind of denomination-level conflict and disciplinary mechanisms that LGBTQ inclusion has done. This is not to say that the same MCUSA members who oppose LGBTQ inclusion do not also oppose abortion; without citable evidence, my informed speculation is that they do oppose it by a large majority. Letters condemning “violence against the unborn” and calling on Mennonites to take more definitive action in that direction are not uncommon in Mennonite publications, and have appeared there with some regularity for the past forty years. But by and large, denominational leaders do not speak of abortion in their public statements. There has been no denomination-wide, organized, opposing, political push to uphold and defend reproductive rights, or visibility campaigns on the part of Mennonite women who have had abortions. Within pro-LGBTQ-inclusion circles, I have observed that talk of abortion in organized forums is almost always a non-starter—not, I think, because everyone agrees, but because they suspect that they don’t, and would rather not find out just how deeply. The simplest answer to the relative invisibility of abortion as a political issue among Mennonites is likely to be shame coupled with conflict aversion. On an anecdotal note, my personal experience has been that Mennonites who are motivated to organize politically for or against abortion rights find non-Mennonite settings in which to do so.

## **Methods**

While my above discussion about theories of violence addresses my concerns about methodology, I will briefly address the specific methods and scope of this study. In

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determining what I would study and where I would go, I held loosely to the idea of “multi-sited ethnography” put forth by George Marcus in his anthropological work, an approach that made more sense to me studying a political conflict within a national denomination than a one-location project. The events I attended included church services, regional Mennonite meetings, denomination conventions, and gatherings of Mennonite LGBTQ activist groups. My ethnographic work took me to sites of LGBTQ-inclusive congregations in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota; Washington, D.C.; Kansas City, Kansas; and across the Kaw River to Peace Mennonite Church in my own town of Lawrence, Kansas. Other destinations included Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Phoenix, Arizona; Chicago, Illinois; and Newton, Kansas. At most of these sites I did interviews, which I also conducted over Skype. All total, I interviewed thirty individuals: queer church members, movement leaders and activists, pastors, and denominational professionals. Substantial email and Facebook correspondences with my interviewees as well as with other executive denominational leaders, sexual abuse prevention workers, Mennonite academics, and queer Mennonite friends have shaped this work as well. Archival research in the Mennonite Library and Archives in North Newton, Kansas and the Church of the Brethren Archives in Elgin, Illinois have provided vital historical context. In addition, the online archives of Mennonite press publications have been indispensable and constant sources of updates on a research site that seems to produce new evidence on a daily basis.

## **Chapter overview**

The first chapter, “Naming the Violence of Process: Reframing a Pacifist Conflict,” looks at the processes that Mennonites call “discernment” and “dialogue,” and how LGBTQ Mennonites experience being the subjects of those processes. It asks the question, how do peacemaking processes come to be experienced as violent? How does privilege shape access to particular ways of being peaceful? This chapter also introduces a particular category of professional Mennonite, the “process broker”: one who helps to structure and facilitate dialogue and discernment in Mennonite churches and institutions. Through the story of the formation of Mennonite Church USA, I investigate the question, what are the consequences of process broking? In the context of a group of people with disparate theological beliefs and approaches to authority and governance, how do process brokers use language to promote the cause of denominational unity?

The second chapter, “Statements and Walls: Persons Associated With a Group Calling Itself Pink Menno,” addressed the most recent manifestation of Mennonite LGBTQ advocacy, a mostly youth-led network called Pink Menno that stages activism at biennial MCUSA conventions. More generally, it looks at the role of denominational statements over the past thirty years of Mennonite history, arguing that while such statements are frequently used to hold back queer inclusion, their actual contents matter far less than the cultural/theological symbols into which LGBTQ people have been made. To place Pink Menno’s experiences in a historical context, this chapter also casts back to experiences of LGBTQ Mennonites at previous denominational conventions at which heterosexist statements were crafted and passed through delegate bodies. The core

ambiguity that Mennonites have in relation to statements of belief permeates this chapter, which asks the question, how does power manifest in relation to that ambiguity?

In Chapter Three, “Strangers and Kin,” I examine the performance of authoritative white statements that attempt to pit queer people against people of color, particularly Latinos. The ethnographic context for the chapter is the 2013 MCUSA convention in Phoenix, Arizona, which Latino Mennonites almost entirely boycotted due to Arizona’s draconian anti-immigration laws and the danger of deportation for undocumented Mennonites. Within this violent political backdrop, I interrogate the convention theme of “Citizens of God’s Kingdom,” arguing that managerial church discourse, even while embracing diversity and anti-racism as institutional goals, is discursively reliant on the figure of beneficent white masculinity.

My final chapter, “John Howard Yoder is Dead: Sexualized Violence and the Haunting of the Mennonite Church,” adds another layer of context to LGBTQ Mennonites encounters with institutional violence and complicity, asking the question, what does sexualized violence have to do with the struggle for queer justice? Through a deep engagement with the story of Mennonite theologian and sexual predator John Howard Yoder, the most influential pacifist theologian of the past fifty years, I try to understand the scope of the damage done when sexual abuse and sexualized violence go unnamed, and sexual deviance is projected onto queerness. How do the institutional histories of heterosexism and sexualized violence intersect? What do these histories teach us about sex, violence, and peacemaking?

My Conclusion begins with an ethnographic account of queer Mennonites meeting to plan for their next phase of engagement with Mennonite Church USA.

Finally, I discuss the future direction of this project, highlighting its potential to contribute to wider critiques of neoliberal capitalism through the lenses of sexual politics and community.

## Chapter One: Naming the Violence of Process: Reframing a Pacifist Conflict

*Systems of classification, such as those of 'diversity,' enact a form of symbolic violence...But there are also different kinds of violence. In addition to the violence of excessive categorization and disciplining, there is the violence of the appropriation of one's labor; the violence of imposed silence; the violence of being forced to struggle for the right to have a right; the violence of simultaneous erasure and overexposure; the violence of not being able to register one's own claims about the world; and ultimately, the violence of being required to behave as if democracy and reasonableness truly existed, when in truth they do not.*

M. Jacqui Alexander, "Anatomy of a Mobilization"<sup>18</sup>

*I've come to the conclusion that process is how Mennonites justify and inflict violence. As long as we have a process, we have been fair, good, and kind people.*

Carol Wise, Executive Director, Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBT Interests<sup>19</sup>

On April 5, 2014, Patrick Ressler, a recent graduate of Goshen College in Goshen Indiana, and the coordinator of the Philadelphia Gay Men's Chorus, left a comment after an article on the paper's website. The article in question described a campus discussion about the possibility of changing Goshen College's hiring policy to end its discriminatory practices against openly LGBTQ applicants. As a Mennonite college, Goshen's hiring policy reflected (and still reflects) the official position of its parent denomination, the Mennonite Church USA. In the article, college officials explain that they have, for the time being, halted the process of re-evaluating their discriminatory policy, out of respect for the Mennonite Church USA's continuing debate about what the article refers to as

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<sup>18</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 141.

<sup>19</sup> Carol Wise, interview with author, October 22, 2013.



“the acceptance of same-sex individuals [sic].”<sup>20</sup> Ressler responds to them with the following:

Goshen College, please be my advocate.

I am becoming more and more convinced that the ability to accept myths of ‘peace’ and ‘unity’ in the Mennonite Church is both a position of distinct privilege and a violent dismissal of the lived experiences of LGBTQ people.

In this Record article, President James Brenneman states that “...it is the ‘slow, methodical, careful, excruciating process that has kept the peace of the Mennonite church intact.’”

I challenge Goshen College to understand that the ‘excruciating process’ is far more dire for those who are excluded from rites and rituals of the Church and employment at its Institutions; that the ability to find ‘peace’ in the slow, tentative unfolding of justice in the Mennonite Church is a position of non-queer privilege; and that perpetuating the idea of the Mennonite Church as ‘intact’ devalues and misrepresents the painful history of LGBTQ Mennonites banging on the doors of the Church and its Institutions, pleading to be let in.

Until the leadership of Goshen College, Mennonite Church USA, and any other institution determining the worthiness of God’s children can recognize and affirm the lived experience of LGBTQ people as if it was their own, they will not understand their Institution as part of the problem, nor the need for action—nor

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<sup>20</sup> Kate Stoltzfus, “Leaders Entertain Hiring Policy Questions,” *The Record*, April 3, 2015, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://record.goshen.edu/2014/04/30100-leaders-entertain-hiring-policy-questions>.

their vital role in that change.<sup>21</sup>

Ressler's comment aims straight at one of the most cherished notions of Mennonites: that they are a peaceful people. This chapter takes seriously Ressler's claim that peace within the Mennonite church is a myth, and that privilege dictates who has access to particular ways of being peaceful. It interrogates how conscious practices of peace can themselves be experienced as violent. This work arises from six years of prolonged engagement with LGBTQ Mennonites, through ethnographic research, oral history interviews, and many informal conversations in which queer-identified Mennonites (and, often, their straight allies) used references to weaponry and war to describe what the church was doing and has done to them.

While conversations and debate about the oppression of queer people are current and ongoing in the Mennonite church, many LGBTQ Mennonites have been naming this oppression *as violence*, in one way or another, for almost four decades. While Mennonites can and do perpetrate physical violence against queer bodies, the violence that advocates like Ressler is identifying is not exclusively or even primarily physical. In his ethnography of transgender as a discursive category, David Valentine explains how his informants' namings of physical and discursive violences are linked: "All draw on a similar epistemology and causality: that representations and ideologies have effects in and of themselves; that representations are linked in a causal way to institutions beyond the power of the individual; that individuals are bound to enact the demands of

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<sup>21</sup> Patrick Ressler, April 5, 2014, comment on Kate Stoltzfus, "Leaders Entertain Hiring Policy Questions," *The Record*, April 3, 2014, <http://record.goshen.edu/2014/04/30100-leaders-entertain-hiring-policy-questions>.

hegemonic representations; and that those who are acted on are victims.”<sup>22</sup> What is perhaps most radical about the work of queer Mennonite advocates who speak of violence is their ability to identify hegemony in the practices of Mennonite communities and institutions.

This framing has chafed against those of church leaders who prefer to depict their institutions and communities as engaging in a necessarily slow process of “discernment” over LGBTQ inclusion as a divisive and polarizing political issue. In structured conversations, denominational conventions, committee meetings, Sunday school circles, and many other less formal settings, queer people have *been discussed*; they are *a concern*; they have been the subjects of *dialogue* and *discernment*. They have, on numerous occasions, been asked to *share their stories*. My italics are not meant to signify complete cynicism as to the results of such processes (though cynicism may be warranted), but rather to highlight the degree to which the terms of these processes constitute queer Mennonites as an unsolvable problem. Thus, I echo W.E.B. Dubois in posing this question: how does it feel to be an unsolvable problem?<sup>23</sup> For queer Mennonites, what material and affective experiences result from being constituted in this way?

Mennonite conflicts over sexual and gender diversity reflect those in other U.S. contexts, both religious and secular, and the purpose of this study is not to argue for Mennonite uniqueness. The idea of being Other, of being not only theologically but also culturally separate from other Christians, has shaped the way many Mennonites think

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<sup>22</sup> Valentine, David. *Imagining Transgender*, 220.

<sup>23</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Unabridged edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 1.

about themselves, particularly whites who identify as “ethnic Mennonites” and trace their ancestry back to European Anabaptist communities. At the same time, Mennonites in the U.S. are shaped by prolonged engagement with evangelicalism. As historian Felipe Hinojosa has argued, evangelicalism has probably been the most powerful force drawing white U.S. Mennonites away from separatism in the twentieth century. In this way, Mennonites were like many other mid-century evangelical Christians who moved away from separatist fundamentalism and towards organized missions and outreach.<sup>24</sup>

LGBTQ Mennonites in MCUSA negotiate the denominational context created by this history. To a large extent, the history of Mennonite evangelicalism has helped to create a dominant Mennonite discourse in which missions are associated with growth and racial diversity. For queer Mennonites, this presents a challenge, as evangelical theologies typically emphasize gender hierarchy and heterosexual supremacy.<sup>25</sup> Given that racialized identity and evangelicalism are mapped onto one another in Mennonite contexts, dominant discourse in MCUSA constructs LGBTQ Mennonites as the ideological opponents of people of color. This construction works against alliances between the very collectivities within MCUSA that have the bodies of knowledge necessary to name the violence of Mennonite peacemaking with specificity.<sup>26</sup> While I will discuss this antagonism in more detail in subsequent chapters, I mention it here to

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<sup>24</sup> Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> For a analyses that discuss how LGBTQ evangelicals confront these theologies, see Melissa M. Wilcox, *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003); Gerald Walton, “‘Fag Church’: Men Who Integrate Gay and Christian Identities,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 51, no. 2 (August 2006): 1–17.

<sup>26</sup> See Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, and Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

point out that LGBTQ Mennonites are not the only marginalized people within MCUSA to critique Mennonite processes of discernment and peacemaking.

### **The process brokers**

One Friday evening in the fall of 2014, I sat in a Kansas City Panera with three Mennonite pastors, all women. Two of these pastors, Ruth Harder and Joanna Harader, are straight ally pastors who are well known in LGBTQ Mennonite circles, serving in Kansas City and Lawrence, Kansas respectively. One, Sarah Klaassen of Columbia, Missouri, holds her ordination through the Disciples of Christ denomination because her queer identity precludes a straightforward path to Mennonite ordination. All three of the pastors were under forty at the time. They were meeting to strategize. Later in the evening they would be speaking to the MCUSA Executive Board about the movement for LGBTQ inclusion within the Mennonite church. Klaassen's presence in particular was something of a coup; the Board is widely perceived by LGBTQ Mennonites and their advocates to be hostile to queer-inclusive interests. In February 2014, after an MCUSA area conference licensed a lesbian pastor, Theda Good, in Denver, Colorado to the sustained and vocal protest of more conservative factions in the church, the Board issued a statement containing the following:

Mountain States' [the area conference that licensed Good] actions expressed the hope of many across the church who desire full inclusion for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. Yet the area conference's decision has exacerbated the polarities within our church and frayed the fragile strands of accountability that hold our church together in an emotionally-charged political atmosphere. This begs the

larger question of the best ways to tend the relationships between congregations, area conferences and the denomination.<sup>27</sup>

Klaassen and her ally colleagues were thus entering into a setting in which queer pastors and their supporters had already been cast as antagonists, lacking in accountability or care for the church. Their task was further complicated by the brevity that the occasion demanded; it was a Friday evening, the board members had been in sessions for several days, and the pastors only had an hour to speak. They were the only representatives of the Mennonite movement for queer justice who had ever been allowed to formally address the Executive Board. As I listened to them strategize, I realized that a central tension in their task was how to accurately represent the pain and violence perpetrated by the church, even by the very governing body they were addressing, without allowing that pain and harm to define the movement they were describing. Enough damage had been done, they felt, by making all LGBTQ-related advocacy about the recognition of queer pain. At the same time, none of them wanted to convey the impression that church leaders were holding themselves adequately accountable for the damage being done to LGBTQ people and LGBTQ-inclusive churches.

What is the problem with talking about pain? In her ethnography of Methodist congregations debating homosexuality, Dawne Moon argues that her interviewees who focused on the pain and suffering of gay people seemed to do so as a means of depoliticizing gay identity. For those speaking in solidarity with gay members, the pain experienced by gay people rendered legitimacy to their need to be accepted as gay. For

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<sup>27</sup> “Moving Forward: A Statement from the Executive Board,” *Mennonite Church USA*, accessed March 16, 2015, <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/moving-forward-a-statement-from-the-executive-board/>.

conservative members who felt sympathetic urges towards gay people, pain was evidence of the need for healing from the affliction of gayness. Notably, Moon portrays these uses of gay pain as fodder for conversations among straight people. The gay members of the congregation in question “tended to keep a low profile.”<sup>28</sup> The straight-dominated conversation around them left them few to no options for an expression of gay identity that was not rooted in the experience of pain. The straight members arguing on their behalf were unable to counter conservatives who believed in “pain itself as the pathological cause of homosexuality.”<sup>29</sup> In addition to this, “when members used pain to show that gay people belonged in the church, they made gay membership contingent on that pain. Gay people who were not in pain were still effectively equated with political self-interest.”<sup>30</sup>

The caution that Harder, Harader, and Klaassen displayed in speaking about pain attests to the presence of similar dynamics in Mennonite discernment processes on LGBTQ inclusion. While the expression of pain is unavoidable in the context of such processes, it also functions as a way of reaffirming LGBTQ peoples’ status as a problem in need of solving. Pain is also, to put it bluntly, politically useful, particularly for those who are charged with balancing the needs of competing constituencies for the larger purpose of holding together a denomination. That LGBTQ Mennonites collectively experience a great deal of pain is one thing that conservatives and liberals can agree upon, even if they differ over the reasons for that pain. For leaders who are flummoxed about how to unite differing viewpoints, experiences, and claims to truth, the exploration

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<sup>28</sup> Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004), 219.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

of queer pain is a relatively stable place to rest. I refer to such leaders, who hold administrative and bureaucratic leadership positions in Mennonite schools, agencies, denominations, and conferences, as “process brokers.” Process brokers are those who establish the terms under which structured dialogues, conversations, debates, and decision-making around LGBTQ bodies will occur.

This deployment of queer pain also functions to create what religion scholar Mark Jordan has called a “sexual character”: an idea about non-normative sexuality that is given shape through discourses of psychiatry, social reform, and even slang, until it crystallizes into a figure of deviance that may then serve a discursive function in anti-queer sexual politics.<sup>31</sup> Like Moon in her observations of Methodists, I have found that sexual characters have considerable power even for moderate and progressive Mennonites who rely on pain as justification for queer inclusion. Jennifer Yoder, a queer Mennonite advocate (whose work I will address in depth in subsequent chapters), wrote the following to me in the context of a lengthy online conversation about the perils of church processes to queer people:

I know that sharing the ways the Mennonite Church has harmed me, and the physical and emotional impacts of that harm, has sometimes helped people feel sympathetic to me, and there was a point at which speaking my truth was an important part of my process...[But] there came a time when I got tired of being everyone’s sad harmed queer, of reliving the same trauma aloud in the hopes it would convince someone to stop participating in harmful behavior: you shouldn’t need to see the ways you’ve made me bleed to know you shouldn’t harm me.

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<sup>31</sup> Mark D. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011), xii-xvi.



Seeing my full, happy, healthy, whole self should be all you need. You don't need to see a gunshot wound to know you shouldn't shoot people.<sup>32</sup>

Advocates like Yoder and Ressler must walk a difficult line. On the one hand, they are committed to naming violence as it happens, to disrupting a discursive framework that hides that violence for the sake of holding together the institutions that enable it. But they must also contend with the discursive figure of the “sad harmed queer” and its great appeal to process brokers across the political spectrum. “They try to find the vulnerable stories,” Carol Wise told me, in reference to Mennonite leaders facilitating “conversations” about LGBTQ people. “If your story is to say, ‘I feel very comfortable being queer, and have no desire to be anything else, and my anger is just at your systems of privilege and your ignorance, not at God for making me gay,’ their response is, ‘Well, thank you very much for your time. We’ll go find the person who cuts themselves, hates themselves.’”<sup>33</sup>

In the discourse of careful moderation employed by process brokers, denominational unity has come to operate in an ethical dialectic with LGBTQ inclusion, the former ever posited as impossible to sustain should the latter come to fruition. For a church that cannot decide whether or not to stay together, the sad harmed queer functions as a convenient generative tool. The processes by which this figure is made into spectacle are a reliable well of pain, ensuring a never-ending supply of vulnerable queer bodies. At the same time, the processes themselves produce a sense of satisfaction, that all have been heard, that the right thing has been done for the moment. As a discursive figure, the sad harmed queer helps to maintain a holding pattern that looks, from some angles, like

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<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Yoder, Facebook message to author, August 20, 2014. Used with permission.

<sup>33</sup> Wise, interview, October 22, 2013.

peace. The figure's pain is an appeasement to liberals who want recognition of past and ongoing wrongs, while its seemingly irredeemable brokenness can assuage conservative fantasies of rescuing the sexual sinner.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, for the past forty years, willingly or unwillingly, people who embody non-normative sexuality and gender have been made into symbols for Mennonites' most intractable disagreements about how to be in community with one another. This chapter does not attempt to answer the question of why this is. Surely the least that can be said on that subject is that Mennonites are much like other U.S. Christians in their decades-long tendency to use queer bodies and queer sexuality as a means through which to articulate political, spiritual, and organizational identities. My intent is rather to inquire as to how this preoccupation manifests in a group of people who define themselves explicitly as peaceful.

Mennonite pacifist discourse developed in large part as conversations among Mennonite men about how to resist masculinist nationalism and militarism. If soldiering was what made boys into responsible masculine citizen-subjects, then Mennonite men needed alternate means to citizenship, and to manhood. From the sixteenth century onwards, Mennonites migrated from one European country to another, and eventually, to North America, their movements largely dictated by the desire to avoid the involuntary conscription of their young men into military service for the nations in which they lived. What happens, then, when the definition of violence is not longer solely in the hands of

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<sup>34</sup> For analyses of this fantasy and its consequences, see Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2006), and Michelle Wolkowicz, *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

men of European ancestry, but also in the hands of women, people of color, and queer people? In the twentieth century as well as the current one, emancipatory social movements aimed at expanding access to the privileges of citizenship have contributed to the most rigorous challenges to Mennonite definitions of violence and nonviolence, as such movements have informed the Mennonites who have made those challenges.<sup>35</sup>

When queer Mennonites advocate for themselves to church leaders, it is often through naming (and subverting) the ways in which dominant, institutional Mennonite discourse objectifies, exploits, and excludes them. In interviews with me, in social media forums, in queer online spaces and in online comments in Mennonite publications, queer-identified Mennonites and those who speak in solidarity with them engage in conversational reframing. Such reframing operates in resistance to socially conservative discourses that pathologize queerness. But just as powerfully, this reframing challenges a more institutional, conciliatory discourse, one espoused by process brokers, who bemoan the “divisive issues” presented by LGBTQ politics and appeal to a higher ground, be it moral, institutional, or eschatological. Mennonite institutional discourse is dependent upon a collective theological imaginary in which the power created by social privilege and histories of inequality does not exist. The path to this imaginary space is paved at least in part through leaders’ use of phrases such as “shared values”<sup>36</sup> and “common life”<sup>37</sup>—language that is both vague and seemingly beyond reproach.

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<sup>35</sup> Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators*; Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*.

<sup>36</sup> Dick Thomas, “Why We Gather,” *The Mennonite*, accessed November 5, 2014, <https://themennonite.org/opinion/gather/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ervin Stutzman, “Tending Our Common Life,” *Mennonite Church USA*, accessed November 5, 2014, <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/tending-our-common-life-3/>.

## The sucker-punch

I write here in the present tense. For those invested in the fate of the Mennonite Church USA, these conflicts over framing are currently inescapable. But they are not new. Since the 1970s, LGBTQ Mennonite activism has been staging this discursive intervention, challenging dominant Mennonite ideas about community, politics, and violence. Much of this work has happened through alternative LGBTQ Anabaptist media,<sup>38</sup> but in less measurable ways, it has happened in the context of interpersonal interactions within families, churches, and Mennonite institutions.

Such interactions are marked by the potential for harm as well as education. LGBTQ Mennonites who are committed to remaining in Mennonite churches must frequently weigh the risks of engagement with fellow church members who present emotional danger against the potential benefits of making themselves accessible and available. John Linscheid, one of the first Mennonite pastors to lose his credentials after coming out as gay in the early 1980s and a longstanding activist presence among LGBTQ Mennonites, described his experiences of church dialogues as making him feel “spiritually sucker-punched.” In 2008, he wrote of a recent experience being recruited as a “gay voice” for a Mennonite anthology entitled *Stumbling Towards a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality*,<sup>39</sup> a recruitment that happened after Linscheid stepped into the fray of “dialogue” (or process) to point out that all of the collection’s original authors were straight. Of the final product, he wrote,

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<sup>38</sup> Christian Yoder, interview by Amy Short and David Quick, video recording, Washington, D.C., June 2, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Michael A. King, *Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2007).

It was full of all the old arguments, and many remarkably new ones, regarding the proper place and behavior of lgbt people and the political niceties of churchly inclusion and exclusion. It included gay and lesbian voices. Even some church leaders took great strides forward.

And I felt more hopeless than ever.<sup>40</sup>

Linscheid's reflection points to a tension that I often feel as I move through Mennonite spaces, both literal and virtual. To understand this tension, I first had to notice how expressions of hopelessness are consistently coded as morally inadequate, both in the church settings I was studying and in the U.S. more generally. American commonsense logic suggests that the hopeless person is not trying hard enough; at the same time, the hopelessness of the marginalized individual can be read as an affront to a collective that is portrayed as overextended in its efforts to tolerate difference. Even in church conversations in which LGBTQ people are surrounded by ostensible allies, they are often pressed to perform a version of what Lauren Berlant has called the "infantile citizen," a grown-up child who trusts the system to work.<sup>41</sup> This discursive construct places disproportionate pressure on those who are socially marginalized, demanding that they willfully disregard their own knowledge of the workings of power and inequality. In Mennonite settings as in many others, such pressures often come in the form of phrases such as, "At least they [process brokers] are willing to have a discussion," and "Let's give everyone the benefit of the doubt."

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<sup>40</sup> John Linscheid, "Done With Dialogue," *Outspoken: A Newsletter of Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests*, Spring 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

Then I hear the side murmurs, in the form of private Facebook messages, over beers later in the evening after the official business is done: *Some people don't deserve the benefit of the doubt anymore.*

I have often walked out of structured “dialogues” or “conversations” about LGBTQ people to hear wildly different responses to what transpired. Straight supporters often express satisfaction that the conversation happened, that differing viewpoints were shared in an atmosphere of mutual respect, and that everyone remained civil “despite our differences.” The conversation itself becomes a commodity, a piece of evidence that we can still “be church together.” LGBTQ participants, on the other hand, express what I came to view as a complex negotiation between the need to be a resource, to seem willing, to accept gratefully the provisional hand extended to them, and the undeniable experience of other, less conciliatory feelings. Notably, such feelings can and do arise even in settings in which queer people are granted space to speak frankly about the abuse of power and privilege and its impact on their lives. Queer Mennonites have fought to be given space to speak in institutional Mennonite settings, but being given space to speak is still a matter of “being given” something, something that is conditional and perhaps just as easily denied. How do LGBTQ Mennonites walk into the institutional space of “dialogue” or “discernment” without implicitly agreeing to its terms? In other words, here’s where the sucker-punch happens. “By entering the dialogue, I accept the implicit proposition that our human worth and our status as children of God are questionable and must be proven,” Linscheid writes.<sup>42</sup> He continues:

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<sup>42</sup> Linscheid, “Done With Dialogue.”

When I present evidence of the hypocrisy, unfair power structures, and patterns of privilege in the institutional church, I buy into the assumption that straight people rightly possess the power to judge who we are, what place we have in the church, and what our ‘lifestyle’ ought to look like. I become merely a supplicant before their bench.<sup>43</sup>

In a similar vein, Kirsten Freed, another queer Mennonite advocate, writes, “Violence is a strong word, and I choose to use it. The ideology and rhetoric that justifies physical violence against lgbt people is an extreme form of the same ideology that justifies discrimination and exclusion in our church.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, while the “sucker-punch” of church dialogue and a gay-bashing murder are not, obviously, the same kind of moral transgression, and differ in their material consequences, they are nonetheless linked. And importantly, in Mennonite discussions, linked in ways that are often only visible to those who are vulnerable to the larger systemic forces implicated in that linkage.

### **Danger to the church**

My first interview with Carol Wise, the current director of the Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBTQ Interests, happened over breakfast in a Minneapolis café. As I walked to the café, I realized I was nervous. If the queer Anabaptist movement had anything approaching a senior leader, Wise was that person, and I wasn’t entirely sure that she approved of what I was doing. I knew Wise from some of her writings in the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Kirsten Freed, “It’s so simple,” *Coming Out Strong* (blog of Kaleidoscope Program, Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBTQ Interests), March 1, 2011, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://www.bmclgbt.org/blog/2011/03/01/its-so-simple/>.

BMC archives. She had her own incisive analysis of the state of the church and injustice against queer Anabaptists. In my initial exchanges with Wise, at MCUSA conferences and over email, I sensed a slight wariness about my project that I could only assume was warranted, based on her experience as a leader within a movement that regularly dealt with the consequences of being poorly represented by well-intentioned straight people. Wise had been instrumental in discouraging a particular pattern in BMC members “sharing stories” at straight-organized church events, a practice that she found sexually exploitive,<sup>45</sup> and a practice I had a particular fear of unintentionally reproducing in my own work. I sought out Wise with the assumption that I was approaching an intellectual and ethical mentor as much as an interview subject.

Wise was a particular master of what I think of as the “comprehensive takedown”: sometimes in the form of a BMC newsletter piece, sometimes in the form of a letter to church officials. In a 1995 letter to the Program and Arrangements Committee of the Church of the Brethren (COB), for instance, Wise denounced its recipients for their controlling approach to annual convention speakers, which they defended by invoking the authority of the denominational statements.<sup>46</sup> The denomination’s Womaen’s Caucus had invited Martin Rock, the founder of BMC, to be a luncheon speaker the previous year, and the intensity of the threats and complaints against his presence had, in Wise’s estimation, scared the convention planners into issuing new, repressive speaker

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<sup>45</sup> Wise, interview, October 22, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> The Church of the Brethren holds national denomination meetings on an annual basis, in contrast to MCUSA’s biennial convention tradition.



guidelines.<sup>47</sup> Wise's challenge to the committee took aim at the legitimacy of their claims to authority.

Which Annual Conference statements will be targeted as binding, and which part of a statement will be considered operable when there are diverse opinions expressed within a statement? Are Annual Conference statements now to be considered as infallible doctrine?...Is no dissent of opinion on Conference statements to be permitted?...Whose peace is considered when we speak of disruption? If I personally find a group's theology or ideology offensive, is that grounds enough to have their luncheon cancelled? Whose opinion counts?...Where is the call for justice?<sup>48</sup>

In this letter as in her more recent work, Wise pushed deep into the underlying logics of repressive denominational practices (within both COB and MCUSA) to expose their inconsistencies and ambiguities. Wise's work also displayed a commitment to the low-church, anti-authoritarian Anabaptist theology that she had chosen for herself as an adult after growing up Methodist. Her denominational critiques rigorously accounted for what was often already obvious to queer Anabaptists: the fear of queer bodies motivated much of what masqueraded as a straightforward exercise of authority.

As we sat down over breakfast, Wise told me immediately that she found our email exchange reassuring. Upon hearing that there was a straight, Mennonite ethnographer interested in this subject, she told me that her initial response was to worry that I would try to argue that Mennonites were exceptional in their treatment of queer

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<sup>47</sup> Carol Wise, "Letter to Program and Arrangements Committee," January 25, 1995, Brethren Mennonite Council boxes, Church of the Brethren Archives, Elgin, Illinois.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

people—that is, exceptionally good. That she would worry about this gulf of difference between her perception and mine, I think, speaks to the continued presence of the tensions I described in the previous section. Years of experience with church process had taught many LGBTQ Mennonites that even ostensible allies were likely to read the state of queer justice in the church much differently than they did. In our emails, Wise was notably encouraged when I responded to her counsel that my work might make me unpopular with church leaders with evidence that I was already becoming unpopular with them. “My observation is many leaders feel betrayed by allies because allies are finally, finally speaking up, asking questions, and not automatically assuming the good will of church leaders,” she wrote.<sup>49</sup>

The question of what to do with assumptions of the “good will” of process brokers was a recurring theme throughout our conversation that morning. “At some point, the church can say, we didn't know. We didn't know,” Wise said. “But once you know, if you continue to act in that way, now you're doing violence willfully... the danger to the church itself is increasing exponentially, the longer it willfully enforces and maintains those structures of racism and sexism and heterosexism. Because there's no innocence left in it.”<sup>50</sup>

I asked Wise if she had ever offered that analysis to a church leader before, and immediately felt ridiculous for asking. “I mean, I’m sure you have,” I said. “What response did you get?” Wise laughed, and responded:

“Thank you for sharing.” Well. [pause] Because they don't believe they're doing violence. They're either protecting the church against our disruption, or they're

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<sup>49</sup> Carol Wise, email message to author, October 12, 2013. Used with permission.

<sup>50</sup> Wise, interview, October 22, 2013.

just trying to listen to all sides, or it's so hard for them, or they are so committed to the unity of the church. There are a lot of ways to try to reassert an innocence that in actuality has already been lost.<sup>51</sup>

### **Building a movement**

Wise was at the helm of an organization with a long history. Like many other Christian groups, Mennonites began to have public conversations about homosexuality in the 1970s. Mennonite activist Lin Garber, writing about the pre-Stonewall era among Mennonites, claims the following: “Before 1969 Mennonites simply subscribed to the attitude of the general population on the subject of same-gender affection: they pretended it did not exist... The prevailing mood was 'don't ask, don't tell'--as it was with such subjects as premarital cohabitation, abortion, and even birth control.”<sup>52</sup> Mennonite denominational publications of the 1970s show a gradual increase in the numbers of articles and letter from readers that referred to homosexuality. While the overwhelming sentiment expressed in these pieces was negative, the pages of these publications do reflect the beginnings of a social movement of Mennonites who identified as gay and as lesbians. Mennonite editors, while hardly accepting of sexual diversity, were not utterly hostile to the presence of gay and lesbian Mennonites in the conversation, and even published their words on occasion, as was the case in an anonymously authored 1978 story entitled, “A letter from two lesbians.” “Everyone—black, white, American, Chinese, male, female, heterosexual, homosexual—is saved by the blood of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Lin Garber, “Mennonites and the 'Homosexual' Issue: A Recent History.” From *Booklet #2: Historical Perspectives*. Welcome to the Dialogue Series, series ed. Ruth Conrad Liechty, The Welcome Committee, 2001.

The most important thing is a person's relationship with Christ, and that's all that matters.”<sup>53</sup> Pieces like these always led to reader backlash. Following the “letter from two lesbians,” one reader responded by complaining about the “avalanche of homosexual propaganda.”<sup>54</sup> Another reader wrote, “With all the pornography we are forced to encounter every day, why must we also read this garbage?”<sup>55</sup>

In spite of this resistance, though, many gay and lesbian Mennonites continued to organize alongside those from other historically Anabaptist denominations, particularly the Church of the Brethren. Under the initial leadership of Martin Rock, a small group of Washington, D.C.-based gay men formed the Brethren Mennonite Council on Gay and Lesbian Concerns in 1976. For the first decade of this organization's existence, their work consisted primarily of maintaining and building a mailing list of potentially supportive or interested people, and creating their quarterly newsletter, *Dialogue*.

From its founding, BMC was concerned with the effects of the church’s hidden violence against gay and lesbian church members. Rock himself was a Brethren employee of a Mennonite organization, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), an NGO for which he had worked for over a decade when he was fired in 1977 for being gay after being anonymously outed by a fellow employee. In his parting speech to MCC employees, Rock was frank about the effects of the way the organization had treated him. “We are very militant in our peace position and do not go to war,” he said. “But in

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<sup>53</sup> Anonymous, “A Letter from Two Lesbians,” *The Mennonite*, May 30, 1978.

<sup>54</sup> Harry Kaufman, “Letter: Avalanche of Propoganda,” *The Mennonite*, September 12, 1978.

<sup>55</sup> Dorothy Loewen, “Letter: I Want Inspiration,” *The Mennonite*, September 12, 1978.

relationships with people we can certainly do a good job of sticking a knife in their back and turning it slowly."<sup>56</sup>

“A lot of it [BMC] was a sanctuary movement,” said Wise. “In many ways it was a pretty wounded community. People didn't have anywhere to go for support.”<sup>57</sup> Jim Sauder, BMC director in the 1990s, also spoke of sanctuary: “Families are forced to be estranged from one another [by the church]...BMC becomes an alternate family, a family of choice for many people because they have been cast out of their family of origin.” Sanctuary became all the more vital during the AIDS epidemic, when Mennonite churches by and large deserted affected gay men and their families.

BMC was also committed to promoting education within those same churches. By the early 1990s, BMC was a transregional organization with an executive board, subcommittees, a paid director, and a mailing list of several thousand people. It functioned increasingly as a grassroots network engaged in educational work, mostly at the congregational level. Sauder described the work of BMC during that time as “dancing at the wall,” a metaphor embraced by the organization's leadership to describe how LGBTQ and ally Christians might engage with the obstacles put up by the institutional church without allowing its rejection to define them.<sup>58</sup> As Sara Ahmed writes, the “wall” metaphor arises frequently among those engaged in institutional transformation for inclusive ends.<sup>59</sup> The wall can be defined as “what you come against when you are

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<sup>56</sup> Martin Rock, “Martin Rock’s Farewell Speech to Mennonite Central Committee,” July 15, 1977, Stan Bohn Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

<sup>57</sup> Wise, interview, October 22, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Jim Sauder, interview by Amy Short, video recording, Minneapolis, MN, June 5, 2011 and September 18, 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Ahmed, *On Being Included*.

involved in the practical project of opening worlds to bodies that have historically been excluded from those worlds.”<sup>60</sup> Ressler alludes to something similar in the opening quote, invoking locked doors that LGBTQ people must plead to have opened.

But by the mid 1990s, many BMC members were weary of work that felt like pleading and pounding on walls. At a conceptual level, the dancing metaphor suggested that, “if the party is better on our side of the wall, they’ll come.”<sup>61</sup> Practically speaking, it moved the organization towards what was to become its most institutionally threatening intervention: the development of a network of openly LGBTQ-inclusive Mennonite and Brethren churches that still exists as the Supportive Communities Network (SCN). Joining the network was not and is not a casual act; almost every congregation that has joined has gone through what BMC calls “a process of education and discernment,” guided by resources that BMC has developed over the years to help foster congregational discussion processes that do not exploit or dehumanize LGBTQ church members.<sup>62</sup>

For Mennonite congregations, SCN membership functions as a particular kind of pro-inclusion identity marker. Certainly, Mennonites in SCN congregations are motivated by the desire to communicate genuine welcome to current and potential LGBTQ members. But SCN membership also indicates priorities in relation to the rest of the

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<sup>60</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Hard,” *Feministkilljoys*, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://feministkilljoys.com/2014/06/10/hard/>.

<sup>61</sup> Brethren Mennonite Council 5<sup>th</sup> International Convention, Meeting minutes, 1994, in BMC Collection, Box 11 Series 1 Folder 9, Church of the Brethren Archives in Elgin, IL.

<sup>62</sup> Wise identified four traits that inclusive congregations have, asserting that in her experience a congregation needs to have at least two of these in order to become SCN congregations: 1) They strongly value education. 2) They have a history of social justice engagement. 3) They have strong lay leadership and a pastor who won't sabotage the process. 4) They have a beloved son or daughter who has come out.

Mennonite world. As much as anything, it signals that a congregation has accepted a certain level of risk to relationships with conference and denominational leaders.

Not every congregation that starts the SCN process ends up joining the network. When churches decide not to join, the reasons generally have as much or more to do with the message that SCN sends to the wider Mennonite world, the possibility of risking relationships with other Mennonite bodies, than it does with any actively anti-gay voices within the congregation itself. For instance, in the archived meeting notes from one congregation of several hundred members that considered and ultimately decided against SCN membership in the early 2000s, I found evidence that Mennonite conference leaders actively discouraged the congregation from joining SCN on the grounds that it would destabilize fragile relationships with more conservative church factions.<sup>63</sup>

In this case as in many others, the church's stance on LGBTQ inclusion was perceived as a political signal, not so much to potential LGBTQ members as to other Mennonite churches with whom congregational leaders were negotiating organizational relationships. In the individual, anonymous responses to this congregations SCN "discernment process," many people wrote responses such as, "Why are we focusing so much energy on this issue?" and "There are many other important issues." As I read through these responses in the church's archive, I had a growing sense of the absence of LGBTQ people themselves in the discussion (commiserate with my knowledge that the church had almost no openly LGBTQ members at the time). Members expressed frustration that discussions about "homosexuality" were taking up so much time and energy. However, it was clear that within the larger church structure in which the

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<sup>63</sup> In the interest of preserving the confidentiality of individuals in this particular congregation, I am choosing not to cite their archives with specific details.

congregation was operating, such discussions were *the* central theater for a large-scale battle over organizational identity.

### **Intentional ambiguity**

The Mennonite world that such congregations were negotiating was complex, and the larger Anabaptist world that BMC was negotiating, even more so. While the Church of the Brethren existed in one U.S. denomination (and still does), BMC and its Supportive Communities Network was initially dancing at walls formed by two distinct Mennonite denominations, each of which had member congregations in both the U.S. and Canada: the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC), and the Mennonite Church (MC). (The latter was sometimes called the Old Mennonite Church.) After a lengthy process beginning in the early nineties, the U.S. components of these two denominations merged into the Mennonite Church USA. Denominational mergers, common occurrences in U.S. Protestantism, are rarely without their contentious elements, and this one was no exception. Janeen Bersche Johnson, a professor of Mennonite polity at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, describes the tension in this way: “In 1999, as we were moving close to the process that brought the denominations together, there was very high anxiety across the church about the merger, but there was also high anxiety about membership issues, particularly the membership of gay and lesbian Christians.”

To further understand how LGBTQ Mennonites have negotiated church life, and how inclusive congregations have operated within their various denominational contexts, one needs a basic understanding of Mennonite polity. In a Christian denominational context, “polity” refers to the visible structures of authority and lines of accountability.



Who makes the rules, and how? Who answers to whom? For Mennonites, the answers to this question are not always straightforward. Christian polity generally falls into three types of organization: *episcopal*, a hierarchical structure in which authority is concentrated with bishops, *synodal* or *conference-based*, in which a gathered parliamentary body of churches holds authority, or *congregational*, which, at its purest level, allows congregations nearly full autonomy. Mennonites have generally held some combination of congregational and conference-based polity.<sup>64</sup>

Both the General Conference and the Mennonite Church were made up of geographically-based area conferences that existed under a larger denominational umbrella, but while GC polity was almost entirely congregational, MC polity was more mixed. Some MC area conferences were congregational in structure, but others were more conference-oriented, meaning that within the area conferences themselves, a more parliamentary process was in place. And while bishops were unthinkable to most GC Mennonites, MC conferences had a long tradition of bishops or elders, regional leaders who were empowered to exercise disciplinary power over the congregations in their jurisdiction without the check of parliamentary procedures, thus operating in a more episcopal fashion. The bishop tradition gradually faded among MCs, but one area conference, the Lancaster Mennonite Conference, retained the tradition.<sup>65</sup> Even today, under the MCUSA, Lancaster is one area conference that retains a bishop board (and by the rules still in place, all bishops must be men).

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<sup>64</sup> *Mennonite Church USA Polity Introduction*, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bElRm6Q7LP0&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bElRm6Q7LP0&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

Anne Breckbill, a former BMC activist who also experienced both MC and GC contexts, explained to me that the difference between MC and GC polities had more to do with theology than anything else. The structures were not that different, she said, except that when a congregation in the General Conference decided to leave their area conference to be independent or go elsewhere, their parting message was “We don’t agree with you.” When this happened in MC congregations, the message was, “God doesn’t agree with you.”<sup>66</sup> Su Flickinger, who in the early eighties served on jointly-run GC/MC committee studying human sexuality, offered a practical example: “Mennonite Church folks were much more aware of what their leadership might say or think about what was going on, and the General Conference folks [were] really impatient with that. It was like, no, we can make that decision, we don't have to go check it out with anybody.”<sup>67</sup>

While the decade of preparatory discussions leading up to the merger was trying for many Mennonites, queer Mennonites occupied a particularly challenging position within them. On the one hand, their presence was under perpetual discussion as a “challenging issue” standing in the way of denominational integration, an issue that must be managed through careful spiritual discernment. On the other, openly queer Mennonites themselves were consistently marginalized within the context of these discussions, and speaking on their own behalf often made them targets for verbal abuse. When verbal abuse happened in the context of church discussions, it often went unacknowledged as such by discussion leaders. Homosexuality was constructed as a political issue, and therefore public statements of church leaders often bemoaned the

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<sup>66</sup> Anne Breckbill, conversation with author, June 13, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Su Flickinger, interview by Amy Short, video recording, Riverdale, MD, June 4, 2012.

“extremists on both sides.” Public, denomination-level conversations were framed in such a way that queer people could be read as political extremists for the very act of being openly queer.

What were the consequences, for queer Mennonites, of these discussions? Minneapolis writer Lisa Pierce, a member of the St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship, spoke to me about the disciplinary processes that her congregation underwent throughout the nineties because of its LGBTQ-inclusive stance:

There's a lens of conflict resolution rather than justice that gets used. Those things don't need to be separate from one another, but in practical application they often are. **Because the conflict resolution model presumes that there are two equal parties coming to the table to have a conversation about a dispute** [emphasis mine]. But in fact, when these conversations happen, a queer person comes to the table and bares their life to who knows who...The stakes are not the same. It's not an equal power conversation, and it never has been. It's a setup that fails from the get-go. In some ways it can't be avoided, in order for people to begin having exposure [to queer people]. But the toll it takes is huge. It's brutal.<sup>68</sup>

BMC responded to this political climate in part by responding to this “conflict resolution model” with a competing interpretive framework that named power imbalance and violence in much more direct terms. The clearest example I have found of such an analysis is an essay written in 1999, three years before the merger was finalized, in response to a meeting between the BMC Board and several church leaders. Written by Breckbill and published on BMC’s website, the essay asks Mennonite leaders to take

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<sup>68</sup> Lisa Pierce, interview with author, October 23, 2013.

responsibility for “maintaining respect and fair play” in the discussions in question. Breckbill's essay is a comprehensive refutation of the church's framing of “the homosexual issue” as an object of denominational conversation, with an insistence on naming aggressive political tactics *as weapons*. “Do not tolerate the use of weapons,” she writes.

Not all weapons are crafted out of metal, but all are crafted for battle...Do not give consideration, time, or energy to conversations that are initiated by an act of violence (i.e. an anonymous mailing, phone call, or rumor that infringes on personal privacy or safety)...**Do not allow hostage taking and threats.** [emphasis in original] More and more, churches are threatening to leave—and to take their dollars with them...Name this as violence to the minority and to the process and be clear that threats are not an acceptable part of this dialogue...Have the courage to allow churches that issue ultimatums to leave if they insist.<sup>69</sup>

Breckbill's challenge was consistent with the growing body of queer Mennonite activist work in its insistence that what was happening was in fact a matter to be discussed in the terms of battle. It was also, by the rhetorical standards of Mennonite institutional leaders, completely inflammatory in its coupling of anti-gay theology and violence. Breckbill identified the primary means through which queer individuals had been intimidated or pushed out of Mennonite institutions—rumors and anonymous outings—as categorically intolerable. While “hostage-taking” resonated with those who had experienced such behaviors firsthand, it was far more potent language than most

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<sup>69</sup> Anne Breckbill, “Guidelines for Establishing and Maintaining 'Fair Play' in the Church's Dialogue about the Inclusion of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual People in the Church.” *Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests*, March 2, 1999, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://www.bmclgbt.org/fairplay.shtml>.

Mennonite leaders were willing to use themselves, even if they shared Breckbill's frustrations in private.

What was the "hostage-taking" that Breckbill referenced? Johnson's own account of the merging process, recounted in an educational video on Mennonite polity in early 2014, offers some hints:

In the 1980s and 90s, a few congregations who had been part of both a Mennonite Church conference and a General Conference Mennonite Church conference had been disciplined by their Mennonite Church but not their General Conference conference, for their openness to having gay and lesbian members... So the question was, as we move toward this new church, what happens to these disciplined churches when we merge? Are they in, or are they out? Each conference, or each denomination, wanted its perspective or process to be honored. So the conferences that had disciplined a congregation had worked at that for a long time... they didn't want that process just ignored, or thrown out. And on the other hand, the General Conference conferences that had not disciplined still regarded those congregations as part of them, and they wanted them to come into the new church with them.

So how to work through this issue? There was some careful work on this, and at a denominational gathering in 1999, the membership guidelines had proposed a way forward for this. And Mennonite Church Canada, which was one of the new entities to come out of this merger, was ready to go ahead with those membership guidelines, and they adopted them there. And so they use the original membership guidelines, which are different than the ones the Mennonite Church

USA uses. And in the US sections, the General Conference Mennonites were ready to accept the original membership guidelines, but the Mennonite Church delegates were not. And we had said that any vote had to pass both groups. So we were at a stalemate.

Any account like this requires some subtextual reading. Johnson's video is meant as an educational resource for everyone in the MCUSA, and as such, her language choices reflect a deliberate neutrality. She speaks of "careful work," conferences that had "worked [at disciplining pro-inclusion congregations] for a long time" and didn't want their work "thrown out." To name such behavior more directly as "hostage-taking," much as Breckbill did in her piece, would likely undermine the purpose of Johnson's video, an educational primer on polity meant for mass distribution within the ideologically disparate body of the MCUSA. Johnson continues:

Between 1999 and 2001, a membership guidelines committee, which I was a part of, revised the membership guidelines for the Mennonite Church USA, so that they would be able to pass both delegate bodies in 2001. So this is a compromise document. And **as a compromise document, it has a fair amount of ambiguity built into it intentionally.** [emphasis mine]<sup>70</sup>

Among the ambiguous phrases purposefully written into the final draft (for the U.S. denomination) of the membership guidelines was the phrase "teaching position." Its ambiguity reflects the differing views within what became the MCUSA body about the purpose of collective documents to Mennonites, and Anabaptists more generally.

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<sup>70</sup> *Mennonite Church USA Polity Introduction*, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bElRm6Q7LP0&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bElRm6Q7LP0&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

Anabaptism, is should be noted, is not a doctrinal approach to Christianity. Mennonites do not point to foundational documents beyond the Bible itself as the sources of their faith. Thus church statements are not construed as divinely inspired so much as they are meant to be reflections of communal will at a given point in history. Mennonites who identify strongly with congregational polity tend to also identify with a skeptical approach to corporate statements of belief. Thus, it is less surprising than it might seem that delegates who thought of themselves as inclusive to gay and lesbian members nonetheless ultimately signed onto what was, inarguably, an explicitly heterosexist statement (see footnote).<sup>71</sup> The membership guidelines committee members assured more

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<sup>71</sup> The committee Johnson references added the following text to the original 1999 guidelines to create the 2001 version. I have highlighted the phrases that Johnson singled out as deliberately ambiguous.

### III. Clarification on some issues related to homosexuality and membership

#### Introduction

For the last several years, issues of same-sex orientation and lifestyle have been the source of deep controversy in our nation and in the church. More particularly, the process of bringing together our two denominations was complicated by differing responses to congregations who have accepted persons in same sex relationships as members. There are several congregations, formerly members of two conferences, who were removed from membership by one of the conferences while retaining membership in the other. In various and significant ways, these disciplinary actions touch other congregations, area conferences, and the entire church. Many people are asking for clarification regarding the beliefs and practice of the Mennonite Church USA regarding the matter of homosexuality, particularly as it touches on issues of church membership. The following commitments and polity guide our discernment and practice:

#### Commitments

Our hearts belong to God, God's word and God's church. We will follow Jesus. We know what it is like to be misunderstood and misjudged. We have within our own history misunderstood and misjudged others, resulting in alienation and exclusion. Nevertheless, we hold the church as God's gift; and we hold the church's teaching as our best human understanding of God's way.

We hold the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) to be the **teaching position** of Mennonite Church USA. "We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life" (Article 19).

inclusive delegates that the guidelines were a temporary measure to hold the new denomination together during what its planners hoped would be a temporary period of fragility. For conservative conferences, however, the segment of the Membership Guidelines on “homosexuality” was foundational to their commitment to joining the MCUSA.

Johnson’s video hints at the differences between the way that church professionals approach and understand polity and the way laypeople do. To those who spend their professional lives negotiating the church’s institutional structure, polity has a different significance than it does for those who mainly encounter its effects indirectly. While the ambiguous nuances of the phrase “teaching position” may have seemed significant to the drafters of the membership guidelines, in other words, those ambiguities did not translate in the way that they hoped.

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We hold the Saskatoon (1986) and Purdue (1987) statements describing homosexual, extramarital and premarital sexual activity as sin to be the **teaching position** of Mennonite Church USA.

We hold the Saskatoon and Purdue statements calling for the church to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views to be the **teaching position** of Mennonite Church USA.

We hold the abuse of power, in its many forms, to be against the **teaching position** of Mennonite Church USA.

Our passion for the church remains undiminished. Our search for the truth finds answer in the scriptures. Our love for God through Christ lifts us up. Our vision for God’s people is healing and hope.

#### Polity

Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same- sex covenant ceremony. Such action would be grounds for **review** of their credentials by their area conference’s ministerial credentialing body. (See A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership, p. 125 for a list of other actions that may prompt such a review.)



The concept of a mandated “review” for pastors who performed same-sex marriages—another deliberate ambiguity—was similarly fraught. (While the membership guidelines claim that pastors can be “reviewed” for other actions as well, officiating same-sex marriage was the only transgression explicitly named in the membership guidelines, and is, to my knowledge, the only action for which any MCUSA pastor has been “reviewed” by their presiding area conference.) The ambiguity of the word “review” has made it possible for a dedicated handful of pastors to officiate such unions and keep their ministerial credentials. But for LGBTQ church members, the conservative vocabulary (“same-sex orientation and lifestyle”) and the heterosexist ethics of the membership guidelines are not so much ambiguous as condemnatory. In many ways, reading the document as tolerably ambiguous was a privilege denied to those whose bodies and identities represented the “issue” at hand.

Cynthia Lapp, a Maryland pastor whose credentials have been reviewed for performing same-sex marriages, described the founding of the Mennonite Church USA to me in this way:

The denomination, because it was two different churches that were brought together, I think on the backs of gay and lesbian people—they could not do the merger unless they wrote the membership guidelines that were **very explicit** [emphasis mine] about how to deal with marriage and pastors' credentials if they were to perform a [same-sex] wedding. The whole denomination was built in a very fragile manner. And so of course it's going to be hard to hold it together.

Basically, we came together as a denomination to say that gay people aren't right.

In essence, that became the central tenet of the denomination. Which is insane!<sup>72</sup>

Gerald J. Mast, a Mennonite communications scholar, offers a similarly unambiguous analysis on the origins of the MCUSA and the membership guidelines:

Mennonite Church USA was founded in what René Girard might call an act of collective violence: the official exclusion of LGBTQ people from full participation in the church...This section in the membership guidelines appears to have been offered as a concession to conservative area conferences and constituencies that were regarded as necessary to the formation of the denomination. Hence, the denomination at its founding made LGBTQ people and communities a kind of sacrificial scapegoat for all of the fears about denominational faithlessness and decline that threatened to thwart support for the new denomination.<sup>73</sup>

In identifying LGBTQ people as scapegoats for “fears about denominational faithlessness,” Mast encapsulated a forty-year struggle in which queer people were made to represent far more than themselves. The drafters of the merger used that symbolism as a foundation from which to build their denomination. They sold what they produced as a reasonable compromise. To queer Mennonites, it felt like a sacrifice.

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<sup>72</sup> Cynthia Lapp, interview with author, July 6, 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Gerald J. Mast, “Pink Menno's Pauline Rhetoric of Reconciliation.” *Pink Menno Press*, August 2013, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://www.pinkmenno.org/2013/08/pink-mennos-pauline-rhetoric-of-reconciliation/>.

## Language of the enemy

Last fall, I attended a structured conversation hosted by an area Mennonite conference, entitled “The Church and Homosexuality: A Conversation that Can Bring Us Together.” In April, a web article in *The Mennonite* (the MCUSA magazine) contained the following quote: “Homosexuality and church process, once thought to be dealt with, is rearing its head again in mystifying ways, with dust kicked up from both progressive and traditional camps.”<sup>74</sup> The structured conversation and the web article in question came from relatively progressive impulses. They both rely on a construction that is familiar to their audiences, that of “homosexuality” as a divisive political issue that needs to be “dealt with,” or something on which reasonable people can converse and disagree.

To LGBTQ Mennonites, this construction alone signals at best lack of neutrality. Wise said to me, “Any time we have a 'conversation about homosexuality'--that is pretty wildly offensive. And it's set up as a process that even in its naming, deals violence to a group of people. Because it doesn't even respect how we understand ourselves, or what the proper language is.”<sup>75</sup> Anti-gay conservatives, on the other hand, tend to read support for pro-inclusion politics in the very use of the acronyms “LGBT,” “LGBTQ,” or reappropriative usage of the word “queer.” (The broad inclusiveness of such terminology hints at a more drastic upending of conservatively gendered worldviews than “homosexuality” language can begin to accommodate.) Of conservative Christians talking about “homosexuality,” Mark Jordan has written that “a young man can repent of carnal copulations, he can bewail them (year after year) as so many falls, but once he

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<sup>74</sup> Brian Stucky, “Unconventional Wisdom.” *The Mennonite* (web exclusive), April 4, 2014, accessed May 6, 2014, [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/17-4/articles/Unconventional\\_wisdom](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/17-4/articles/Unconventional_wisdom).

<sup>75</sup> Wise, interview.

begins to describe them in the enemy's language, perhaps even to defend them, he is lost."<sup>76</sup> And indeed, if there is one shared understanding that LGBTQ Mennonites and vocally anti-queer Mennonites seem to have, it is that there is no neutral language with which to talk about their differences.

### **No neutral Jesus**

*The third way is not synonymous with being nice to each other. The truth is that Jesus' "rhetorical tone" varied widely depending on who he was talking to—and possibly how tired and cranky he was. He spoke gently to the children and the woman caught in adultery. He got testy with the disciples. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers." He turned over the money-changers' tables in the temple. If the third way means following Jesus, then it cannot also mean smiling and nodding and trying to make everyone happy all of the time."*<sup>77</sup>

—Joanna Harader, pastor, Peace Mennonite Church in Lawrence, Kansas

Despite the dearth of neutral language with which to talk about LGBTQ justice, or perhaps because of that dearth, some Mennonite church leaders have come to promote neutrality itself as a spiritual virtue. The most prolific of these has been MCUSA Executive Director Ervin Stutzman, who in October 2014 wrote the following:

I confess that I cannot imagine Jesus as a fiery advocate for the political approach on either side of many of these social issues. I believe he would be more likely to confront the rhetorical tone and many of the presuppositions and actions of all the parties in many of these public debates...I pray with hope that we can find a third way in Mennonite Church USA. We need not be divided by a party spirit, so that

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<sup>76</sup> Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love*. Xxi.

<sup>77</sup> Joanna Harader, "Let's Talk About the 'Third Way,'" *Spacious Faith*, June 2, 2014, <http://spaciousfaith.com/2014/06/03/lets-talk-about-the-third-way/>.

one side or the other must win. Rather, we must seek for shared values and norms for Christian living that benefit our whole community.<sup>78</sup>

In a denomination of “shared values” in which nobody “wins,” what becomes of sexuality and gender identity? More generally, what becomes of difference? Stutzman’s words hint not only towards his own relative ease in accessing the appearance of political neutrality, but also to his resonance with increasingly widespread institutional practices that uphold “civility” as a social contract, thus subsuming and reappropriating democratic discourses of justice in ways that ultimately reinscribe white male power again and again. Furthermore, Stutzman infuses his call for civility with theological weight by suggesting that Jesus himself cared more about “tone” than content. Peacemaking thus comes not from radical actions, but from pacifying ones; not from below, but from “the middle”; not from outcomes, but from process.

In the past year, Stutzman’s calls for civility and good behavior come out at least once a month, in the form of columns and blog posts that rapidly circulate among LGBTQ advocates with whom, unsurprisingly, Stutzman is deeply unpopular. The critiques that unapologetically queer Mennonites offer are not easy ones for a leader like Stutzman to hear, or to act upon. His difficulties are sourced in the ideological divides of the groups that the denominational merger brought together. Queer Mennonite activism is ideologically grounded in the social justice traditions of progressive Christianity and in feminist and civil rights discourses. White Mennonites who resist LGBTQ inclusion are far more likely to identify with evangelicalism. And Mennonites of color often identify

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<sup>78</sup> Harader, “Let’s Talk About the ‘Third Way.’”

with combinations of these traditions and discourses that baffle white-dominant understandings of movements, politics, and social change.

To navigate this complexity, MCUSA leaders rely on the very processes that Ressler, Wise, Pierce, and Yoder have singled out for their violent potential. MCUSA leaders, it should be said, are not uniformly hostile to or oblivious to these critiques. In the course of my research, I've heard denominational leaders express a wide range of responses to the critiques they receive from queer and ally Mennonites. It's clear that the individuals who serve on the overseeing boards and in appointed leadership positions in the MCUSA and its area conferences hold a range of theological views about sexual diversity, and not all of them oppose the inclusion of queer people.

But at the same time, few of these leaders, particularly at the executive level, have demonstrated understanding or acceptance of the charge that church processes of communal discernment are themselves violent. And perhaps this is unsurprising. Discernment processes is, quite simply, how everything gets done when single leaders are not held up as divinely appointed sources of truth. MCUSA leaders express a great deal of confidence in the idea that God is at work in the midst of discernment; in fact Stutzman, wrote a book about discernment entitled *Discerning God's Will Together: Biblical Interpretation in a Free Church Tradition*.<sup>79</sup> In another recent column entitled “Cultivating Indifference,” Stutzman again defends the practice of discernment as a way through the church's divisions, writing, “[Discernment] grows out of a deep desire to

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<sup>79</sup> Ervin R. Stutzman, *Discerning God's Will Together: Biblical Interpretation in the Free Church Tradition*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House LLC, 2013).

know God's will, unfettered by petty desires or selfish ambition.”<sup>80</sup> Everyone, he says, must leave their investments in a particular outcome at the door. For Mennonites like Stutzman, who have built careers in church institutions, this is what defines a peaceful process. Peacemaking happens through the supposed renunciation of power.

Whether or not such a message is his intention, his construction of the ideal discernment process implies that a church discussion is power-neutral territory. In practice, what Stutzman is communicating to LGBTQ Mennonites is that their desire for full inclusion in Mennonite communities is a “petty desire” or “selfish ambition.” He may, of course, also be communicating to heterosexist conservatives that their cherished notions of Biblical truth are also selfish and petty. The essential problem, though, from the social justice perspective that most queer-inclusive Mennonite advocates embrace, is that once again this construction creates the illusion of equal vulnerability.

The “third way” that Stutzman references in his earlier quote is a theological concept both beloved and contentious within Mennonite circles. As a practice of peacemaking, Mennonites often promote the “third way” as equivalent to compromise. In hands such as Stutzman’s the “third way” functions as an institutional practice for containing ideological conflict. The problem with Stutzman’s appeals is that the “shared values” he invokes are impossible to disentangle from the realm of power and politics, the very place that where he portrays Jesus as presiding in neutrality.

But how does one talk about the experience of violence in neutral language? When is naming an act as violence an authentic and defensible action, and when is it a provocation in need of calming censure from the appropriate authorities? In a world

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<sup>80</sup>Ervin Stutzman, “Cultivating Indifference.” *The Mennonite*, March 1, 2014, accessed May 6, 2014, [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/17-3/articles/Cultivating\\_indifference](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/17-3/articles/Cultivating_indifference).

where neutrality reigns, what happens to the anger that comes from violation, from subordination, from being rendered invisible? While Stutzman and other executives elided these questions with the calming tones of managers, queer Mennonites and their supporters were eyeing the temple tables, and planning what came next.



## **Chapter Two: Statements and Walls: Persons Associated With a Group Calling Itself Pink Mennos**

*The experience of Pink Mennos at Columbus in 2009 introduced a new level of engagement in controversial matters. ... The techniques of social advocacy and confrontation that we have taught young adults in our schools has come to haunt our church's most visible gathering, to the end that convention-goers feel immense pressure to take up sides against one another on [homosexuality].*

—Ervin Stutzman, Executive Director, Mennonite Church USA<sup>81</sup>

*To be unacceptable because one tries to live the values one was taught by one's family's elders—this is a great sin against the young.*

—Ruth Krall<sup>82</sup>

A group of Mennonites is gathered in the expansive hallway of a large, modern conference center, singing hymns printed in a pink booklet. Some sing obviously from memory. Inside the rooms around them are other Mennonites, attending bureaucratic meetings, structured dialogues, and worship services. These Mennonites in the hallway stand in a circle, but they self-consciously arrange their bodies to make the circle permeable. Some face outward; some angle themselves in an attempt to be present both inside and outside the circle; some hold stacks of pink hymn booklets while watching passers-by attentively; some passers-by will take the offered booklets and join the circle to sing. Many of those in the circle are wearing pink: scarves, bandannas, plastic bracelets, and t-shirts with inclusive slogans.

By almost any theoretical or popular definition one could invoke, the circle is queer. Its place in space is simultaneously marginal and central. It exists outside the doors

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Everett Thomas, “Unconventional Conventions?,” *The Mennonite*, May 1, 2011, [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/14-5/articles/Unconventional\\_conventions](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/14-5/articles/Unconventional_conventions).

<sup>82</sup> Ruth Krall, Comment, March 4, 2015. In Kauffman, Richard A., “Opinion: Mistakes, Regrets, Lessons,” *Mennonite World Review*, March 2, 2015, <http://mennoworld.org/2015/03/02/latest-issue/opinion-mistakes-regrets-lessons/>.

of the conference rooms, the sites of officially sanctioned Mennonite religious and communal practices, in the hallway. Almost all of the other Mennonites have to pass it as they go from room to room, to see and hear those within it and to decide how they will place their own bodies in relationship to it. Fear, discomfort, disgust and curiosity are all palpable in the area around the circle. The music is coming from queer mouths: gay and lesbian Mennonites, bisexual and gender non-conforming Mennonites, single Mennonites, Mennonites like myself who aspire to be straight allies and thus identify themselves in relationship with queer people and queer communities. Almost all of us know how to sing four-part harmony, and sing well. Many of these people are in tears, or have been, or will be at least once during the time that they spend in the circle.

This is a scene that has played out multiple times, in multiple settings: in 2009 in Columbus, Ohio; in 2011 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and in 2013 in Phoenix, Arizona, at the national, biennial conventions of Mennonite Church USA. Most of the members of these circles identify with Pink Menno, a loose, mostly web-maintained network of queer- and ally- identified Mennonites. While people of all ages at Mennonite conventions wear Pink Menno t-shirts and stand in such circles to sing hymns, the network is strongly associated with youth. This is in part because the original organizers of Pink Menno were in their twenties at the time of its founding, but just as much, the association has to do with the fact that a conspicuously large percentage of people who are drawn to Pink Menno at conventions are teenagers and adults under thirty. Pink Menno operates with the financial and organizational help of Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBT Interests; it is not a discrete organization so much as it is the public face of current LGBTQ Mennonite activism. “I think we're uniquely poised in the

Mennonite church,” Carol Wise said to me in our 2013 interview, several months after the Phoenix convention. “We have the activist piece of Pink Menno. BMC’s the infrastructure. We have the educational resources; we have the connections.”<sup>83</sup>

Despite or perhaps because of its contribution to this enviable position, Pink Menno has both confounded and infuriated Mennonite denominational leaders and process brokers for the duration of its existence. The visible youth of the movement lays bear an uncomfortable, undeniable truth to church leaders: the millennial generation of churchgoers are the most LGBTQ-accepting demographic in the Mennonite church and also the most likely to leave the church. This translocal trend towards queer-friendly youth exists alongside an adamant faction of anti-queer churches, located primarily (but not exclusively) in the northeastern U.S. and within historically MC area conferences, that seems poised to leave MCUSA over what they see as its excessive tolerance of homosexuality and overly permissive sexual politics. In defending their claims, the leaders of these churches refer to denominational statements of conservative sexual ethics as proof that queer-friendly churches have betrayed their commitments to MCUSA.

There is much to be learned about the workings of power in the absence of unambiguous hierarchies by observing the ways in which MCUSA leaders have interacted with, avoided interacting with, and attempted to discursively manage Pink Menno in face of this overwhelming generational reality and its backlash. These have included: portraying Pink Menno as a general danger to youth, portraying Pink Menno leaders and supporters as exclusively white agents of racial discord,<sup>84</sup> portraying Pink

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<sup>83</sup> Carol Wise, interview with author, October 22, 2013.

<sup>84</sup> Based on my observations at MCUSA conventions, I would state at least anecdotally that the younger Pink Menno members are, the less homogeneously white they are. (I

Menno as pushers of an irrelevant political agenda that is “of the world,” reducing Pink Menno to its relative youth and assuming a parental voice in relation to it, portraying Pink Menno as vengeful abusers of social media, isolating Pink Menno from its larger context as part of a forty-year movement, and above all, resisting and silencing intersectional analysis that takes LGBTQ identities seriously as a category of marginalized existence.

Taken in total, I refer to these techniques as “managing difference,” and Mennonites did not, obviously, invent them. Because so much of the power of executive Mennonite leaders is exerted through denominational publications and press releases, the most conspicuous means through which these techniques have been practiced are public instances of what M. Jacqui Alexander calls “subordinating speech acts.” Such acts accrue power when “the speakers in question have authority and when, through that authority, *they can stop another’s speech from counting as the action it was intended to be.*”<sup>85</sup> The struggle between Pink Mennos and denominational representatives has been fought over the questions of “who has authority, what is its source, who confers or denies it, and who struggles to gain ownership of it all.”<sup>86</sup> In these discursive battlegrounds, denominational statements overwhelmingly operate as an anti-queer cudgel within a larger arsenal of heterosexist weaponry. This chapter is an attempt to understand the nature and effects of that cudgeling. I argue that the historical context and even the actual

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have also observed that my own generation, approximately ages thirty-five to forty-five, is conspicuously absent from Pink Menno, with the exception of pastors. I see far more Pink Menno t-shirts on people who appear to be in their fifties, sixties, and seventies.)

<sup>85</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 123-24.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

words of these statements matter far less than the social and symbolic meanings they have been given in battles over LGBTQ inclusion.

### **The wall and the arm**

As I noted in the first chapter, Sara Ahmed writes in her work on institutional diversity practices of the frequency with which her informants, diversity workers at universities, used “the wall” as a metaphor for their experiences trying to facilitate the kind of inclusive transformations that they were ostensibly employed to create.<sup>87</sup> The wall is that which is resistant to any genuine disruption of the power relations already in place. The wall hurts when you come up against it: “No wonder that when the wall keeps its place, it is you that becomes sore.”<sup>88</sup> Almost by definition, those for whom institutional power is easily obtained and retained cannot perceive the wall. In fact, they are often baffled by the insistence that the wall exists, and will even at times insist that the wall is a fabrication of those who define themselves through unnecessary opposition.

In recent work that builds on her diversity research, Ahmed follows the concept of “willfulness” through multiple cultural and historical sources.<sup>89</sup> Notably, “willfulness” is rarely attributed to those who speak with authority that is affirmed by cultural norms. It is a childish quality, one to be overcome through wisdom and maturity. In Mennonite contexts, authority means the power to assert what is best for the common good: the

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<sup>87</sup> Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 26.

<sup>88</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Feeling Depleted?,” *Feministkilljoys*, accessed September 2, 2014, <http://feministkilljoys.com/2013/11/17/feeling-depleted/>.

<sup>89</sup> Sara Ahmed, “A Willfulness Archive,” *Theory & Event* 15, no. 3 (2012), [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v015/15.3.ahmed.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v015/15.3.ahmed.html).

common good is what is in accordance with God's will. And thus, expressions of will must be ranked. Not all individuals are fit to speak for the common good.

To illustrate the difference between willfulness and will, Ahmed uses a Grimm's fairy tale about a child whom God causes to die because she refuses to mind her mother. When the child is buried, her arm repeatedly shoots up from beneath the ground, defiant of the death it has been dealt. The arm, in fact, will not stay buried, not until the mother of the willful child takes a rod and beats the arm back into the ground. Finally, the child stays dead. The willful arm remains buried, forced into submission by the rod, the stronger will of the mother and by extension, of a parental God.<sup>90</sup>

Ahmed writes of the story, "it teaches us to read the distinction between will and willfulness as a grammar, as a way of ordering human experience, as a way of distributing moral worth."<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, it invokes "the promissory logic of the family" as a means of interpreting different acts of will, a logic that imposes heteropatriarchal order on sex and reproduction and casts "queerness as self-regard" (or in the more prevalent Mennonite language, "individualism"). The parent represents God's will, and those who deviate from God's will must be punished as children.

I am drawn to this story as an interpretive map for Mennonite institutional discourse on difference and diversity because of its unflinching portrayal of violence at the hands of a parent. In Mennonite discussions about LGBTQ people, as is the case in many Christian settings, familial logic is rarely far from the surface; the rejection of LGBTQ people is often delivered in a parental language of loving disapproval. Familial logic allows heterosexual Christians to subvert the accusations of bigotry that they often

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

receive. Bigots commit violence out of hate; parents enact discipline out of love. While such expressions of disapproving love for queer Mennonites may well be genuine at times, they are also subordinating acts of power that attempt to reduce queer people to a state of rhetorical adolescence.

As a means of social regulation, parental logic works in concert with the currently dominant U.S. political ideology that grants citizenship and social legitimacy through the private lens of family and heteronormative relations.<sup>92</sup> It also falls into a specifically Anabaptist genealogy of disciplinary action against nonconforming community members, expressed through the practices of shunning, excommunication, or the withholding of communion. Menno Simons, the sixteenth century Anabaptist leader from whom Mennonites take their name, labeled such practice as “Loving Admonition.”<sup>93</sup> Anabaptists demanded the freedom to practice religious faith without authoritarian intervention, but the realities of persecution and forced migration meant that much of Anabaptist praxis developed within small, separatist communities within which some community members were granted considerable authority over others. The irony of this legacy is that while powerful Mennonites almost always employ a rhetoric of separation from “the world” to justify their power and manage dissent, their ability to theologially distance themselves from power simultaneously primes them to accept and reproduce patterns of social inequality that are much bigger than Mennonites.

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<sup>92</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>93</sup> John Horsch, *Menno Simons, His Life, Labors, and Teachings* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1916), 275.

## Breaking silence

*It may be that God is ready to use revolution as a prelude to resurrection...Most of our people will never be ready for the requirements of the hour, and we cannot longer wait for them.*

—Vincent Harding, “Record of the Meeting of Church Leaders for a Discussion on Racial and Civil Rights Problems.”<sup>94</sup>

On New Year’s Eve in 2008, Jennifer Yoder, a queer sexual violence survivors’ advocate in her mid-twenties, wrote down a plan. She and her older brother, Luke Yoder, had been hanging out over the holiday break, trying to think of ways that they could create queer visibility and activism at the upcoming Mennonite Church USA convention in Columbus, Ohio. The Yoders were aware of the history of BMC, and of the work of pro-inclusion straight pastors. Only a month earlier, a group of these pastors had circulated an “Open Letter to MCUSA” among other Mennonite pastors, calling for support for LGBTQ inclusion.<sup>95</sup> “We must acknowledge that the Church is already divided,” the letter read. “We have been willing to sacrifice our LGBT brothers and sisters, their families and friends to preserve a presumed unity.”<sup>96</sup> The first draft of Jennifer Yoder’s document was entitled, “Gaying Up the Mennos.”<sup>97</sup> Once the document started to circulate, she changed the title to “Pink Campaign.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Memo from September 14, 1963, quoted in Tobin Miller Shearer, “Moving Beyond Charisma in Civil Rights Scholarship: Vincent Harding’s Sojourn with the Mennonites, 1958-1966,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82, April 2008: 213–48.

<sup>95</sup> Cynthia Lapp, Sheri Hostetler, Weldon Nisly, “Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA,” *Open Letter to MCUSA*, April 1, 2009, <http://openlettertomcusa.blogspot.com/search/label/letter>.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Jennifer Yoder, email message to author, September 18, 2014, used with permission.

<sup>98</sup> Jennifer Yoder, “Pink Campaign,” January 2009.



At the top of the page, Jennifer Yoder wrote the Martin Luther King quote, “There comes a time when silence is betrayal.”<sup>99</sup> The quote, taken from King’s speech, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,”<sup>100</sup> was a revealing choice. The speech was delivered a year to the day before his assassination, marking the public moment when King linked what the violence committed by the United States against the poor of Vietnam with the segregated, racialized poverty of the United States itself. For Mennonites aware of the speech and its history, it had a particular and not entirely comfortable resonance: “Beyond Vietnam” was drafted by King’s close friend, the civil rights leader and historian Vincent Harding. For most of the sixties, Harding and his wife, Rosemarie, were the foremost voices in U.S. Mennonite communities advocating for activism against racist oppression. Rosemarie Harding was a graduate of Goshen College, a Mennonite school, and her husband came to the Mennonite church through her influence. The Hardings worked for many years with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), but after a series of disillusionments with white Mennonites’ reticence to involve themselves in civil rights action, they left their MCC positions and the Mennonite church. “Beyond Vietnam” was penned around the same time that the Hardings were departing from the Mennonite world, and in its linkage of U.S. militarism to the domestic sins of racism and poverty, white Mennonites could well hear a subtext of rebuke of their own failures to live their nonviolent commitments with consistency.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> King, Martin Luther, “Beyond Vietnam,” April 4, 1967, [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_beyond\\_vietnam/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/).

<sup>101</sup> For more on the Hardings and Mennonites, see Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

Jennifer Yoder knew this history. Like the Hardings, her definition of violence was expansive and intersectional<sup>102</sup>, and perhaps most saliently for the task at hand, encompassed not only what *was* done but also what *wasn't*. After the merger of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church into MCUSA, in an effort to control public expressions of disagreement over LGBTQ inclusion, the denominational magazine, *The Mennonite*, announced a “moratorium” on articles and letters from readers addressing “Mennonite Church USA’s teaching position on sexuality.”<sup>103</sup> While this action was presented as politically neutral, even as an act of healing, Yoder’s plan made it clear that at least in some corners, it was not experienced as such. Under the first section of her plan, “Goals,” she wrote, “Moratorium on queer issues in *The Mennonite* lifted.”<sup>104</sup> This silence—the action of inaction—was not neutral, as Yoder made clear with another goal: “Apology from Mennonite church for silencing and/or committing spiritual violence against queers.”<sup>105</sup>

Yoder’s goals also included queer ordination and queer marriage (neither of which had been particularly central to the work of BMC<sup>106</sup>). While they were on her list, they were only two of nine bullet points that included conference-wide acceptance for queer members<sup>107</sup>, “queer issues addressed at home congregations,” and the ambiguous goal to have statements and delegate votes “on these issues.”<sup>108</sup> But her most immediate

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<sup>102</sup> Harding also spoke out for LGBTQ rights. See

<sup>103</sup> Thomas, Everett, “Conflict Is Normal,” *The Mennonite*, January 1, 2013, <https://themennonite.org/opinion/conflict-normal/>.

<sup>104</sup> Yoder, Jennifer, “Pink Campaign.”

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Wise, interview, October 22, 2013.

<sup>107</sup> Yoder, Jennifer, “Pink Campaign.”

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

and comprehensive aspiration was the most achievable and fully developed: “To demonstrate a queer and ally presence at the Mennonite convention in Columbus.”<sup>109</sup>

**Possible Actions at the Convention:**

**ALL ACTIONS ARE OPTIONAL. PINK BLOC MEMBERS CHOOSE HOW INVOLVED THEY WILL BE IN EACH ACTION. IT IS NOT NECESSARY THAT PINK BLOC MEMBERS AGREE WITH EVERY ACTION BEING TAKEN. THEY MAY DISSOCIATE THEMSELVES FROM ANY ACTIONS THEY CHOOSE NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN.**

- Wearing excessive amounts of pink at all times!
  - Providing extra pink for forgetful folks and people who decide to join us there
  - Varying tactics including sitting together in a bloc, spreading out to spread the pink love, telling everyone in sight why you’re wearing pink, etc.
  - Special “I’m pink and I vote!” shirts for the delegates!
- Pink sheets of paper with talking points
  - Repeating talking points ad nauseum to everyone in sight
  - Excessive cheerfulness in the delivery!
    - We do not engage in hate or with hate
    - If hate is encountered, text other pink bloc members and they will come with back-up cheer!
    - Block hateful presentations with loving songs like Kumbaya
  - Presenting talking points formally in workshops and/or worship services

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

- Hold formal or informal workshops to present the talking points...
- Contact the press!...<sup>110</sup>

The list was longer than what I have included here, and contained ideas for continuing the campaign beyond Columbus: withholding tithes from non-inclusive churches, formal withdrawals of membership until the church became more inclusive, “wear[ing] pink to church every Sunday until goals are met.”<sup>111</sup> The plan balanced a relentless determination for cheerfulness with a refusal of shame or apology.

The Yoders put their plan into action. After recruiting a few queer and ally Mennonite friends, they started a social network site, contacted the congregations and pastors they knew to be inclusive, and contacted leadership in BMC, which quickly became their main source of financial support. By July, the month of the MCUSA convention, they had implemented many of their plans. They were prepared with talking points, hymnbooks, custom pink t-shirts, and a name: Pink Menno. On July 2, near the beginning of the convention, they held a press conference with nearly one hundred pink-clad Mennonites in attendance. Cynthia Lapp, pastor of the Hyattsville Mennonite Church in Hyattsville, Maryland, was among the speakers there, and reflected on the experience:

So I made a statement at the press conference, and the MCUSA people did not like—I mean, we don't air our dirty laundry like this in public. This is something that we deal with internally. Then the AP picked it up, so it was in all the local papers where there are big Mennonite communities. It was brilliant. It really kickstarted stuff. It really made people have to start talking. But it upset people in

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

leadership because they didn't know how to deal with it. They would much rather just not talk about it.<sup>112</sup>

From the standpoint of the denominational leaders who only ten years earlier had negotiated a denominational merger with an anti-gay policy as the final bargaining chip, Pink Menno was terrifyingly successful in terms of its visibility and its impact.

In addition to wearing pink t-shirts and holding a press conference, Pink Menno members sang a cappella<sup>113</sup> hymns in the hallways of the convention center during high-traffic moments when people were passing from one event to the next. As a strategy for establishing themselves as a non-threatening but persistent presence, hymn-singing had many advantages, not the least of which was its traditionally central role in Mennonite worship. Mennonite hymnologists Marlene Kropf and Kenneth Nafziger have written that, “In the absence of a weekly eucharistic tradition, singing functions for Mennonites as sacraments do in liturgical churches.”<sup>114</sup> Pink Menno also boasted a number of gifted singers and songleaders. At the very least, their singing was an affective presence for Mennonites who grew up with the kind of four-part singing that they were doing.

I did not attend the Columbus convention, which happened the summer before I began my doctoral studies, though I followed the Pink Menno social networking site closely, as well as the official church press coverage of the week. In interviews as well as casual conversations over the intervening years, a number of queer Mennonites and their

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<sup>112</sup> Cynthia Lapp, interview with author, July 6, 2011.

<sup>113</sup> Singing a cappella is part of the Swiss Mennonite worship tradition of the pre-2002 Mennonite Church. General Conference congregations generally used organ, piano, or other instrumental accompaniment. The practices of MCUSA congregations tend to reflect their previous conference affiliations, but hybrid approaches to worship music are not uncommon.

<sup>114</sup> Marlene Kropf, Kenneth Nafziger, and John Bell, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 27.

supporters have related to me traumatic and upsetting stories of their encounters in Columbus. “It was our first year,” Jennifer Yoder said, “And so we surprised and scared the shit out of everybody with our sheer numbers. It brought out the fury.”<sup>115</sup> Audrey Roth Kraybill, a self-described “Pink Menno Mom” who became involved in LGBTQ activism after her young adult son came out as gay, described “hate stares” from onlookers in Columbus; the only time she saw hate that palpable, she said, was when a KKK rally came to her town.<sup>116</sup> Jennifer Yoder, like a number of Pink Mennos, had daily encounters with verbal harassment and hate speech. In a letter written after the convention, Luke Yoder and his Pink Menno colleague Luke Miller described the incidents to James Schrag, the Executive Director of MCUSA:

[The incidents] included being browbeaten with the Bible, being called fag, being verbally abused, and in many instances being driven to tears. Please take a minute to picture the numerous youth and adults, both gay and straight that had been verbally attacked to the point of tears. This is what we witnessed all week.<sup>117</sup>

The intensity of these attacks, combined with the indifference to them from denominational authorities, signaled the limit for Jennifer Yoder. The queer co-founder of Pink Menno stepped away from both the movement and the Mennonite church, leaving Pink Menno strategy for the next two conventions in the hands of her straight brother and another wave of young (and for several years, mostly male-identified) leaders. Looking back on the group emails that came through my inbox in the weeks after Columbus, I saw her work already being overlooked. “Maybe it took a non-cynical straight young person

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<sup>115</sup> Jennifer Yoder, Facebook message to author, July 3, 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Audrey Roth Kraybill, interview with author, July 9, 2011.

<sup>117</sup> Luke Miller and Luke Yoder, “Letter to James Schrag,” July 21, 2009.

with good political instincts like Luke Yoder to help us realize what is possible today and how to achieve it!” wrote one person.<sup>118</sup> The events of the next few years would show that in founding Pink Menno, both of the Yoders displayed remarkable political instincts. But the price of engagement with church institutions was almost always steeper for queer people than it was for their supporters. “Columbus was damaging enough that I needed a break,” Jennifer Yoder wrote to me in 2014.<sup>119</sup> It was through non-Mennonite queer communities, friendships, and secular social justice work that she found enough healing and strength to consider confronting Mennonites again.

### **The social life of church statements**

While Pink Menno worked to transform unofficial convention spaces in Columbus, the other site of possibility for pro-LGBTQ activists was in the delegate session, where a statement entitled “Resolution on Following Christ and Growing Together as Communities Even in Conflict” was up for passage.<sup>120</sup> Despite this broad title, the text named the specific purpose of the resolution as “current and ongoing debate about the issue of human sexuality.”<sup>121</sup> By the pre-determined code of Mennonite decision-making, “the issue of human sexuality” referred to LGBTQ people (for historical reasons I will explain below). After the convention was over, queer-friendly delegates and observers had one minor victory to celebrate, contained in the phrase, “We

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<sup>118</sup> Email to Brethren Mennonite Council listserv, July 12, 2009.

<sup>119</sup> Jennifer Yoder, Facebook message to author, July 3, 2014. Used with permission.

<sup>120</sup> Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly, Columbus, Ohio, “Resolution on Following Christ and Growing Together as Communities Even in Conflict,” July 4, 2009, [http://resources.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Resolution\\_full\\_even-in-conflict.pdf](http://resources.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Resolution_full_even-in-conflict.pdf).

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

acknowledge the statements by Mennonite Church USA on Human Sexuality, which have been previously passed and are currently in place, while we also acknowledge the presence of dissenting voices within our denomination.”<sup>122</sup> In the original proposed text, the first “acknowledge” in this sentence was “affirm,” so that the statement read, “We affirm the statements by Mennonite Church USA....”<sup>123</sup> The change from “affirm” to “acknowledge” signaled a subtle recognition that the statements in question did not hold the same authority for everybody. Given how little attention the resolution has received since 2009, it is reasonable to conclude that this small change made little difference to anybody who was not actually physically present in the delegate session. “It appears that they've washed the bucket into which they have poured the same old excrement,” wrote one gay observer in a group email.<sup>124</sup>

To interpret these events, it helps to understand the ambiguous role of statements and resolutions in the history of Mennonite denominations. In my previous chapter, I explained this ambiguity as it came to bear during the denominational merger of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church into MCUSA, particularly within the context of the 2001 Membership Guidelines. The Membership Guidelines, however, are part of a complicated lineage of corporate statements tracing back to the 1980s that codify married heterosexuality as the baseline of Mennonite sexual ethics, and map sexual deviance onto queerness (constructed as homosexuality).

Anabaptist practice is shaped by a rejection of the idea that any church institution can produce authoritative or permanent doctrine. That rejection was crafted in the very

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Email to Brethren Mennonite Council listserv, July 4, 2009.

<sup>124</sup> Email to Brethren Mennonite Council listserv, July 4, 2009.



specific historical context of sixteenth-century Western Europe, when the doctrines that Anabaptists were rejecting were indistinguishable from the dictates of the state. To trace the complicated history of how Anabaptists interpreted the role of authoritative statements within the multiple communal formations that they have created in the intervening centuries is beyond the scope of this project. What is most relevant from that history, perhaps, is the constancy of questions related to power. How does power survive and reconfigure after the dissolution of a particular legalistic structure or hierarchy? When the idea of doctrine is rejected, what happens next? Do we recreate doctrine under different names? And, returning to the question of the previous chapter: who is granted the authority to answer such questions? How does power survive the death of doctrine?

In Mennonite contexts, corporate statements come to contain the competing wills of the multiple and overlapping communities into which they are deployed: the will to be done with a social disruption that is deemed inappropriate; the will to contain that disruption within manageable parameters; the will to enable social transformation. At the denominational level, such statements are created through a process in which congregations or coalitions of congregations propose resolutions, which are then vetted by a committee that decides whether or not they will be presented to a delegate body at the denominational convention, made up of representatives from every church in the denomination. After some moderated discussion on the delegate floor, the delegates vote. The statements are then theoretically operative, but there is no shared understanding of how they are interpreted, who is held accountable for breaking them, and how long they are intended to be in effect.

In my time talking to Mennonites about the series of corporate statements that cemented the practices of LGBTQ exclusion in the General Conference, pre-2002 Mennonite Church, and post-2002 MCUSA, I learned that few Mennonites have any knowledge of any such statements that do not somehow pertain to regulation of sexuality. Yet MCUSA delegates do propose and pass resolutions on other things. In 2009, the “affirm/acknowledge” debate happened within the same delegate body that passed two other resolutions as well, one stating opposition to human trafficking,<sup>125</sup> and one on “National Healthcare Policy” that, given the embattled context of healthcare debates before and during the Obama administration, could be perceived as astoundingly partisan.<sup>126</sup> One line, for instance, reads, “We will ask our members and congregations to urge their congressional representatives to support legislation that would extend access to healthcare to all Americans, particularly the poor and disadvantaged, while we engage local healthcare needs.”<sup>127</sup> How could a line with this much political specificity pass with little lasting controversy, while the difference between “affirm” and “acknowledge” in a vaguely-worded statement about sexuality generated lasting rancor and even despair?

I contend that the symbolism projected onto queer bodies holds more power in MCUSA than any statement or polity arrangement. The general waning of

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<sup>125</sup> Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly, Columbus, Ohio, “Statement against Human Trafficking, Modern Day Slavery,” *Mennonite Church USA*, July 4, 2009, <http://resources.mennoniteusa.org/resource-center/resources/statements-and-resolutions/statement-against-human-trafficking/>.

<sup>126</sup> Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly, Columbus, Ohio, “Resolution on National Healthcare Policy: Next Step,” *Mennonite Church USA*, July 4, 2009, <http://resources.mennoniteusa.org/resource-center/resources/statements-and-resolutions/national-healthcare-policy/>.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

denominational identity in U.S. Christianity<sup>128</sup> and rise of sexual and reproductive politics as identity-defining factors for U.S. Christians are part of the broader context that has made this the case. Mennonites have their own particular history within that context. For Mennonites who are old enough to remember the 1980s, I learned that the surest way to hear about that history was to say, “Tell me about Saskatoon and Purdue.”

### **Sex and symbols**

*The space was a little bit open, to actually talk about this stuff. To me, that was part of the travesty of Saskatoon and Purdue. Those statements were what backed people into corners.*

—Su Flickinger<sup>129</sup>

In early 1980s, the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church commissioned a jointly-run study of human sexuality, which was to conclude with a report that might then be disseminated to congregations for educational purposes.<sup>130</sup> For four years, a committee of carefully selected professionals (psychologists, pastors, theologians and other church leaders) in both conferences met regularly to discuss what belonged in the document. Su Flickinger, who later came out as gay and became active in Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBT Interests, was a college student when the study began, and by far the youngest member of the committee.

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<sup>128</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>129</sup> Su Flickinger, interview with the author, November 23, 2013.

<sup>130</sup> Loren Johns, “Homosexuality and the Mennonite Church,” *Homosexuality and the Mennonite Church*, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://ljohns.ambs.edu/H&MC.htm>.

The report they produced, released in 1985, was entitled *Human Sexuality and the Christian Life: A Working Document for Study and Dialogue*.<sup>131</sup> Its contents—which I never encountered as a Mennonite churchgoer, only as a researcher—took me by surprise with their relative lack of rule-based dogma. Its emphasis was less on conclusions and more on pinpointing the relevant questions that a congregation might discuss in the context of sexual education. At the time that I first encountered the document in my research, my level of frustration with purity discourses and theological inattentiveness to questions of power and consent in sexuality was at an all-time high. But the study guide did not focus on purity as an ethical barometer. Even the chapter on homosexuality was far more nuanced than I expected. “[Homophobia] can arise from lack of acquaintance with homosexual persons,” read one section. “In other cases, where heterosexual persons have difficulty accepting their own sexual feelings, they find it confusing to come to terms with feelings so different from their own.”<sup>132</sup> In addition to this discreet suggestion that homophobic straight people turn the mirror of examination onto themselves, the section worked to discredit dominant fictions about gay people: “Homosexual persons are neither child molesters nor given to violence because of their sexual orientation. They are not necessarily driven by their sexual desires to any greater degree than are heterosexuals.”<sup>133</sup> The closest the section comes to a definitive “ruling” is the following:

The Committee on Human Sexuality in the Christian Life calls on Mennonite congregations to prayerfully study and discern their response to homosexual persons. The material in this section of the report is intended to be helpful in this

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<sup>131</sup> *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life* (Newton, KS and Scottdale, PA: Faith and Life Press and the Mennonite Publishing House, 1985), <http://ljohns.ambms.edu/hsc1/hsc10.htm>.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

discernment process. While the committee could not come to one mind as to openness to all of the alternatives above, it does urge the church to continue to uphold the traditional sexual ethic which does not allow promiscuity or sexual relationships **outside of a covenantal relationship**.<sup>134</sup>

“Outside of a covenantal relationship”: some ambiguities are tolerable, but perhaps not this one. Why not write “outside of a heterosexual marriage?” My sense of surprise at the open-ended nature of the Study Guide was likely rooted in the fact that I grew up in a Mennonite church that was shaped by what happened next.

Flickinger described how, in the course of their creating the study guide, the boards of both denominations began to pressure the committee to make a statement on sexuality that could be voted on by delegates in the upcoming denominational conventions, held in, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan for the General Conference in 1986, and Purdue, Indiana for the Mennonite Church in 1987.<sup>135</sup> The committee challenged that demand, many of them pointing out that after four years of discussion, they were far from capable of drafting a statement that reflected the complexity of the material they had covered. The denominational leaders seemed determined to get a corporate statement out of the process, however, and when the committee did not forward their own version, the boards created their own. In Saskatoon in 1986 and in Purdue in 1987, each denomination passed a version of the same statement, against the advice of the study guide committee.

The one-page statement contained three sections, an “Affirmation,” “Confession,” and

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid. Emphasis mine.

<sup>135</sup> Flickinger, interview with author, November 23, 2013. At this point, recall that before the mergers that created MCUSA and Mennonite Church Canada, the General Conference and the Mennonite Church were both bi-national denominations (though the GCMC had a much higher percentage of its population in Canada than the Mennonite Church).

lastly, “Covenant,” which contained the text that was to have the most lasting effect on Mennonites’ denominational future:

We covenant with each other to study the Bible together and expand our insight into the biblical teachings relating to sexuality. We understand the Bible to teach that sexual intercourse is reserved for a man and woman united in marriage and that violation of this teaching is a sin. It is our understanding that this teaching also precludes premarital, extramarital and homosexual sexual activity.<sup>136</sup>

In his encyclopedia article, “Homosexuality and the Mennonite Church,” Loren Johns writes, “The original committee was disappointed with how few congregations actually studied their document.”<sup>137</sup> Flickinger put it more bluntly: “A whole bunch of churches then said, well, if we're going to vote on a statement, why even bother with the guide? If the answer is going to be given to us, why study for the test?...Ever since then I've had very little belief in statements. All they do is cut off conversation.”<sup>138</sup> For gay and lesbian Mennonites, the Saskatoon/Purdue debacle was further soured by the experiences that BMC representatives had with homophobic church members at the conventions themselves. Frank Trnka, a longtime BMC member, recalled his own experience at Saskatoon:

One of the most rabidly homophobic and dismissive people in the open mic discussions was a minister from Oklahoma who came up to the mic with his ten-year –old son and said, “Even my son can figure out that this isn’t natural!” The next day this minister came, I was sitting somewhere just having a cup of coffee

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<sup>136</sup> “Resolutions on Human Sexuality Compared,” accessed March 15, 2015, <http://ljohns.ams.edu/Resolutions.htm>.

<sup>137</sup> Loren Johns, “Homosexuality and the Mennonite Church.”

<sup>138</sup> Su Flickinger, interview by Amy Short, video recording, Riverdale, MD, June 4, 2012.

and this minister came over and sat and talked. He asked if I had dinner plans that night, and if I was interested in having dinner with him away from the conference. And that he'd always sort of wondered what it would be like to be with a man. I was like, oh really? [laughs] Yeah, I know where this is going. No, we're not doing this, but thanks for letting me know that you're really another closeted homophobe.<sup>139</sup>

Stories like Trnka's are not uncommon among LGBTQ Mennonites who have lived through decades of church process. The effect of the Saskatoon/Purdue statements was a general trend away from discussions of sexuality and sexual ethics *in general*, despite the fact that the commissioned study guide contained twenty distinct sections on the subject, only one of which concerned homosexuality. It seemed that homosexuality was the only sexual topic that mattered. Thus it came to be that in the context of structured "dialogues about homosexuality," which continued throughout the eighties and nineties, LGBTQ Mennonites bore the weight of their churches' more general sexual repressions. "It was becoming creepy, and voyeuristic," Carol Wise said. "We were being used for people to project all kinds of their own sexual stuff, to test out and work on it, on our bodies."<sup>140</sup> Queer Mennonites' cynicism about denominational statements cannot be separated from their literal, embodied histories of absorbing the consequences of sexual silence.

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<sup>139</sup> Frank Trnka, interview by Amy Short, video recording, Minneapolis, MN, June 11 and July 31, 2011.

<sup>140</sup> Wise, interview.

## **Persons associated with a group calling themselves PinkMennos [sic]**

*I think part of the silencing of LGBT people and women and communities of color is not because people aren't convinced intellectually or Biblically or theologically. I think it's because we don't want these people to talk. Because they know too much.*

—Carol Wise

James Schrag, the first executive director of the Mennonite Church USA (he held the position from the denomination's inception until the end of 2009) was a longtime Mennonite process broker. As a central figure in the negotiations of the General Conference/Mennonite Church merger, Schrag was one of the new denomination's foremost spokespeople articulating the aspiration that a merged Mennonite denomination could become more formidable as a voice for nonviolence and peacemaking. In a July 2001 Associated Press article covering the Mennonite Church USA convention in Nashville (the meeting in which the merger was finalized) Schrag stated his vision:

James Schrag, executive director designate of Mennonite Church USA, said the new denomination will foster "a higher level of collaboration and cooperation than ever before," strengthening church members' efforts on mission work and political issues, such as capital punishment and human rights.

"We've simply grown more alike, and this is a culminating point where we can articulate a vision for the future," he said.

With the merger complete, denomination leaders now will focus on spreading peace and the teachings of the Christian faith, he said.<sup>141</sup>

At the same historical moment in which Schrag and others spread this optimistic message about Mennonites' invigorated capacity for peacemaking, the convention

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<sup>141</sup> Associated Press, "Merger Gets Mennonites' Blessing," *Lawrence Journal World*, July 6, 2001, [http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2001/jul/06/merger\\_gets\\_mennonites/?print](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2001/jul/06/merger_gets_mennonites/?print).



delegates inside the Opryland Hotel in Nashville were absorbing decidedly different messages about the meaning and purpose of the Membership Guidelines that ultimately cemented the merging of their denominations. The vote on this “compromise document,” to use Janeen Bertsche Johnson’s language, was nearly unanimous, but as the previous chapter indicates, this near-consensus rested on the carefully crafted ambiguity within it. Schrag’s public statements reflected a determination to focus away from the uncomfortable truths underlying that ambiguity. “The two groups really can’t be distinguished,” he told reporters, referring to GCMC and MC.<sup>142</sup>

But in their approaches to polity and authority, the two groups still *could* be distinguished, a sentiment that fourteen years later I still hear articulated by Mennonites who are old enough to remember the pre-merger denominational cultures. In casual conversations with older straight Mennonites about my research, I have been asked more times than I can count, “Isn’t this just all about the merger?”<sup>143</sup> Given that my own background is General Conference, I am more likely to encounter GCMC Mennonites of my parents’ generation than MC ones, and this question is generally uttered in the context of lamenting what they see as the undue influence of authoritarian MC practices that, from their perspectives, have aggressively overtaken the more congregational approach of the General Conference. From older LGBTQ Mennonites, I generally hear more nuanced interpretations. As impactful as polity differences were for LGBTQ Mennonites before MCUSA was formed, queer people in GCMC churches knew that congregational

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<sup>142</sup>Items compiled from Tribune news services, “2 Mennonite Groups Planning to Merge,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 2001, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2001-07-01/news/0107010311\\_1\\_general-conference-mennonite-church-merger-denominations](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2001-07-01/news/0107010311_1_general-conference-mennonite-church-merger-denominations).

<sup>143</sup> Official denominational language seems to generally eschew the word “merger” in favor of “transformation,” which draws attention away from the corporate overtones of the former. The practice has not, in my observation, caught on with Mennonite laypeople.

polity didn't protect them from homophobia, and queer people in MC congregations did not want to deal with patriarchal, authoritarian traditions in isolation from other queer Anabaptists. If the problems of the present-day MCUSA were "all about the merger," queer Mennonites had the unfortunate privilege of knowing that the conflicts over which the merger was formed were all about *them*.

To Schrag, LGBTQ people and queer organizing seemed to represent a division that he had tried to relegate to the past. Their vigorous, pink appearance in Columbus, combined with the virulence of the backlash against them, made it clear that the past and the present were not as separate as he would like. On July 17, 2009, less than two weeks after the Columbus convention had ended, Schrag sent a damage control email to area conference leaders, encouraging them to share it with their congregations:

During the final session of the Delegate Assembly in Columbus, delegates adopted a resolution calling the church to find ways to be in dialogue with **those who do not agree with parts of our Confession of Faith.**

While we were trying to model a more open posture to diverse perspectives during the Columbus assembly, there were certain occurrences at Columbus that were problematic, primarily related to the distribution of literature by persons associated with a group calling itself PinkMennos. PinkMennos is a group which is advocating for the full inclusion of lesbians and gays into the life and expression of our church.

Our convention staff did not authorize or approve this distribution of literature. When they learned about the unauthorized distribution of literature in the exhibit area, they repeatedly requested that this activity

stop. These requests were followed for a time but then continued again later in the week.

Some may have also read the Associated Press story in their local or regional newspaper that reported a one-sided and sometimes inaccurate view of our attempts within Mennonite Church USA, its conferences and its congregations, to recognize and practice our commitment to be in dialogue when we disagree. Leaders of the Executive Board and its Executive Leadership staff do not accept the inaccurate account presented in the secular press.<sup>144</sup>

Schrag's letter is evidence of how successfully the notion of dissent from denominational statements had been grafted onto LGBTQ Mennonites and their supporters. While the 1995 Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective contains twenty-four separate articles, only one of which is explicitly pertinent to LGBTQ identity<sup>145</sup>, it is rare to hear any other part of the Confession invoked. Of the LGBTQ student group on their campus, one Mennonite college professor told me, "I can tell you that the ONLY time the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective is EVER discussed on our campus is in relationship to this organization. Suddenly, the conservatives, who otherwise have absolutely zero interest in this confessional document, are convinced that its jot and tittle, namely paragraph three of article 19 forbids such an organization on our campus."<sup>146</sup> When Schrag referred to "those who do not agree with parts of our Confession of Faith," he was using a well-established Mennonite code. "Our

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<sup>144</sup> James Schrag, email to Mennonite pastors, July 17, 2009.

<sup>145</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press 1995).

<sup>146</sup> Email message to author, February 29, 2015, used with permission.

Confession of Faith” referred to the third paragraph of article nineteen of that document. “Those who do not agree” were those who were queer, and those willing to wear pink t-shirts to support those who were queer. Schrag could be assured that his readers would know exactly what he was talking about. The association between the Confession of Faith and heterosexist theology was so thoroughly cemented in MCUSA dominant discourse that its one article condemning homosexuality was often quite literally the only thing that Mennonites knew about its contents.

From the perspective of many Pink Menno readers, however, what was even more hurtful was Schrag’s use of the phrase “Persons associated with a group calling itself PinkMennos.” Through this alienating language, intentionally or non-intentionally, Schrag evoked what Shane Phelan has called the “sexual stranger.” Phelan writes, “Any binary scheme produces ‘undecidables’ . . . Strangers are not like enemies, who are clearly other; they both are and are not ‘us’ . . . Thus they produce a challenge to identities.”<sup>147</sup> In their letter responding to Schrag, Luke Yoder and Luke Miller identify the same pattern: “It feels like an attempt to define us as ‘other,’ belonging outside of the church.”<sup>148</sup> In my own communication with Schrag, in which I confronted him about his choice of words, he rushed to assure me that Pink Mennos were in fact a part of the church and that he cared deeply about them.<sup>149</sup> However, Schrag never publicly apologized for these words, and his panicked duplicitousness reinforced Pink Menno’s strange, liminal status within MCUSA.

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<sup>147</sup> Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 29.

<sup>148</sup> Luke Miller and Luke Yoder, “Letter to James Schrag.”

<sup>149</sup> James Schrag, email message to author, July 20, 2009.

## Magisterial managers

Mennonite leaders learned from Columbus, though perhaps not the lessons that BMC or Pink Menno representatives would have hoped. What they did seem to learn was that the resolution process was too volatile for their fragile denomination to sustain at that moment. At the next MCUSA convention in July 2011, the MCUSA's Executive Board made a highly publicized proposal, approved by the approximately 800 delegates at the beginning of the convention, to abstain from any voting on resolutions. This decision, promoted as a one-convention break from the divisiveness of resolutions, was given its own brand name: "The Pittsburgh Experiment."<sup>150</sup> The MCUSA moderator at the time, Ed Diller, explained the proposal: "Our meetings on the work of the church should look less like the world around us."<sup>151</sup>

They had also learned Pink Menno needed to be contained, at least at the level of denominational image control. In the lead-up to the next MCUSA Convention, in Pittsburgh in July 2011, *The Mennonite* editor Everett Thomas wrote an editorial in which he quoted Stutzman referring to Pink Menno as a "haunting" presence at conventions (see epigraph quote).<sup>152</sup> Stutzman's comment communicated multiple layers of meaning; the liminality of "haunting" kept Pink Menno in the realm of sexual strangers, but by referencing "the techniques of social advocacy and confrontation that we have taught young adults in our schools," Stutzman suggested a related possibility: that Pink Mennos were misguided youth, abusing the knowledge they were given by their

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<sup>150</sup> Thomas, Everett, "Delegate Assembly Tries Pittsburgh Experiment - The Mennonite," *The Mennonite*, August 1, 2011, [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/14-8/articles/Delegate\\_Assembly\\_tries\\_Pittsburgh\\_Experiment](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/14-8/articles/Delegate_Assembly_tries_Pittsburgh_Experiment).

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Thomas, Everett, "Unconventional Conventions?"

elders. Pink Menno leaders, with a subversive approach to rhetoric that Stutzman clearly found irritating, responded with a t-shirt design that many wore at the Pittsburgh convention. Against a blue background was a pink Pacman-like ghost and the phrase, “Haunting the Church Since 1525.”

It was a classic Anabaptist sting. The year 1525 referred to the year known at least colloquially as the date of the first defiant “re-baptisms” in early modern Europe (in Zurich, Switzerland), and thus, arguably, the moment of the founding of Anabaptism as a religious movement. The provocation that adult baptism represented to the Holy Roman Empire and to Lutheran magisterial Protestantism led to intense persecution of early Anabaptists, in Switzerland and later, in the Low Countries as well. Anabaptists have long lived with the paradox of authoritarianism within communities defined by anti-authoritarian thought; thus the accusation of complicity with magisterial forces has become, in effect, a foundational charge against other Anabaptists, one that in the same breath claims Anabaptist authenticity for itself. The message could not have been clearer. If it were the sixteenth century, the t-shirt suggested, Stutzman would not be the one re-baptizing.

“Ervin hates Pink Menno,” one pastor told me several years after the Pittsburgh convention. “He *really* hates Pink Menno.”

### **A Plan with a Purpose**

*The last several years have seen rapid changes in our nation’s attitudes toward same sex attraction. For the first time, as reported in a May 2011 Gallup Poll, more than half of the respondents supported the legalization of same sex marriage. This social shift is reflected to some extent in Mennonite Church USA; our church reflects the divide in our nation. We cannot afford to ignore these differences of conviction; neither can we afford to allow this issue to become the most important*

*issue in our life together.*<sup>153</sup>

—from “Desiring God’s Coming Kingdom: A Missional Vision and Purposeful Plan for the Mennonite Church USA”

In 2011, the Executive Board of the MCUSA, together with Stutzman, produced a document entitled “Desiring God’s Coming Kingdom: A Missional Vision and Purposeful Plan for the Mennonite Church USA.” This title itself reflects a strong will: the will on the part of denominational leadership to hold together an ideologically disparate collection of people and communities under the umbrella of “Mennonite,” and to assert what their reason was for being together, knowing, perhaps, how fragile the bond might be. The Plan was first presented at the Pittsburgh convention in 2011 during the resolution-free delegate sessions.

Before I go further, I must speak to limits of my own knowledge about how thoroughly integrated the Purposeful Plan has been into Mennonite congregational life. I came to the document after I had finished the bulk of my ethnographic fieldwork, in the process of attempting to interpret the behavior of Stutzman and MCUSA’s executive board, who spoke regularly about the limits of their own regulatory power while at the same time pouring considerable disciplinary and bureaucratic energy into regulating the behavior of LGBTQ-friendly congregations. My suspicions are that the majority of Mennonite laity does not know or particularly care about the Plan’s contents. At the same time, as a “living document,” the Purposeful Plan’s original authors designed it to be revised and edited by congregational delegates at biennial denominational meetings, a process that has happened once, in Phoenix in July 2014. (The available copy of the Purposeful Plan does not make clear what parts of it are delegate-modified.)

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<sup>153</sup> Mennonite Church USA, “Our Purposeful Plan,” February 25, 2014, <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/about-us/our-purposeful-plan/>, 13.

Denominational leaders are clearly invested in promoting the Plan throughout the denomination, and even encourage congregations to create their own Purposeful Plans. But the Purposeful Plan interests me primarily as a document that reflects the thought of MCUSA executive leaders, particularly as it pertains to their ideas about politics and diversity.

In the Purposeful Plan, the word “missional” operates as the primary descriptor for the church’s central priorities. The document opens: “In 2011, through prayer and discernment, the Executive Board sensed that God was calling Mennonite Church USA to move more deliberately toward fulfillment of our missional purpose as a church.”<sup>154</sup> But “missional” is far from a universally accepted or well-defined term in Mennonite congregations. Writing in 2012, Mennonite pastor and LGBTQ inclusion advocate Ron Adams wrote the following in the denominational publication *The Mennonite*:

We Mennonites have been using this word for at least the last 10 years. Yet we always need to explain what we mean whenever we use it. We preface every missional conversation with a definition, with what we don’t mean and what we do mean when we say the word.

Something is wrong here. We are reasonably smart people. Well-educated and diligent in our church work. Yet, with the exception of a few experts among us, we can’t seem to find our way toward a comfortable usage of missional. This

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 1.



suggests that the problem is not with us. The word is the problem. And words matter.<sup>155</sup>

Adams' conclusion, that the word "missional" is more trouble than it is worth, is not necessarily shared across the denomination, and certainly not by executive leaders, but his description of the confusion it engenders is relevant to the Purposeful Plan, which places missional identity at the heart of MCUSA's reason for existence.

The Purposeful Plan aims to give ideological focus to an institution in a way that assigns particular meanings to particular human bodies. It maps the worth of those bodies through means of binaries that reflect a deep grounding in the theological dualism that separates "God's kingdom" from "the world." In a listing of "missional character traits" and corresponding "signposts" within the Plan, one reads as follows: "*Missional character trait*: The church understands itself as different from the world because of its participation in the life, death, and resurrection of its Lord. *Signpost*: In its corporate life and public witness, the church is consciously seeking to conform to its Lord instead of the multitude of cultures in which it finds itself."<sup>156</sup>

In Mennonite discourse as in many other Christian settings, "the world" is a fluid category, occupying the same conceptual territory as "society" or "culture." Often Christian speakers will modify "world" with "secular," implying a clean division between what is church and what is not. A discourse that places politics in the realm of the world and places the world in binary opposition to church is particularly treacherous for those

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<sup>155</sup> Ron Adams, "Bearing Witness to Our Missional God," *The Mennonite*, accessed September 2, 2014, [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/15-6/articles/Bearing\\_witness\\_to\\_our\\_missional\\_God](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/15-6/articles/Bearing_witness_to_our_missional_God).

<sup>156</sup> Mennonite Church USA, "Our Purposeful Plan", 6.

church members whose politics are formed in response to the specific vulnerabilities of their bodies.

In turn, “missional” occupies the same conceptual territory as the word “common”: common as in “common vision,” “common mind,” or simply, “what we have in common.” These themes are grafted onto “the church.” One could easily read the Plan through a grammar of willfulness: if God’s will is contained within the missional church, then the willful child inhabits the world, swayed by the things the Plan identifies as external to the church, such as “individualism” and “partisan politics.”

The Purposeful Plan portrays “partisan politics” as unfortunate distractions from what really matters. “Since we increasingly identify with political parties, our church is increasingly divided along the same lines as the nation,” the document reads. The divisions in the denominational body are thus diagnosed: they exist not because of the *content* of values and issues that draw people to one political party or the other, but rather, quite simply, because the nation is divided into political parties and thus, through thoughtless assimilation, the church is as well. The cure, then, is not to resolve but to refocus: not on political causes but on the church, not on division but on what is held in common. “The church must focus on the main thing that unites us—the vision, purpose and priorities of our missional church—lest we leave our assemblies as winners and losers on the issues that deeply divide us.”<sup>157</sup>

In her ethnography of Methodists debating acceptance of gay and lesbian people, sociologist Dawne Moon found that both conservatives and liberals in the churches she studied tried to defend their beliefs about gay sexuality by blaming their ideological

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.15.

opponents for being political. Their attempts, Moon argues, reflected a wider American tendency to denigrate the entire category of the political as irredeemably tainted. Moon places her conclusions in the larger context of sociological and anthropological studies showing that Americans define politics as “divisive, exhausting, mean, or worldly rather than humane and conducive to building community.”<sup>158</sup>

Of course, in a context in which the status quo is disapproving of non-heteronormative relationships, the strategy of maligning politics works somewhat better for those who are opposed to inclusive change. People who embody difference are generally more likely to be labeled as political when advocating for their own interests. Perhaps this is as good of a definition as any for what it means to come up against the wall: the truth of one’s lived experience is negated through the category into which it is placed. *They have an axe to grind; they’re playing the race card; they’re pushing a political agenda.* In religious settings particularly, such categorizing slams one’s very body against the specter of eternal truth. It is always easier to perform distance from politics when the existing political regimes support one’s own claims to personhood.

Mennonites have a somewhat different relationship with the category of the political than do many other Christians, due in part to their historical connection to nonviolent activism. Even this connection is fraught; Mennonite peacemaking has long been expressed through a dialectic relationship between social justice activism and separatist retreat. Still, in many Mennonite circles the concept of “politics” rings not only with the potential for worldly corruption but also with the possibility for transforming that corruption through peaceful, Christ-like intervention. In the Mennonite world,

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<sup>158</sup> Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). p. 26.

“politics” is not a universal ill. The renowned Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder became famous for his 1972 book *The Politics of Jesus*, which argued that Jesus himself had identifiable politics to be emulated.<sup>159</sup> In a similar vein, writing in 2012, Paul Schrag, editor of the international paper *Mennonite World Review*, argued the following: “Separating church and state is different from separating faith and politics. The former is the cornerstone of U.S. religious liberty. The latter would remove a source of moral guidance from politicians’ and voters’ decisions. The first is essential, the second impossible.”<sup>160</sup> But Mennonite criteria for what appropriate politics should look like are still largely in the hands of straight white men, whose are most able to embody and perform the norms that are perceived as politically impartial.

Despite Mennonites’ somewhat more nuanced historical relationship with “politics,” the “vision” put forth in the Purposeful Plan performs a similar semantic trick to that of Moon’s informants, using “partisan politics” and “political parties” as phrases that speak of the commitments that it conceives as inappropriately distracting to the “common life” or “common vision” of the church. In other words, the possibility for appropriate political activity is left tentatively open, but with little guidance as to how it might actually look.

The problem with admonishing people to leave their partisan politics at the door is that political ideologies, like religious faith, are designed to engage people’s deepest convictions about how the world works and what their places in it should be. Political

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<sup>159</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994). The final chapter of this dissertation addresses Yoder’s legacy as a sexual predator whose abusive treatment of women was concealed and minimized for several decades by Mennonite institutions.

<sup>160</sup> Paul Schrag, “MWR: Faith and Politics Freely Exercised,” accessed August 26, 2013, <http://www.mennoworld.org/2012/3/12/faith-and-politics-freely-exercised/>.

affiliations are not, on the whole, trivial distractions from what is truly important to people so much as they are expressions of it. The Purposeful Plan suggests that those who participate in partisan politics are doing so not because they have meaningful convictions but because they have incorrect priorities. Partisanship is tantamount to the child's willfulness, to the individual's thoughtless disregard for the higher purposes of the church community. The authors of the Purposeful Plan seem unable to conceive of a partisan political orientation that could reflect the purpose of the church rather than detracting from it.

As a manifestation of the MCUSA institutional wall, the Purposeful Plan is a kind of circular fortress, built on tautologies that foreclose the possibility of queer people being heard as adults. *God's will is that we focus on what we have in common, and what we have in common are our priorities as a missional church. Our priorities as a missional church require that we discern together where God is leading us. And God is leading us to conform to his will rather than allowing ourselves to be shaped by the culture around us.* Much like Schrag's 2009 letter, the Purposeful Plan was an attempt at refocusing the energy generated by Pink Menno, back onto the church's "real" work. The difficulty, for leaders, was that MCUSA Mennonites did not actually agree on what that work should be.

### **Managing difference**

*My experience in the Mennonite Church has often been being one of the 'not-quite-as-bad-minorities,' that Mennonites embrace and tokenize you to the point of being overly friendly or overly welcoming, just like, Oh my God, we're so glad you're at this church right now. What I noticed at Pittsburgh that was so fascinating was that putting on a pink shirt completely flipped it around. I could notice a big difference, on days when I wouldn't wear the pink shirt and just people's reactions to me, and then I'd put the pink*

*shirt on and it was like a visible marker. I could just feel the glances change, the distance it created between people. It was really fascinating to feel that in a very visible way... There was something very weird about sort of transcribing that onto my body and having it visibly displayed.*

—Pink Menno member<sup>161</sup>

Among the more specific priorities that the Purposeful Plan laid out for MCUSA was “Undoing Racism and Advancing Intercultural Transformation.”<sup>162</sup> For people of color who served as diversity workers in MCUSA and the denominations that preceded it, the struggle to have antiracism recognized as a foundational priority of Mennonites was a long and hard one.<sup>163</sup> It was fraught with the particularly formidable obstacle of working with a group of white people who used a small list of Swiss and German last names as a mark of in-group identity, who thought of themselves as categorically different from the powers that shaped “the world,” and who generally knew more about how their ancestors had suffered religious persecution in Europe than they knew about the American context of slavery, genocide, and land theft that enabled Mennonite migrations to the U.S. and Canada. White “ethnic” Mennonites had—and continue to have—a habit of rhetorically distancing themselves from hegemonic whiteness and assuming that their own institutions and communities were free of such problems. So it was not an inconsiderable victory to have a denominational document that claimed antiracism as a priority (even if the meaning of “priority” was hardly clear). To address “racism” was to push beyond the less power-specific categories of “multiculturalism” and “diversity.”

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<sup>161</sup> Interview with author, November 11, 2011.

<sup>162</sup> Mennonite Church USA, “Our Purposeful Plan.”

<sup>163</sup> For some of the history of this struggle as told by Mennonite anti-racism advocates, see Iris De Leon-Hartshorn, Tobin Miller Shearer, and Regina Shands Stoltzfus, *Set Free: A Journey Toward Solidarity Against Racism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001).

But with racism as the only named category of systemic marginalization to be embraced as a church priority rather than portrayed as a “divisive issue,” the Purposeful Plan had the unfortunate effect of giving anti-queer white leaders another tool through which to categorize, rank, and divide the marginalized collectivities within their denomination. If LGBTQ identity was inherently white, Western, and imperialist—as some of the leaders of color within MCUSA contended—then conspicuous repression of queer Mennonites could stand as a visibly anti-racist act on the part of white leaders. Almost from the first appearance of Pink Menno, this triangulating political tactic was among their most formidable obstacles.

For instance, Everett Thomas, then editor of *The Mennonite*, wrote the following in 2011:

Pink Menno leaders and leaders of other groups working for change also spent time organizing for the Pittsburgh 2011 convention. However, these activists may have inadvertently energized another group that is emerging.

Although not gathering to specifically address the church’s teaching position on sexuality, a by-invitation-only gathering of racial/ethnic<sup>164</sup> leaders in Tampa immediately after the Executive Board meeting is the first of its kind. This group will address the continuing racism many see within our church structures. An [sic] evidence: I’ve heard often from racial/ethnic leaders that the voices of people of color are at times discounted and ignored. Even more onerous,

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<sup>164</sup> “Racial/ethnic” is official MCUSA terminology to refer to people of color.

according to several of the racial/ethnic associate groups, is the appropriation of civil rights and justice language by LGBT activists for their cause.<sup>165</sup>

Thomas's comment reflected a host of painful realities. Thomas himself was a veteran process broker who had for years been committed to antiracist work in the Mennonite church.<sup>166</sup> In all likelihood, he had heard white LGBTQ advocates do what white people in the U.S. often do: speak of civil rights in terms of successive waves of liberation, with the reductive and dangerous assumption that the African-American-led movement had achieved its freedom and the queers were up next. Thomas lived in a conceptual world in which people of color in general could legitimately claim marginalization, while queer people could not; it was also a world in which all the people of color were straight and all the queers were white.<sup>167</sup> He, like other Mennonite leaders, maintained this worldview by choosing which voices of color he would acknowledge, and ignoring the specific words of LGBTQ leaders in his denomination almost entirely.

Thomas's comment, like so many authoritative, subordinating speech acts before it, helped to maintain a world of hauntings, of strangers, of invisible walls and liminal not-quite-Mennonites whose claims to truth could simply be spoken out of existence through the mechanisms of straight, white, masculine, parental authority—the only form of Mennonite authority that remained truly constant through the ideological and theological battles that I describe here. As my next chapter will show, the 2013 MCUSA convention in Phoenix made the violence of that world ever more apparent.

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<sup>165</sup> Thomas, Everett, "Resolve in the New Year," *The Mennonite*, January 1, 2011, <https://themennonite.org/opinion/resolve-new-year/>.

<sup>166</sup> See Leon-Hartshorn, Shearer, and Stoltzfus, *Set Free*.

<sup>167</sup> Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *But Some Of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, N.Y: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993).



### Chapter Three: Strangers and Kin

*There are no commensurate discursive structures that spectacularize or rank whiteness in the way in which people of color are ranked and spectacularized. Further, in the absence of any white ethnic differentiation, whiteness becomes homogenized. Although apparently absent, it nonetheless orders the hierarchy, establishing itself while disappearing at the same time. It would seem that white managerial masculinity travels everywhere, with the ability to normativize itself in its apparently silent movement as lawful benefactor in 'our community.'*

—M. Jacqui Alexander, "Anatomy of a Mobilization"<sup>168</sup>

*We function not just as agents of our own imaginings, but as the objects of others' exclusions.*

—Leti Volpp, "The Citizen and the Terrorist"<sup>169</sup>

Arizona was the wrong place for Mennonites to be in July 2013. Following the 2010 passage of Arizona's Senate Bill 1070, widely regarded as a racialized attack on Latinos,<sup>170</sup> a number of Latino Mennonites began a concerted effort to challenge the choice of location for the 2013 MCUSA convention, which had already been chosen by denominational leaders.<sup>171</sup> The threats of Arizona were hardly abstract for Latinos. SB1070 put all racialized bodies in danger, and undocumented bodies in particular, and Latino Mennonite congregations had a substantial undocumented presence.

While denominational leaders put forth a considerable public display of concern and consideration for the petitions of Latino leaders, those petitions were ultimately to little avail. In 2011, MCUSA leaders announced that they would proceed with the

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<sup>168</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 139.

<sup>169</sup> Leti Volpp, "The Citizen and the Terrorist," *UCLA Law Review* 49, no. 5 (June 2002): 1575.

<sup>170</sup> "Arizona's SB 1070," *American Civil Liberties Union*, accessed March 18, 2015, <https://www.aclu.org/arizonas-sb-1070>.

<sup>171</sup> Paul Schrag, "Executive Board Receives Conflicting Advice on Phoenix Convention," *The Mennonite*, October 1, 2010, [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/13-10/articles/Executive\\_Board\\_receives\\_conflicting\\_advice\\_on\\_Phoenix\\_convention](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/13-10/articles/Executive_Board_receives_conflicting_advice_on_Phoenix_convention).

Phoenix location, citing the potential financial loss of cancellation or rescheduling as a primary reason for their decision. In response to the situation, however, conference organizers made the Phoenix convention into a highly visible assemblage of immigration-related thematic material, choosing as the convention theme the phrase, “Citizens of God’s Kingdom.” In the opening delegate session of the convention, on July 2, 2013, MCUSA moderator Richard (Dick) Thomas announced that the convention would be different from other MCUSA conventions because of its Phoenix location and week-long focus on immigration. In deference to the overwhelming absence of Latino Mennonites, who mostly boycotted the convention, the moderator’s stage on the delegate floor contained an empty chair, a deliberate symbol that Thomas pointed out. “It’s a time for us to unite around our core values and to celebrate the diversity among us,” he said.<sup>172</sup>

What does “core values” mean in such a context? What does “diversity” mean? What does “us” mean? What is Thomas actually saying when he uses these words and phrases; what power relations are invoked or obscured? Furthermore, what kind of work is the theme “Citizens of God’s Kingdom” doing in this setting? Political, legal, and queer theorists have all argued that the construct and political ideal of the citizen is reliant on the opposing figure of the stranger in order to give it meaning and coherence. In the United States, citizenship is inseparable from the gendered, classed, and raced discourses that grant legitimacy to particular bodies over others.<sup>173</sup> Mennonites have multiple traditions of critique aimed at confronting the violent work done by citizenship and

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<sup>172</sup> MCUSA Delegate session, July 2, 2013, Phoenix Convention Center, Phoenix, AZ.

<sup>173</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000); Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001); Volpp, “The Citizen and the Terrorist.”

nationalism, and deliberate distance from any nationalist identity has long been a hallmark of Anabaptist theology.<sup>174</sup> But these theological traditions, which are themselves plagued with the intellectual limitations of masculine dominance, exist in tension with the managerial priorities of denominational leaders.

Denominational leaders, in turn, must balance the historically anti-nationalist bent of Anabaptism with a sizeable faction of Mennonites whose sexual politics are informed by the U.S. religious right, which for four decades has traded profitably in what Lauren Berlant has called “a nationalist politics of intimacy.”<sup>175</sup> In right-wing U.S. discourse, “normal intimacy is considered the foundation of the citizen’s happiness.”<sup>176</sup> I observe Mennonite leaders negotiating these competing theologies by attempting to broker peace and compromise through the language of “welcoming the stranger.” While welcoming the stranger may appear to subvert the violent power structures that make the citizen possible, I argue in this chapter that the Mennonites’ experience with Phoenix as a convention site made clear the limitations of citizenship as an egalitarian discourse. Even within the theological imaginary of “God’s kingdom,” the citizen extends welcome to the stranger from a seat of power; the stranger must then deal with the effects of that power.

What is the appropriate response to that welcome? Subservience? Gratitude? Suspicion? Challenge? Refusal and departure? Mennonites whose bodies and experiences place them in marginalized collectivities must contend with the consequences of these various alternatives. They must also contend with the matter of how to interact with one

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<sup>174</sup> Gerald J. Mast, J. Denny Weaver, and Greg Boyd, *Defenseless Christianity: Anabaptism for a Nonviolent Church* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009); J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The Origin and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 2nd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005).

<sup>175</sup> Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

another when the powers above them require that they compete for a contingent and incomplete “welcome.” In being forced to make such choices, their interactions with MCUSA echo the same interactions that they have with the political and economic hierarchies and apparatuses of the United States. In church as elsewhere, Mennonites of color confront what Lisa Lowe has called “the constitutive contradiction of liberal democracy: in a political system constituted by the historical exclusion and labor of racialized groups, the promise of inclusion through citizenship and rights cannot resolve the material inequalities of racialized exploitation.”<sup>177</sup> In church as elsewhere, LGBTQ Mennonites must contend with the degree to which “heterosexuality is a prerequisite for modern citizenship,”<sup>178</sup> and movement politics that are substantially shaped by the linkage between homonormative respectability and political enfranchisement.<sup>179</sup> In church as elsewhere, all of these historically marginalized Mennonites must contend with discursive patterns that place disproportionate blame for strife and division on their bodies, their voices, and their claims to truth.

This chapter continues the work of the previous chapter in tracking the ways in which MCUSA has come to function as a modern liberal institution. My particular focus here is on the manifestations of managerialism as a raced and gendered performance, deeply informed by Mennonite cultural practices but also related to the gendered

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<sup>177</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 23.

<sup>178</sup> Phelan, *Sexual Strangers*.

<sup>179</sup> See Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism.” In Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, eds., *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2002), 175-194; Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

corporatization trends in other institutions premised in social good. Ambiguous unity language, selective de-politicizing of difference, and paternalism are all tools in play here, endowed with added authority by the theological fluencies of those who use them. In this story, straight, white, male bodies do the work of extending welcome, assigning meaning to history, and granting or denying legitimacy to marginal bodies and voices. My purpose is not to assign malevolence, but rather to understand how, in this setting, the benevolence of those whose citizenship goes unquestioned can itself cause harm.

With all this in mind, my story picks up four days after Thomas's opening session remarks.

### **Mennonite Church USA National Convention, July 5, 2013, Phoenix Convention Center**

From my fieldnotes:

*I hadn't made it to a Pink Menno hymn-sing all week, which was pretty ironic, considering how much writing I have done over the past few years about the hymn singing in Pittsburgh. From what I was hearing, it wasn't feeling as raw or as bold as it did in Columbus and Pittsburgh. Patrick had said to me during our interview that they were pretty sure that people were getting "comfortable" with the Pink Menno presence. They were predictable: they sang nice hymns, and then they dispersed. Pink Menno had its own separate events. They weren't shaking things up anymore. The flip side to feeling more accepted than they had in Pittsburgh was the suspicion that in fact people had just gotten used to them, and that as long as they continued to behave in these predictable ways, they'd be allowed to continue just as they were.*

*But I did join in on Friday morning, because what came next was the delegate session in which they were presumably to shake all this up. Ruth and I arrived and went over to stand by Adam. Those of us singing were forming a sort of oblong, oval corridor near the entrance to the delegate session. It was a big group—I would say at least 40 people by the time all had joined. We sang out of the pink songbooks, of course, and Patrick led. I could hear Patrick’s tenor floating easily above the others: clear and full, with flawless pitch—a songleader’s voice.*

*After one of the songs Ruth leaned over and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of my cardigan. “Those are holy tears, Steph,” she said, mostly sarcastically, but with an edge of something else. My throat was tightening too and I just kept fighting it back. I didn’t want to cry. I didn’t want to let my heart get tangled into whatever was about to unfold. Or maybe I just didn’t want to deal with indignity of crying, even though I would hardly have been the only one. I was wearing a pink camisole under a green cardigan with a black skirt. And pink and rainbow bracelets. Not neutral. But I wasn’t wearing a bright Pink Menno t-shirt and preparing to do whatever they were about to do on the delegate floor.*

*We finished singing, and Patrick called over the t-shirt-clad people who were participating in the action. The rest of us filed into the delegate hall. “And it’s all downhill from here,” said Ruth, her voice full of battle fatigue and here-goes-nothing, before she headed off to her table. I sat down in the bleachers with my notebook and cell phone recorder turned on and realized that my heart was pounding out of my chest.*

Pink Menno had a plan, and the plan was to interrupt a delegate session. At Mennonite conventions, generally speaking, this was not done. Delegates had arguments,

and they could be heated, but there were protocols for managing delegate arguments. There were not, however, protocols for managing the slow, methodical, silent entrance of approximately seventy people in Pink Menno t-shirts, entering in pairs, some holding hands, and their gradual distribution, over the course of the next five minutes, throughout the delegate hall—not in the bleachers, with the spectators, but on the floor, amidst the tables that held the delegates. As they wove through the tables, I watched a number of pastors I knew from the inclusive pastors network, already seated at delegate tables, stand up in solidarity. Some of them were also in pink. I recognized a well-known Mennonite restorative justice expert in the bleachers near me in a Pink Menno shirt, and saw her rise and walk onto to the delegate floor, where she stood next to Cindy Lapp.

When I listened to my audio recording of the event later, there was no audible indication of what was happening. As Pink Menno members silently entered the delegate space, the delegates themselves were busy reading the resolutions that they were planning to vote on (none of which pertained explicitly to sexuality). Ruth Harder, the pastor I referenced in my field notes, told me later that it took a long time for some of the delegates to realize that anything out of the order was happening. As silent as the Pink Mennos were, however, their visual presence was clearly going to be impossible to ignore for the duration of a two-hour delegate session.

Among the pink-shirted, those who did not identify as queer carried signs with large, black-and-white studio photographs of LGBTQ Mennonites, part of an exhibition called “Strangers No More” that had been on display all week in the Pink Menno hotel

room.<sup>180</sup> Many of those who were queer made that queerness visible in the signs they carried. Each sign bore a quote from a talk or sermon given by various Mennonite leaders throughout the week. Beneath each of these quotes was a “BUT”:

“You matter, you're an equal” --Rachel Schwartzendruber Miller, Tuesday evening worship

BUT

I can't be ordained as a pastor in the church.

“The call of the kingdom is wide” --Ervin Stutzman

BUT

I can't get married in my home church.

“I'm going to be calling on you to let them into my house.” --Ervin Stutzman, Wednesday service

BUT

I can't work at my Mennonite college.

“It doesn't matter who you are, what you look like, or how you identify yourself—you are a beloved child of God.”--Rachel Schwartzendruber Miller,

Tuesday evening worship

BUT

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<sup>180</sup> The photographer for the project was Jacklyn Wells. See Harnish, Darian, “Strangers No More Project,” *Pink Menno Campaign*, June 3, 2013, <http://www.pinkmenno.org/action/strangers-no-more-project/>.



I am a person of color and queer.<sup>181</sup>

It was another kind of haunting, silent this time rather than audible, declaring in explicitly spatial terms the truth about delegate sessions and queer people. In this forum that forged the Saskatoon/Purdue statements, the Confession of Faith, and the Membership Guidelines, rhetorical weapons to erase queer bodies, queer bodies were refusing to be erased. As he wove through the delegate tables, one pink-clad young man carried a chair above his head, an empty chair with a Pink Menno t-shirt stretched across it. The empty chair representing absent Latino Mennonites was still on the moderator's stage; the symbolism of an empty Pink Menno chair would escape no one. He reached the foot of the stage and stood, silently, the chair still aloft in his hands, waiting.

My heart kept pounding, knowing that some people would perceive the empty chair as an attempt to score in a competition for legitimately marginal status. The misery of the entire setting swamped me for a moment, the violence of having to campaign to be a category worthy of representation by an empty chair.

While all of this was happening, Katie Hochstetler was making her way to the microphone on the delegate floor. Like the others, she wore a Pink Menno t-shirt. As Thomas introduced the resolutions and asked for delegate comments on them, she stood quietly at the microphone, holding a copy of her prepared statement, waiting for Thomas to acknowledge her presence. At one point, a gray-haired white man in a short-sleeved button-down shirt stood up and walked to the microphone. His business was routine; he was speaking as a delegate about a resolution that was part of the parallel fiction still at work in the room, the fiction that this was a normal delegate session in which seventy

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<sup>181</sup> MCUSA Delegate session, July 2, 2013, Phoenix Convention Center, Phoenix, AZ.

people in pink t-shirts were not standing silently around the room carrying placards and an empty chair. As he approached the microphone, Hochstetler stepped aside to make room for him. He took the microphone, but he also took her hand, holding it in solidarity throughout his short, unrelated statement. (Hochstetler did not know the man; later she located him on Facebook to thank him.)

Thomas, from his podium on the stage above her, finally turned his attention to the Pink Menno presence. “You know, one of the things I realized as moderator is that I serve as moderator for every person in this church,” he said. “I love every person in this church. And this church has wonderful diversity. This church also has wonderful core values. And I think we need to unite around our core values that start with Jesus at the center. I think that uh, Pink Mennos have not necessarily felt that, uh, maybe they've been heard at the point that they would. And so I think that they are ready to read a statement to us and I would welcome that at this point.” There was a pause, and then applause. “And if you'd state your name and congregation, I think it's Katie and I forget the last name and I might be wrong on Katie.”

Hochstetler stepped to the mic again. “My name is Katie Hochstetler and I'm a delegate from Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis, MN,” she said. The camera focused on her, so that everyone could see her from the projection screens, and she read her statement, her voice clear and level.

We come to you as Mennonites who are burdened by our church's practices of exclusion, silence, and violence towards gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people. We carry with us not only the faces of lgbt sisters

and brothers, but also their hopes and dreams of a church whose language of welcome and justice matches its actual practices.

It is right that as a church we carefully and prayerfully examine the meaning and disparities of race and citizenship as it is practiced in our country and in our church. We seek to understand the ways that our prejudices and privilege have hardened our hearts to the suffering of immigrant people. We repent of the ways that we have contributed to the diminishment of others by our votes, indifference or blatant support of injustice. Lives matter to God, and the cries of the marginalized do not go unnoticed.

We call upon the Mennonite Church to repent for its harsh and unwelcoming treatment of the sisters and brothers, parents, teachers, leaders, friends and family among us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. As Pink Mennos, we refuse to allow our leaders to pit marginalized groups and people against one another in the name of unity or convenience. **We reject the premise that our church is incapable of understanding the insidious connections of oppression and privilege as they are played out on the bodies of immigrants, women, children, people of color, lgbt people and the many who are excluded from full participation in our church and society.** We bear witness to the pain and loss that accompanies the violence of rejection, exclusion, silencing, condemnation and complacency. We affirm MLK, Jr.'s jailhouse words that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Today we bring before you our faces, our yearnings, our bodies, our dreams, our faith, and declare that **we refuse to be strangers to one another.** As

followers of Jesus, we cannot, and will not rest until the Mennonite Church abandons its exclusionary impulses and embraces the width and breadth of God's welcome, so that all may participate fully and **God's kin-dom is made whole**.<sup>182</sup>

When she finished, Thomas spoke. "Thank you for the statement," he said, and then paused, as a number of delegates were applauding Hochstetler. Then he continued:

I think we hold in trust the documents of our church, and those documents include the commitment to dialogue where we disagree. And so those, there are occasions that we need to stop and do that. There are times when we need to hear a word, as we just did today. I'd ask us just to reflect, in a period of silence and prayer, on what we heard, about how God's speaking to us about marginalization of [pause] persons. What God's speaking to us about God's word, what God's speaking to us about God's will and God's way, that we all may be whole. Let's reflect and pray together.

For two minutes then, there was silence. I spent those two minutes watching Dick Thomas, who was still on the stage behind the podium, his face made larger on the projector screen that hung next to him. First, he rested his head in his hand. Then he rubbed his forehead with his hand for a while. He rested his chin on his hand briefly, set his hands on the podium, and finally, he prayed out loud. As he prayed, speaking slowly, every phrase conveyed an impression of weighty deliberation.

God, listen to your children praying... We're all in need of the wholeness that you bring, as a church. God, you know the divides that are among us. You know the

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<sup>182</sup> Pink Menno, "Strangers No More Statement for Phoenix 2013," *Pink Menno Campaign*, July 2013, <http://www.pinkmenno.org/2013/07/strangers-no-more-statement-for-phoenix-2013/>. Katie Hochstetler and Carol Wise co-authored the statement. Emphases mine.

way we read Scripture differently. You know the way we love you. The way we love each other. The hopes and the yearnings that we have for our church to be the kingdom good news that you want it to be in the world. And God we confess that we fall short, of the fullness of your grace, the fullness of your glory, and the fullness of your shalom. . . . God, we've talked a lot about justice and your kingdom at this convention. And now we've had brought before us another kind of question. And I pray, God, that we walk again in yearning for wholeness, and caring for justice, and listening to each other, in the way that you listen to our prayers. And we pray this in the name of Jesus. And all God's people said Amen.

It was not a prayer that would alter the course of anything, and not everyone chose to say Amen along with him, though many did. But it did a noteworthy kind of work. Listening back later to the language that Thomas used to navigate the situation, I noted the ambiguities: “core values,” “wonderful diversity,” “hold in trust”; “commitment to dialogue where we disagree”; the loosely cohered sea of words in which “justice,” “wholeness,” and “kingdom” floated without anchors of specificity. Before a theologically disparate delegate body, confronted not only with Pink Menno's sincerity but with their savvy, tactical checkmate, Thomas could use that language to crack open a door for queer Mennonites in the institutional wall. A small gift, that cracked door, bestowed in that moment by a benevolent, straight, white, male body: unquestionably belonging, unquestionably a citizen of every kingdom and kin-dom intersecting in that room.

## The kin-dom in pink

*Straight white men don't have a lot to gain from everybody else realizing that they're in it together.*

—Katie Hochstetler<sup>183</sup>

The Pink Menno delegate action was more than a show of visibility. At that moment, Pink Menno *needed* more than a show of visibility; as Patrick Ressler told me in an interview done the day before the events I just described, Pink Menno had become part of the convention in a way that was becoming uncomfortably institutional, despite the denomination's executive persistence in not recognizing them or BMC in any official way. Not only their visibility but their audibility had become rote; as I wandered around the convention center that week, I heard a number of people observe that Pink Mennos were the only ones at the convention doing traditional Mennonite singing. "Traditional Mennonite singing" was, of course, what white Mennonites were used to singing in church. Pink Menno organizers were not unaware of this uncomfortable Eurocentric undertone, particularly in convention contexts in which Black and brown musicians were providing much of the worship music inside officially sanctioned worship spaces. In Phoenix, the danger was even more palpable. In a space from which Latino Mennonites had been effectively dismissed, Pink Menno singers faced the distinct danger of merely becoming a reliable space for white, "ethnic" Mennonites to feel comfortable.

In the delegate hall, singing to drown out the proceedings would have doubtless been more intrusive, harder to ignore. But silence may well have been the more subversive choice, given that singing was what people had come to expect of the mostly, not entirely, white group in pink t-shirts. A silence punctuated with symbols, a silence

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<sup>183</sup> Katie Hochstetler, interview with author, October 22, 2013.

that served the pain of Stutzman’s “haunting the church” comment back to Stutzman’s own institution. That comment already lived in queer Mennonite infamy,<sup>184</sup> that diagnosis of their ghostliness from a mouth so firmly situated at the nexus of heterosexuality and white paternal power that it could pronounce with beneficent confidence what was best for its church.

Ghosts were not supposed to speak, and so they spoke. But more important was what they said. At a Pink Menno-sponsored seminar earlier that week, Carol Wise described the current state of the queer movement as “unapologetic,” a contrast from what in the 1980s and nineties had sometimes felt like humiliation and begging. Pink Menno’s action on the delegate floor had to do two things: effectively gain entry into a veritable fortress of gatekeepers, and then, once inside, de-legitimize the gates.

They did so in part through a theological intervention, one that took gentle aim at the very themes that propped up the Phoenix convention. What they said about those themes mattered. It mattered particularly at a moment in which their bodies—bodies that two years ago in Pittsburgh, some leaders of color had read as colonizing—were occupying a space to which they were not invited. It was also a space that many of them had accessed through the privileges of citizenship, the money for plane tickets, the safety of whiteness. “Citizenship” appeared only once in Hochstetler’s statement, in connection to marginalization, race, and repentance, an acknowledgment that Pink Menno brought experiences of privilege as well as oppression to the table. Crucially, the statement did not use citizenship as a theological metaphor. The dominant theological discourse of the

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<sup>184</sup> Tim Nafziger, “Haunting Straight Mennonite Moderates: The Christian Tradition Of...,” *Young Anabaptist Radicals*, May 9, 2011, <http://young.anabaptistradicals.org/2011/05/09/haunting-straight-mennonite-moderates-the-christian-tradition-of-confrontation/>.

convention constructed a “kingdom of God” in which “citizens” welcomed “strangers.” In contrast, Pink Menno named intersecting oppressions, refused stranger identity, and, in a subtle way, called out the imperialistic overtones of “kingdom.” Their theological metaphor of choice was “kin-dom,” a concept honed in the mujerista/womanist theology of Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, the Cuban-American Catholic theologian who spent her life challenging imperialism and patriarchy in institutional Catholicism.<sup>185</sup>

Immediately after the delegate session, Pink Mennos met back at their Hospitality Room in the Renaissance hotel a block from the convention center. Ostensibly, they were there for a scheduled seminar led by inclusive pastors, entitled, “Where Do We Go From Here?” The action that had just taken place, however, added urgency and palpable excitement to the intergenerational meeting of fifty or sixty people. The conversation was wide-ranging, covering the role of ambiguous denominational language; the continuity of Pink Menno’s protest with older Mennonite protests, such as those of women who refused to wear head coverings; what the role of straight, inclusive pastors should be moving forward; the pros and cons of working at a congregational level versus a denominational one; the massive generational change in perceptions of LGBTQ people that signaled, as one teenager put it, “the light at the end of the tunnel.”

As positive as the mood in the room was, one pastor offered a sobering caution at the very end of the meeting. Sheri Hostetler, the pastor of First Mennonite Church of San Francisco, shared an area conference with a group of immigrant pastors from Africa and Southeast Asia, mostly in the Los Angeles area, that four years earlier had appealed to the

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<sup>185</sup> Paul Vitello, “Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Dissident Catholic Theologian, Dies at 69,” *The New York Times*, June 5, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/06/nyregion/ada-maria-isasi-diaz-dissident-catholic-theologian-dies-at-69.html>.



Executive Board of MCUSA with a request for a conservative, denomination-wide sexual ethic and disciplinary measures to enforce it. As the pastor of a church that had been openly LGBTQ-inclusive since the 1980s, Hostetler had run up against sexually conservative immigrant leaders many times, and to some degree, had forged positive connections with them. Hostetler began by noting that, particularly after the morning's delegate session, pro-LGBTQ inclusion Mennonites had momentum on their side. "Our momentum is threatening to a lot of people," she said. She referred to her relationships with immigrant pastors: "Pink Menno isn't aligned with colonialism and Western imperialism, but a lot of people still make that connection," she continued. "How do we approach people who are threatened by us with the spirit of Christ?" "How," she added, "can we show people the difference between feeling threatened and *being* threatened?"

### **Fighting for chairs**

*Those marginal group members who are close to the edges of dominant power, where access and involvement in decision making actually seem possible, confront incentives to promote and prioritize those issues and members thought to 'enhance' the public image of the group, while controlling and making invisible those issues and members perceived to threaten the status of the community.*<sup>186</sup>

—Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*

When MCUSA was incorporated, its bylaws indicated that three seats on the new denomination's Executive Board would be guaranteed to members of the recognized constituent groups representing people of color in the denomination: the African American Mennonite Association (AAMA), Iglesia Menonita Hispana (IMH), and Native

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<sup>186</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1996).

Mennonite Ministries (NMM).<sup>187</sup> Each of these organizations is in charge of selecting their Executive Board representative. When, in a candid moment, I asked one white board member why white leaders seemed to pick and choose which people of color they would acknowledge based on the conservatism of their sexual politics, he mentioned this structure as integral to the problem. Later, he sent me a clarifying email:

I think it is healthy for the MCUSA board to have formal representatives from its largest constituency groups because it avoids the danger of the dominant culture handpicking non-representative leaders of color. However, both IMH and AAMA have their roots in conservative evangelism efforts by Virginia and Lancaster conferences,<sup>188</sup> and have always been a more comfortable home for congregations and people of color who are more theologically conservative, and its representatives generally reflect this leaning.<sup>189</sup>

Iglesia Menonita Hispana leadership, particular its current moderator Samuel López, has been particularly adamant in their protests of LGBTQ activism. In a letter to Stutzman and the current MCUSA moderator Elisabeth Soto Albrecht in September 2014, López wrote the following:

At our IMH Biennial Assembly on August 8 and 9, 2014, the Hispanic pastors and delegates expressed their deep concern about the issue of homosexuality and how the Conferences and congregations are dealing with it.

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<sup>187</sup> “Bylaws for Mennonite Church USA” (Mennonite Church USA, July 2013), [http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/MCUSABylaws\\_APPROVED\\_2013\\_July.pdf](http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/MCUSABylaws_APPROVED_2013_July.pdf). Beginning in the summer of 2015, the Asian Mennonite Ministries constituent group will also have a guaranteed seat.

<sup>188</sup> Within MCUSA, the Lancaster and Virginia area conferences are generally recognized as the most socially and theologically conservative.

<sup>189</sup> Email to author, November 19, 2014, used with permission.

On the one hand we see the affirmation of our historical position on sexuality and Confession of Faith, but on the other hand we see a different practice. Therefore, confusion and doubts are raising and we pray to God that He will give wisdom to our Mennonite Church leadership on how to handle this issue.

It was not surprising to the IMH Board to hear the Hispanic pastors and delegates calling the MC USA to keep the teaching position of the church and enforce it in all the Conferences and ministers. Also, the pastors and delegates expressed the painful sentiment that most, if not all, of the Hispanic Mennonite Churches will withdraw from MC USA if the present teaching of sexuality and Confession of Faith is changed.<sup>190</sup>

A month after this letter hit the church press, I met with Mennonite historian Felipe Hinojosa, author of *Latino Mennonites*, at a meeting of the American Studies Association in Los Angeles. Hinojosa, who teaches at Texas A&M University, had been part of the campaign to keep MCUSA out of Phoenix. Thus his cynicism at the intractable whiteness of Mennonite power structures was particularly well informed. Over coffee and a long conversation about Mennonite church politics, he explained his frustration at López's claim—not only with its heterosexism, but with the way it presumed to speak for Latinos as though they were theologically and ideologically homogeneous. To understand Hinojosa's argument, it helps to know one of the core arguments of his book: Mennonite congregational polity has consistently stymied Latinos

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<sup>190</sup> Quoted in full in John M. Troyer, "Mennonite Church USA: Monochromatic or Various Shades of Brown?," *Evana Network*, accessed March 8, 2015, <http://www.evana.net/blog--news-updates/mennonite-church-usa-monochromatic-or-various-shades-of-brown>.

in the creation of a national Latino Mennonite movement.<sup>191</sup> Like the board member I quoted above, Hinojosa saw IMH not as a representative body for Latino Mennonites as a whole but rather as an arm of the entrenched social conservatism of the Lancaster conference (where Lopez serves on the all-male bishop board). Later, Hinojosa fleshed it out to me in an email:

Here's why I believe Iglesia Menonita Hispana is bluffing when they threaten to leave the denomination. First, IMH does not have the national reach that Latina/o Mennonites had in the 1960s and 1970s. Regionalization and conference structures essentially diminished any Latina/o national movement. This means that Latino churches are tied to conferences (Lancaster, South Central, Western District)--and have been since at least the 1970s--and are more likely to follow conference leads, not the denomination as a whole. Second, IMH is most strongly tied to Lancaster conference (Sam Lopez) and so the "threat" to leave will not create a mass exodus. It only means that Hispanic churches in the northeast will do whatever Lancaster wants them to do. For me, it's more important to follow what happens at the conference level.<sup>192</sup>

When I took Hinojosa's advice and started following Latino Mennonite politics at the regional level instead, the first thing I noticed was an article in *The Mennonite* referencing Gilberto Flores, the associate conference minister of Western District Conference (WDC, an area conference of mainly Kansas congregations).

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<sup>191</sup> Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

<sup>192</sup> Felipe Hinojosa, email to author, March 9, 2015, used with permission.

These leaders, Flores said, don't want to talk about the issue of same-sex relationships anymore. They will not try to change churches who want to be more welcoming, and they don't want to be judged by others. If WDC organizes its assemblies around issues of disagreement, they said, they don't want to participate. They want to focus on the things we agree on, Flores said.<sup>193</sup>

Flores's statement isn't exactly welcoming to LGBTQ members, but the larger point is that it contains no threat of departure should the denomination become more LGBTQ-inclusive. His statement was congruent with what Joanna Harader, a WDC pastor whose credentials were reviewed after she officiated a same-sex wedding, told me in an interview. Latino Mennonite churches in the WDC don't have time to issue ultimatums to the denomination and fight other churches over same-sex marriage, she said. They're too busy dealing with poverty, racism, and the consequences of xenophobic anti-immigration laws.<sup>194</sup>

To Hinojosa, the selective political use that white denominational leaders made of IMH statements was further evidence that they had little interest in doing anti-racism work that went beyond surface-level image management. "I find it outrageous that the denomination picks and chooses when it will listen to Latinos," he wrote. "On immigration, they essentially ignored us, but on becoming a welcoming and inclusive church for LGBTQ people they all of a sudden are concerned about losing us and about being an anti-racist church." Isaac Villegas, pastor of the Chapel Hill Mennonite Church

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<sup>193</sup> Gordon Houser, "Western District Talks Congregational Authority," *The Mennonite*, November 16, 2014, <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/western-district-talks-congregational-authority/>.

<sup>194</sup> Joanna Harader, interview with author, October 1, 2013.

and an MCUSA Executive Board member (unaffiliated with IMH), expressed a similar sentiment in his review of Hinojosa's book:

Hinojosa states that more than half of Latinos support same-sex marriage. Such diversity doesn't fit within the Latino/Latina Mennonite identity that has been constructed and that is assumed to be against LGBT inclusion. But, in reality, we — speaking as a Hispanic Mennonite — are on both sides. I know, because of my own family and my conversations with Hispanic Mennonites. Hinojosa notes his surprise that white Mennonites support this opposition to LGBT inclusion under the guise of being an antiracist church. A truly antiracist church would honor the diversity among every racial group and not use one part of us against the other.<sup>195</sup>

### **“Natural allies”**

Hinojosa was particularly frustrated by the layers of historical ignorance that white leaders' statements about Latino Mennonites revealed. His book, a painstakingly researched account of Latino leaders' largely frustrated attempts to create an emancipatory Latino social movement within the Mennonite church, has the potential to disrupt a far more common narrative among white Mennonites: that Black and Latino leaders were naturally drawn to the Mennonite church because of its transformative peace theology, and that white Mennonites were more racially enlightened throughout the fifties and sixties than their other white Christian peers. Hinojosa, in contrast, writes, “Placing Mennonite responses to racism in their historical context reveals that they were not any

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<sup>195</sup> Isaac Villegas, “Despite Missteps, Latinos Joined Mennonites,” *Mennonite World Review*, December 4, 2014, <http://mennoworld.org/2014/12/04/columns/despite-missteps-latinos-joined-mennonites/>.

more progressive about race than other evangelical groups in the 1950s.”<sup>196</sup> His account of the 1960s details a long, hard, and ultimately thwarted struggle by Latino Mennonites to convince white Mennonite leaders to prioritize the civil rights struggle of Latino farm workers over the demands of wealthy, union-busting Mennonite farmers in California.<sup>197</sup>

On the other hand, readers who didn’t want to absorb the details of Hinojosa’s narrative could reinvent it to suit their own fantasies. In a November 2014 review of Hinojosa’s book in *The Mennonite*, Mennonite historian John Roth—well-known for his social conservatism—began with a laudatory account of Hinojosa’s book, emphasizing how white Mennonites grew closer to evangelicalism due to their encounters with Latinos. He moved on, then, to a description of the IMH statements about homosexuality, quoting Samuel López’s prediction that Hispanic churches would leave MCUSA en masse if stricter discipline was not enacted against LGBTQ-inclusive churches and conferences. Roth then offered this analysis:

Among the many painful realities of our current ecclesial tensions is the fact that racial-ethnic minority churches who once regarded Mennonite progressives as natural allies in the struggle for racial and economic justice now find themselves increasingly alienated from those leaders.<sup>198</sup>

I wasn’t entirely sure, reading this, that Roth and I had read the same book. The Latino and African-American leaders that Hinojosa describes did not find “natural allies” with white progressive Mennonites; in fact, a large number of them left the Mennonite church entirely before homosexuality ever became a public topic of discussion in Mennonite

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<sup>196</sup> Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, 122-145.

<sup>198</sup> John Roth, “‘Meno-Latino’ Identity,” *The Mennonite*, November 2014, 9.

congregations. By this point, straight white men making concerned pronouncements about LGBTQ activism on the supposed behalf of people of color was turning into something approaching a genre in Mennonite forums.

I asked Hinojosa what he thought of Roth's review: "My impression was that your book was a pretty hefty intervention into the idea that Latino Mennonite leaders found 'natural allies' in progressive white Mennonites," I wrote. Hinojosa responded, "Your assessment of Roth's comments is right on. My book never assumes that these were 'natural allies,' but instead contested and complex relationships. To assume that 'natural alliances' have today been disrupted only serves to romanticize the struggles that Latina/o Mennonites and other people of color have had in the Mennonite Church, especially with white progressives."<sup>199</sup>

### **The kingdom's airport security**

*In California, where I live, many people have moved from other parts of the world to work here, but they keep their citizenship with their home country. They are required to carry a visitor registration card (called a "green card"), which allows them to work here even though they aren't citizens. Christians should carry spiritual green cards to remind us that our citizenship is in heaven....*

*Your identity is in eternity, and your homeland is heaven. When you grasp this truth, you will stop worrying about 'having it all' on earth. God is very blunt about the danger of living for the here and now and adopting the values priorities, and lifestyles of the world.*

—Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*<sup>200</sup>

*To proceed as if the categories do not matter because they should not matter would be to fail to show how the categories continue to ground social existence.*

—Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Hinojosa, email to author, March 9, 2015, used with permission.

<sup>200</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?*, Special Anniversary edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012). Rick Warren has claimed affinity with Anabaptism, and Stutzman's preaching style, use of symbols, and circular theology seem to reflect Warren's influence.



On July 4, 2013, Ervin Stutzman, took the stage at the Phoenix Convention Center and began his sermon by raising his hands in greeting: “Shalom.” Speaking without a podium from a wraparound mic, he opened with an observation, that Mennonite Church USA conventions are always held over the fourth of July. “You’ve probably wondered, why do we do that?” Stutzman said. “The answer is, it’s cheaper that week.” This was played for laughs, but Stutzman continued by linking the MCUSA’s bargain-price conventions with a practice of the Apostle Paul. During Paul’s time in Ephesus, Stutzman explained, the teacher Tyrannus allowed Paul to use his lecture hall in the afternoon, as Tyrannus gave his lectures in the cool of the morning. Paul trained many followers in this hot lecture hall, followers who were then sent into Asia to spread the word of God. Stutzman explained that we know this because of the apostle Luke, the author of the book of Acts. At this point he cocked his head slightly to the side, raising a finger to indicate an idea. “Let’s hear it from Luke himself,” Stutzman said, “what he might say about what Paul was speaking in the kingdom of God.”<sup>202</sup>

Stutzman then walked to a side table on the stage, where he picked up a long, dark, front-fastening robe with a tassel draped loosely about the neckline, snapping it on over his button-down shirt. He then reached for an embroidered kufi skullcap, which he placed on his head. These accessories were clearly meant to signal that Stutzman was assuming the persona of Luke. He preached for the next ten minutes in this costume, telling stories about the ministry of Paul, ending his “Luke segment” with a story in

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<sup>201</sup> Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 182.

<sup>202</sup> Mennonite Church USA, *Ervin’s Sermon: Phoenix 2013*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I00UNxST1e0>.

which Paul and his fellow disciple Silas are freed from unfair imprisonment by a timely earthquake. But they choose to stay in the prison, where Paul converts his jailer. The next morning the civil authorities who threw him in jail ask him to leave quietly. Paul holds them to account, crying, “I’m a Roman citizen! You beat us without a trial. *You* come here and escort us out of town.” (The story to which Stutzman refers here is in Acts 16:17-39.) Stutzman continued, “I learned a lesson from Paul. One can be a citizen of the Roman empire, and a citizen of the kingdom of God. But there’s never, ever a question as to which kingdom, which empire, holds our ultimate loyalty. That’s when I learned to say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ not ‘Cesar is Lord.’”<sup>203</sup>

For a convention in which the concept of citizenship was both deliberately and unintentionally central, it was a strange moment. Stutzman’s use of Luke’s voice allows him to frame the story of Paul’s imprisonment and resistance as an occasion for downplaying the importance of worldly forms of citizenship. But while Paul ignores his initial chance at freedom in order to minister to his jailer, he also demands accountability for his treatment from the civil authorities through the invocation of his Roman citizenship. And while Stutzman didn’t mention the end of the story, Paul’s Roman citizenship, not his citizenship in the kingdom of God, is what forces the authorities to humble themselves in apology (Acts 16:39). The dignity with which Paul and Silas depart from this situation is due to their entitlement to due process as Roman citizens.

If what Stutzman was attempting was a liberatory message, he might have done better to mention the Paul and Silas story’s role in the lyrics of the African-American civil rights song, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize.” But the emphasis in that song is on the

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

falling walls of the jail. Stutzman, on the other hand, seemed to want to do something with the idea of citizenship, though it is not clear exactly what. His costume change gestured towards a desire to portray his undeniably white body as racially fluid, yet his inattention to the racialized history of the Bible story he tells suggests an unwillingness to engage with imprisonment and jails as literal experiences in the literal world.

He then tried another metaphor:

Coming to the kingdom of God is like entering airport security. Anybody done that lately? Like coming to border security. You know the routine, right? What do they tell you? 'Everybody empty your pockets.' So that's what we do...empty your pockets and put them on the belt. Take off anything metal. [removes his watch], like watches, or cell phones [he sets his cell phone next to his watch], empty your pockets of any keys or anything else. Put all those things there. And then they come up with the more disgusting part; 'Please, take off your shoes.' [begins to take off his shoes] Some of us think we're getting ready to go to bed or something. Put your shoes on the belt. But here's the kicker. For a lot of places, you come in and they say something like, **'put your hands above your head, and stand here like this. It's almost like coming to Jesus and raising your hands.** Because when Jesus said you come into the kingdom, he said, you give up everything you've got. So when you get into the kingdom it's like walking here, and you say, 'Where's my stuff'? And Jesus says, 'Well, you gave it to me. You gave your self to me.' 'But how am I going to get to convention without my wallet?'

And I think the conversation may go like this. Where Jesus says, 'You're going to need your wallet to get along in life, some of this plastic and cash you've got. So I'm going to loan it back to you for now. and any time that anybody needs something that you've got, I'm going to send them to you. Who owns the wallet?' 'Yes, Jesus, I got the point.' 'Those keys that you gave me--that's a lot. Who owns the house?' 'Yes, God, you own the house.' 'That's true. And there's a lot of people, homeless people who need a place to stay. So I'm going to be calling on you to let them into my house. That car key you've got there [holds up keys], that's a powerful thing, to be able to drive around a neighborhood, all around this country. There's lots of people who need transportation to get to the place my spirit is calling them to be. So when somebody needs a ride, I'll be calling on you to let them ride in my car.' 'I got it. I got it, Lord.'...

...So that's how we walk in the kingdom of God. Everything we've got belongs to God. It's like when we step into the kingdom of God, God says to us [throwing up hands], 'Join in the riches of the kingdom of God. Everything I have is yours to share...' <sup>204</sup>

In the dozen or so times that I have watched the video recording of this sermon, I have fought hard against the temptation to write it off as bad preaching and ignore it. On almost every level it fails: charisma, coherence, and narrative flow are all absent. Its usage of jails, citizenship, and airport security as universal symbols, drained of their historically specific and racialized meanings, assumes a listening audience full of people whose bodies, identities, and papers allow them to move as easily through the world's

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

racialized, gendered sites of surveillance as Stutzman does himself. His easy conflation of “airport security” and “border security,” as if these phrases did not each indicate their own specific dangers and specific threats would be troubling enough anywhere—but this was Phoenix. Sheriff Joe Arpaio’s prisons were mere miles away, full of liminal bodies, *aliens, strangers*. People who were tortured, sexually humiliated, and stripped of hope, people for whom citizenship could never be only a metaphor. Those prisons were part of why Latino Mennonites stayed away from the Phoenix convention.

From the perspective of an institution that embraces anti-racism as a core principle, the bare minimal answer to the problems of this sermon might be a long course in cultural competency. Whiteness is everywhere in this sermon, and yet nowhere is it named as such. Stutzman’s performance evokes nothing so much as the abstract citizen of classical liberalism, with all the inherent flaws of that construct. The abstract citizen allows for the fiction that we all have equal access to the privileges of citizenship, and thus, that disregarding earthly citizenship could possibly mean the same thing to all of us. The abstract citizen, of course, assumes a white, male, cisgender body with papers is stepping through that TSA scanner, perhaps facing a patdown from the TSA’s hands.

From this perspective, Stutzman’s symbology begins to look depressingly coherent. Once again, the white male benefactor speaks on behalf of the community, speaking his institution into being. He admonishes people to share their wallets and cars, admonishing citizens to welcome strangers, beckoning, enticing, always with the distant promise of an empty chair.

## Chapter Four: John Howard Yoder Is Dead: Sexualized Violence and the Haunting of the Mennonite Church

*What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term haunting to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view.*

—Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*<sup>205</sup>

*The reason why offenders get away with what they do is because we have too many cultures of silence.*

—Boz Tchividjian<sup>206</sup>

What does the struggle for LGBTQ justice have to do with sexualized violence?

This question has been with me for the duration of my research on LGBTQ Mennonites, and in the course of this work, I have often felt the impulse to ignore it, overwhelmed as I was with the methodological issues it presented to me, not to mention the emotional ones. For the duration of my ethnographic study of the Mennonite Church USA and its internal movement for queer inclusion, however, I have watched and to some degree participated in another movement towards sexual abuse survivors' advocacy within Mennonite churches and institutions. For much of this time, my placeholder answer to this question has been *I don't know. Something.*

In July 2014, I wrote a blog post for the Pink Menno website, entitled “Naming Violation: Sexualized Violence and LGBTQ Justice,” with the following paragraph:

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<sup>205</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

<sup>206</sup> Joyce, Kathryn, “The Next Christian Sex-Abuse Scandal,” *The American Prospect*, accessed February 3, 2015, <http://prospect.org/article/next-christian-sex-abuse-scandal>.

Sometimes, in the midst of a church “dialogue” about queer people, I get the sense that there’s another conversation going on in the same room, a ghost conversation about real sexualized violence that has gone unnamed, and that there are survivors and perpetrators in the room there with me. And what I’m witnessing then isn’t dialogue or discernment; it’s multiple layers of spiritual carnage.<sup>207</sup>

I wrote this because the language of haunting was the only language I could find to express how powerfully and yet vaguely I have felt the presence of sexualized violence<sup>208</sup> throughout my ethnographic project. I needed a way of putting out into the world what seemed obvious: that the histories of LGBTQ people and those of sexualized violence victims were deeply connected, but that the entire intersection was so poisoned with lies, ignorance, and half-truths that the fear of discussing it was depressingly well-founded. Haunting became my language for the secrets I kept, that I knew others kept; the suspicions I held privately about particularly vociferous anti-queer people; the many private conversations where I learned someone was a survivor; the stories of abuse that I tracked through blog comments, weaving in and out of my own spheres of acquaintance and knowledge; the skin-crawling suspicion I felt from the occasional online or in-person

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<sup>207</sup> Krehbiel, Stephanie, “Naming Violation: Sexualized Violence and LGBTQ Justice,” *Pink Menno Campaign*, July 2014, <http://www.pinkmenno.org/2014/07/naming-violation-sexualized-violence-and-lgbtq-justice/>.

<sup>208</sup> In my use of the phrase “sexualized violence,” I use the same umbrella term used by a number of Mennonite feminists and survivors’ advocates. In an interview with me, Barbra Graber explained it as follows: “‘I like the phrase ‘sexualized violence,’ to encompass everything from child molestation to rape, to sexual harassment...objectification...All of this is sexualized violence, this bushel basket that we can throw them into. Within that, we have to pull it apart. It isn’t like they’re all equal. But they are all under this umbrella that must have the term ‘violation’ in it.” (Barbra Graber, interview with author, September 4, 2013.)

encounter. The most profound challenge I face in writing about this material is that so much of the evidence that informs me is not mine to share. I am haunted by the stories I do tell and by the stories I cannot tell, and that haunting has taken real form in my life.

In this chapter I aim to show how a church can experience the presence of sexual predators as a haunting, and to demonstrate how that state of haunting leaves it vulnerable to the violent reinscription of heterosexist norms. At the same time, haunting is a phenomenon that presents what Avery Gordon calls a “something-to-be-done”: by definition, haunting is unsettled, and what is unsettled can be transformed. I work from Gordon’s idea of haunting as “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely.” Haunting is a product of “abusive systems of power,” distinct from trauma but often stemming from trauma. Haunting affects not only individuals, but communities, institutions, collectives. Haunting is what happens when the individual pieces of system-wide trauma are kept apart, both forcibly and out of habit, cast as inconsequential, individual grievances. The possibility that this false separation could become untenable is a specter of both hope and fear.

In many ways haunting is how I account for that which I do not yet understand. And yet, I understand this much about sexualized violence and LGBTQ exclusion in Mennonite contexts: they are both bound up in and around the processes through which Mennonites try to make peace. Both sexualized violence survivors and queer people (which are not mutually exclusive groups) within Mennonite contexts are frequent casualties of Mennonite peace-making process.



I want to be clear here what I am *not* arguing. The enabling of sexualized violence and conservative, heterosexist Christianity do not automatically map on to one another. Even the insinuation that this is the case is dangerous: not because sexualized violence doesn't flourish in conservative churches—it does<sup>209</sup>—and not because religious patriarchy isn't linked to sexual abuse and victim-blaming—it is<sup>210</sup>—but because male-dominated progressivism has failed to produce any meaningful challenge to its prevalence. Despite the powerful influence of right-wing evangelicalism on Mennonites, in many ways their more ideologically leftist power centers provide a case study of male-dominated progressivism and its ethical limits in the realm of sexuality and violence. Ruth Krall, retired director of Goshen College's Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies program and longtime advocate for sexual violence survivors, captures the despair provoked by the problem:

It is a conundrum that feminist women find unsolvable. Men from the left abuse women and their children while they write wonderful words about salvation and human justice and reconciliation. Men on the right also abuse women and their children. They too write wonderful words about salvation and human justice and reconciliation. Their words carry the day. Their victims carry the wounds.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> For a recent account of sexual abuse in conservative U.S. Christianity, see Kathryn Joyce, "The Next Christian Sex-Abuse Scandal."

<sup>210</sup> For treatments of abuse, patriarchy, and theology in a peace church context, see Elizabeth G. Yoder, *Peace Theology & Violence Against Women* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), and Carolyn Holderread Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

<sup>211</sup> Ruth Krall, August 10, 2013 (7:45pm), comment on Hannah Heinzekehr, "Can Subordination Ever Be Revolutionary? Reflections on John Howard Yoder," *The Femonite: Musings from a Mennonite Feminist*, accessed January 30, 2015, <http://www.femonite.com/2013/08/09/can-subordination-ever-be-revolutionary-reflections-on-john-howard-yoder/>.

The most famous Mennonite perpetrator, the theologian John Howard Yoder, is perhaps most readily identifiable as a New Left figure whose ideas about sexual liberation were integral to his abusive behavior. The questions his abuse poses to the Mennonite church are ones that animate innumerable sites of political conflict in the U.S.: What are the relationships between sexual freedom, sexual heterogeneity, and sexual ethics? What sexual ethic best attends to issues of power and consent? What makes the violation of a heterosexual marriage covenant a more urgent transgression to address than the violation of another person's sexual autonomy? When the heterosexual family unit is the foundation of a sexual ethic, whose life becomes less liveable? Finally, what are the consequences of sexualized violence that isn't seen as violence through dominant systems of meaning? Where does the haunting manifest?

I begin with this personal account of my hesitant research process because this chapter, more than any of my others, attempts to account for my own presence in the community I am studying, particularly as a public writer who has come to be associated in Mennonite circles with the movements about which I am writing. This public writing, in the form of several pieces on the Pink Menno blog and on Our Stories Untold, a blog on Mennonite sexualized violence, has been primarily for a Mennonite audience, with the exception of one more widely read piece on Religion Dispatches, an online religious news magazine.

In recent years, ethnographic literature has increasingly taken on the challenges presented by online media as sites of study. Though I do not engage that body of work here, in writing about the effects of my own online publications, I recognize that I write in close proximity to it. Writing as a public scholar within my communities of study has

become, for me, an ethnographic method unto itself: one in which my own interpretations of what is happening are deployed into the same spaces in which they are happening, and the responses to which I have access become part of my own body of knowledge.

### **Peace where there is no peace**

*The pacifist theology of the Mennonite Church is nothing but a sham until the men of the church become willing to apply an equal amount of passion for peace to their relationship with their Sisters in Christ and work to stop violence against women and children in their own homes and congregations. They could start by including the ethical ironies of John Howard Yoder's life in their study of his work.*

—Barbra Graber<sup>212</sup>

In early 2014, after releasing a historicizing piece on the LGBTQ Mennonite movement entitled “The Violence of Mennonite Process: Finding the Address of the Present,” I went very quickly from several dozen Mennonites knowing about my work to at least several hundred. One day later, Religion Dispatches published my article “The Woody Allen Problem: How Do We Read Pacifist Theologian (and Sex Abuser) John Howard Yoder?”<sup>213</sup> Perhaps due to the timely Woody Allen hook, the latter piece was popular by RD’s standards, garnering nearly two thousand Facebook likes and moving my account, heavily critical of masculinist Mennonite peace theology, into multiple conversational spheres.

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<sup>212</sup> Quoted in Rachel Halder, “A Year in the Making: 1 Year Anniversary of Our Stories Untold & Hopes for the Future,” *Our Stories Untold*, accessed February 19, 2015, <http://www.ourstoriesuntold.com/2013/06/05/a-year-in-the-making-1-year-anniversary-of-our-stories-untold-hopes-for-the-future/>.

<sup>213</sup> Stephanie Krehbiel, “The Woody Allen Problem: How Do We Read Pacifist Theologian (and Sexual Abuser) John Howard Yoder?,” *Religion Dispatches*, February 11, 2014, <http://religiondispatches.org/the-woody-allen-problem-how-do-we-read-pacifist-theologian-and-sexual-abuser-john-howard-yoder/>.

The near-simultaneous timing of these two publications put my interpretations at the complicated intersection of two increasingly public Mennonite struggles. One, of course, was the struggle for LGBTQ justice.<sup>214</sup> The other was an advocacy movement for survivors of Mennonite sexual abuse, coalesced around the serially abusive John Howard Yoder, dead for fifteen years, but with what is now known to be many dozens of living victims. For much of the time after Yoder's death, the scholars upon whom he was most influential, both within and beyond the Mennonite church, seemed either unaware of or unconcerned with the scale of his offenses. My Religion Dispatches piece, which argued for more survivor-centric accounts of powerful abusers, was one of a series of increasingly urgent and unapologetically feminist writings on the damage that had been left by Yoder and the institutional practices that protected him.

Yoder had become an impossible figure for me to avoid. Regarded by many as the most renowned pacifist theologian of the twentieth century, Yoder's influence in the Mennonite world is hard to overstate. In her social history of Canadian, Mennonite-owned manufacturing companies, Janis Thiessen provides a succinct description of how the influence of a small number of Mennonite intellectual elite resonated through Mennonite communities. "This elite disseminated their worldview through Mennonite Sunday school curricula, the sermons of Mennonite seminary-trained pastors, and the

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<sup>214</sup> LGBTQ Mennonites, like LGBTQ people in many other contexts, live with a host of popular misconceptions about queer sexuality and sexualized violence. Anti-gay rhetoric, particularly that which comes from evangelical sources that draw on outdated clinical language, draws heavily on notions of queer people as sexual victims, predators, or both. Religion scholar Mark Jordan has charted how U.S. Christians propagate the idea of homosexuality as generally predatory, particularly towards youth: "The most effective American rhetoric for condemning civil or religious toleration of homosexuality has repeatedly warned of dangers to the young." Mark D. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xiii.

courses of Mennonite Bible college instructors. Mennonite[s]...were raised in a culture whose authorities attempted to inculcate this worldview in them.”<sup>215</sup> From the 1970s until arguably the present, Yoder was the most powerful of these elites.

More than any prominent Mennonite thinker, Yoder gained recognition and accolades outside of the Mennonite world, which to a large extent made him all the more powerful within the Mennonite world, particularly at the moment when Mennonites were tasked with curbing his predatory sexual behavior.<sup>216</sup> In the patriarchal spaces of seminaries and divinity schools, his work helped to make Anabaptist pacifism at least respectable, if not accepted.<sup>217</sup> Yoder’s work was likewise affirming to Mennonites who chafed against the more separatist and parochial impulses of their church. Well before his death, his work had gained broad ecumenical popularity. Unlike most of the Mennonite intellectual/theological elites who preceded him, Yoder presumed to speak to the Christian church writ large, denouncing church institutions as complicit in the worldly evils of war and empire. Much of his work was devoted to his ideas about the correct

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<sup>215</sup> Janis Thiessen, *Manufacturing Mennonites: Work and Religion in Post-War Manitoba* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 19.

<sup>216</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen, “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* LXXXIX, no. 1 (January 2015): 7–80.

<sup>217</sup> Gerald Schlabach, “Only Those We Need Can Betray Us: My Relationship with John Howard Yoder and His Legacy,” *Gerald W. Schlabach*, accessed February 11, 2015, <http://www.geraldschlabach.net/2014/07/10/only-those-we-need-can-betray-us-my-relationship-with-john-howard-yoder-and-his-legacy/>. Schlabach addresses how Yoder’s theological challenges echoed those in the non-academic Mennonite world: “The searing challenge for Mennonites in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was how to respond to the barbed compliment of Reinhold Niebuhr, acknowledging at last that they had gotten Jesus’ ethic right, but turning around and saying that they were thereby rendering themselves politically irrelevant and socially irresponsible. This after all was a sophisticated version of the existential accusation that very ordinary Mennonites who never read this stuff get thrown at them in every wartime – that they are shirkers. And no one responded to Niebuhr in more ways, through more decades, more trenchantly than Yoder.”

ethics for a Christian community whose role in the world was not to participate in secular systems but rather to challenge them through its own superior witness. He remains, for Mennonites in general, the most influential ethicist of Christian living. When I first encountered Yoder's writings as an adult, I recognized in them the same complicated balance of sectarian and missionary ideals that I encountered in the course of my own Mennonite upbringing and education. As Thiessen and Mennonite theologian Carol Penner have argued, Yoder's influence extends far beyond those who have actually read his work.<sup>218</sup>

But Yoder's influence is a haunted one. In July 2013, Barbra Graber, a retired Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) theater professor, published a piece entitled "What's to be done about John Howard Yoder?", first sharing it as a note on Facebook, then on *Our Stories Untold*, a blog for Mennonite sexualized violence survivors created in June 2012.<sup>219</sup> Graber, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and veteran of survivors' advocacy battles, had spent years trying to stop Mennonite sexual predators—particularly those enabled by the pulpit—from getting access to women and children. She was close to women who had survived Yoder's assaults, and knew that among survivors of Yoder there was a great deal of pain over the largely unqualified veneration of Yoder among Mennonite theologians and church leaders. She also, along with a number of other Mennonite women who had crossed paths with Yoder, suspected that the number of his victims was much higher than was generally acknowledged in Mennonite circles. After

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<sup>218</sup> Carol Penner, "Content to Suffer: An Exploration of Mennonite Theology from the Context of Violence Against Women," in Elizabeth G. Yoder, *Peace Theology & Violence Against Women*.

<sup>219</sup> Barbra Graber, "What's to Be Done about John Howard Yoder?," *Our Stories Untold*, accessed October 21, 2013, <http://www.ourstoriesuntold.com/2013/07/17/whats-to-be-done-about-john-howard-yoder/>.

reading yet another review in *The Mennonite* praising a newly released, posthumously edited collection of Yoder's writings,<sup>220</sup> she wrote her blog post, containing a list of concrete actions that Mennonites could take to atone for the Yoder tragedy.

At the top of Graber's list was a request to end the minimizing language that for years had characterized descriptions of Yoder's behavior from most church leaders and scholars of Yoder. "People still ask me what he actually did that was so bad," Graber wrote. "Words like 'inappropriate,' 'dalliances,' 'crossed boundaries,' 'improprieties,' and 'sexual advances' to describe Yoder's actions are highly misleading because they are far too mild, lack specificity, and leave everyone asking, 'So what did the women do to encourage him?' and 'Why didn't they protest.'<sup>221</sup> But the center of Graber's critique was her desire for Mennonites to admit that they had a problem with sexualized violence that hadn't died with Yoder, and to start acting on that problem. Her call was not just for penance; Graber's intervention aimed at placing sexualized violence prevention at the heart of Mennonite praxis. "Sexualized violence is a peace and justice issue," she wrote "For Mennonite pastors and bishops: No more secrecy and silence."<sup>222</sup> In the comment section of another Mennonite blog, Graber again made it clear that Yoder was only the springboard for the renewal of interest in Mennonite sexualized violence. "[Yoder] is the least of my worries because he is no longer living. But he remains a symbol for the way

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<sup>220</sup> Gordon Houser, "Books on Emergence, Saints, Yoder," *The Mennonite*, accessed October 21, 2013, [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/16-6/articles/Books\\_on\\_emergence\\_saints\\_Yoder](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/16-6/articles/Books_on_emergence_saints_Yoder).

<sup>221</sup> Graber, "What's to Be Done about John Howard Yoder?"

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

in which the church has historically dealt with the sexual abuses of power by its leaders.”<sup>223</sup>

Graber’s counsel reflected years of trying to make Mennonites pay better attention to those abuses. When, in an interview, I asked her how that activism began, she pointed to a theater production she did in the mid-1990s on sexual abuse. Her partner in the project was Carolyn Holderread Heggen, a Mennonite psychotherapist specializing in trauma and sexual abuse.

We got this grant to tour across the country. [Heggen’s] book, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*,<sup>224</sup> was just coming out. She got this grant and invited me to join her, and we put together a lecture-drama, we got some actors, and we toured several of the Mennonite colleges and universities one year. We told the stories of survivors in the Mennonite church. We were attempting to break open this incredibly taboo topic. I was for the first time telling my story publicly....and what we learned is that this is pandemic [among Mennonites]. We found survivors everywhere we went. And **then it all seemed to close back up.**<sup>225</sup>

The challenge of silent survivors continues to stymie Graber, who knows from innumerable private conversations how acute the pandemic remains. “We can’t get Mennonite survivors to come forward,” Graber told me. “We hide in shadows in the Mennonite world, and we clutch those shadows...[survivors] scurry away from me if I ask, who did this to you? Tell me his name. I have a list, let me put him on it, so we know

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<sup>223</sup> Barbra Graber, June 25, 2014, comment on

<sup>224</sup> Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*.

<sup>225</sup> Graber interview, September 4, 2013.



if he has harmed someone else. ‘Oh no, I couldn’t do that.’ It’s just astonishing, the level of oppressive silence. I catch this tendency to protect the identity of known predators in myself and my family’s experience as well.” Another survivor of child sexual abuse and rape by two separate Mennonite perpetrators told me that people who are initially eager to support her as a survivor respond very differently when she names her attackers, asking her if she misunderstood their intentions or implying that her accusations are slanderous.

*I heard Barbra Graber has a list, I read in a Facebook message. Can you put me in touch? I have a name for her.* Since my publications in early 2014, I sometimes get messages like this. Most often, it is a story or a piece of one, no inquiry or request for action. Rarely are there names of perpetrators attached, though occasionally there are.

Heggen also knew this phenomenon well, not only as a therapist but as a survivor of abuse by John Howard Yoder, the most powerful perpetrator the church was protecting. Heggen had played a central role in church discipline of Yoder when he was living (which I will describe), but the process left her and many other survivors of Yoder’s abuse with more frustration than resolution. Yoder’s behavior towards Heggen echoed a common pattern in his engagement with academic women: initial interest in her intellectual work devolved into pornographic letters and attempts to convince her to meet him in hotels. In 1993, after Heggen’s book on sexual abuse was released and she began to speak about violence against women in Mennonite institutions, she was inundated with stories of women harassed and abused by Yoder. Heggen’s own analysis of sexualized violence placed it squarely within the traditions of Christian patriarchy; while she remained devoted to the church, she did not shy from critiques of its institutions.

“Churches have tended to value the permanence of marriage over the dignity and sanctity of personhood,” she wrote. “Too often women and children are told to return to an abusive home because ‘it’s God’s will’....”<sup>226</sup>

In Mennonite communities, sexualized violence survivors and their advocates face a similar struggle to that of LGBTQ people in appealing to the faith’s peace tradition: the hurt done to them is largely unintelligible within the dominant theological traditions for defining violence within their churches. Even within the most social justice-oriented corners of Mennonite tradition, survivors run up against a mostly unspoken hierarchy of worthy concerns that they struggle to ascend or dismantle. As a survivors’ advocate, Graber had periodic experiences with that hierarchy. One of her most demoralizing encounters with masculine pacifist dismissal came in 1996, when EMU invited Yoder onto campus as a speaker. When Graber attempted to intervene, arguing that Yoder was dangerous to women students and faculty, she discovered how explicitly her understanding of violence conflicted with that of the committee that invited Yoder. “I remember one particular meeting facilitated by Ron Kraybill, faculty in the EMU Conflict Transformation program,” she wrote to me:

To support my position, I told the story (anonymously) of a friend who, as a 20-something employee of the Mennonite Church, was sexually harassed and assaulted by Yoder. The incidents were so disturbing she moved many states away and married outside the church. We happened to meet in 1985, discovered our similar backgrounds and became fast friends. She wanted to sing hymns when we got together and I sensed in her a longing for a church she once loved and

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<sup>226</sup> Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, 93.

served, but by whom she felt brutally betrayed and therefore left. As I relayed parts of her story in that meeting of leaders about to welcome her unrepentant perpetrator to campus as a guest speaker, I wept. **I pleaded with them to reconsider what this action does to survivors who are also part of our body, even though they remain invisible.** I remember expressing angry frustration at the situation and then being reprimanded by Kraybill in front of the group. I was terribly embarrassed, but also ticked off.

After the meeting I questioned Kraybill about the appropriateness, as a mediator/facilitator, of shutting down my legitimate emotion. He said something like **“I just don’t understand why women have to make such a big deal of these things when there are people all over the world who are violated in much more terrible ways by the injustices of poverty and war.”** I’d heard this before from peace and justice Mennonites. It was yet another confirmation that experiences of sexualized violence were often not even on their table. It was also another wake up call that those who have never been sexually violated cannot understand the depth and tragedy of its lifelong impact. Yet they too often continue to feel they have a right, from their own limited understanding, to silence and shame those of us who have, and even pass judgment on the veracity and seriousness of our personal experiences. It seemed a clear case of preaching "Peace, peace, when there is not peace." I left that particular meeting with a heavy heart.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Barbra Graber, email message to author, January 21, 2015, used with permission.

At their worst, the politics of social justice and war protest—particularly when the wars and injustices in question are geographically distant—can be deployed as weapons of silencing against the survivors of violence that is too intimate and proximate to face without uncomfortable self-reflection. The dismissal that Graber recalls here is startling, not only in its ignorance of the integral role that sexualized violence plays in war, but for the implication that *the very ubiquity of sexualized violence is a justification for ignoring it*. In a comment like this, sexualized violence is made a natural and inevitable aspect of feminine experience, something that women need to get over in service of more important concerns. Male survivors, transgender and genderqueer survivors—they are driven even further into shadow. This is violence defined aggressively, defined explicitly *against* bodies that are gendered and sexualized, through the assertion that real violence happens elsewhere.

Within such a discursive world, the trauma of ubiquitous sexualized violence can only manifest as haunting. When the ghosts threaten to speak, the first line of defense against them is subtle shaming, or, as too many of my informants to count have named it, *passive aggression*. “May we forgive John Howard Yoder and move on; may we continue to console and aid the victims of any action he was involved in negatively, and move on. Children in Syria was gassed [sic] to death on August 21 this year. We really do have work to do in the Kingdom, especially to love and protect the children,” wrote one Mennonite pastor on his blog, in September 2013.<sup>228</sup> Reading this comment, I am struck by a “we” from which Yoder’s victims are excluded, by the repetition of “move

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<sup>228</sup> Bill Dellinger, “Thoughts About John Howard Yoder,” *Mennonite Preacher*, September 12, 2013, <https://mennonitepreacher.wordpress.com/2013/09/12/thoughts-about-john-howard-yoder-091213/>.

on,” and above all, by “We really do have work to do in the Kingdom.” With these lines, the author swiftly and paternalistically assigns to survivors their place; worthy objects of consolation, perhaps, but separate from the world of real church work, and at worse, stealing attention that rightly belongs to legitimately suffering people. Feminists concerned with sexualized violence did gain significant support within the Mennonite church throughout the 1990s and 2000s,<sup>229</sup> but they continued to fight against this much more powerful and entrenched theological discourse that trivialized their work.

Heggen was a veteran of such fights. As her personal catalogue of Yoder survivor stories grew, she repeatedly confronted the Mennonite seminary officials who supervised Yoder, particularly Marlin Miller, the president of Goshen Biblical Seminary [ ], demanding to little avail that they do more to curb Yoder’s behavior. Years after Yoder’s death, Heggen was haunted by a sealed file that she knew was in the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) archives, full of Miller’s personal notes about abuse and harassment complaints against Yoder. She also knew that Miller had made an agreement with Yoder that the file be permanently sealed.

When Ervin Stutzman, whom Heggen knew from her years of teaching at Eastern Mennonite University, became the Executive Director of MCUSA in 2010, she saw an opportunity to appeal to new leadership. Requesting that Stutzman’s wife and another close friend of hers be present, she told him of her experience being harassed by Yoder. “I told Ervin that I believed the Mennonite Church had unfinished business with Yoder

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<sup>229</sup> For a more detailed account of ways in which this support was both manifested and stymied at an institutional level, see Linda Gehman Peachey, “Naming the Pain, Seeking the Light: The Mennonite Church’s Response to Sexual Abuse,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* LXXXIX, no. 1 (January 2015): 111–28.

and that we would never be vital again until this issue was addressed,” Heggen wrote to me in an email. “I was amazed and impressed and touched as he was one of the first church leaders who had listened without being defensive about Yoder or somehow implying that I must have done something to encourage Yoder's sexual attention.”<sup>230</sup> Several months later, Heggen made a similar appeal to Sara Wenger Shenk, the president of AMBS, hoping that a woman in that role might respond differently than the men she had dealt with in the past.

I told [Shenk] that I believed there was unfinished business with Yoder and that there would continue to be a shadow over the seminary until the truth was uncovered and dealt with. Then I told them my personal experiences with Yoder, sharing the years of deep depression that followed and my belief that I had somehow done something to cause this great man of the church to think I was sexually interested in him. I also told them about having encountered around 50 other women around the world who had shared similar stories with me. I said that although Yoder was dead, for many of his victims the pain of his violence and of the church's denial and secrecy about who he really was was still very much alive...I told Sara that I thought if she and the seminary ever wanted to understand the depth of violation women had suffered and the secrecy that had protected Yoder for so long, she needed to know what was in those documents.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Carolyn Holderread Heggen, email message to author, February 8, 2015, used with permission.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

Against a considerable degree of backlash from other powerful Mennonites,<sup>232</sup> Sherk decided to honor Heggen's request. She and Stutzman together assembled a group of four Mennonites with expertise in sexualized violence. Together with Stutzman and Sherk, they made up a six-person "discernment group" appointed to do "healing and reconciliation work" with Yoder survivors. In a press release, the group stated, "We hope this work will lead to church-wide resolve to enter into lament, repentance, and restoration for victims of sexual abuse by other perpetrators as well." Stutzman and Sherk asked Heggen to be part of the group, but she refused, clear that "this was not my work to do." For the sake of helping other survivors to trust the process, Heggen agreed to serve as an adviser to the group.<sup>233</sup>

In private conversations with me, Mennonite survivors and survivors' advocates have expressed a wide range of opinions about this group. Heggen's presence as an adviser has lent it credibility, as have several members whose feminist and LGBTQ-friendly politics are important for queer survivors especially. Some express distrust of any group convened by the Mennonite church, and with reason: the history of Yoder's violence was littered with ineffective task forces and discernment groups, and the history of LGBTQ Mennonite exclusion has been as well. For queer survivors in particular, Stutzman's presence has induced skepticism. But opening a sealed archive releases long-silent ghosts, and such ghosts are hard to control. When the discernment group invited

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

historian and Washburn University professor Rachel Waltner Goossen to do research in the archives and report on that research,<sup>234</sup> the ghosts began to speak in a feminist voice.

### **When specters speak**

*They would never confess to themselves, or the church, that they had no ability to lead. Simply put, these church leaders had been out-manipulated by a man who wore the mask of a respected intellectual but was really just a very sick man mired in his own deceit.*

—Sharon Detweiler, “John Howard Yoder: My Untold Story After 36 Years of Silence.”<sup>235</sup>

Yoder’s own ideological position in relation to the feminism is impossible to extricate from his pattern, well-documented<sup>236</sup> and consistent over several decades, of ingratiating himself to young women in the Mennonite church with scholarly and professional ambitions as a means of grooming them for coercive sexual encounters. The context in which he encountered these women made it difficult to impossible for them to resist intellectual flattery and engagement from one of the most powerful men in their church. Mennonite conferences moved towards gradual acceptance of the ordination of

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<sup>234</sup> Hannah Heinzekehr, “Historian to Examine Church’s Response to John Howard Yoder’s Abuse of Women,” *Mennonite Church USA*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/historian-to-examine-churchs-response-to-john-howard-yoders-abuse-of-women/>.

<sup>235</sup> Sharon Detweiler, “John Howard Yoder: My Untold Story after 36 Years of Silence,” *Our Stories Untold*, January 9, 2015, <http://www.ourstoriesuntold.com/2015/01/09/john-howard-yoder-my-untold-story-after-36-years-of-silence-2/>.

<sup>236</sup> The most comprehensive accounts are Ruth Krall, *Volume Three: The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder, Collected Essays* (Enduring Space: Transforming Cultures of Violence One Person at a Time, One Moment at a Time, 2013), <http://ruthkrall.com/downloadable-books/volume-three-the-mennonite-church-and-john-howard-yoder-collected-essays/>, and Rachel Waltner Goossen, “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse.” Goossen’s unprecedented archival access allowed her to confirm much of what Krall, in her account, gestured towards, particularly in relation to the scope and severity of Yoder’s abuse and the institutional complicity that enabled it.



women through the 1970s and 80s, but this acceptance has never been complete nor without tremendous resistance, and certainly this was this case during the period (1970s-80s) that Yoder is documented to have done the majority of his abuse. Women in Mennonite seminaries who aspired to ministry or other church leadership positions knew that their positions within these elite, intellectual circles was tenuous and contingent. Yoder positioned himself as a mentor to women and even, at times, encouraged explicitly feminist organizing and education on the seminary campuses at which he taught. In the early 1970s at Goshen Biblical Seminary (GBS)<sup>237</sup> in Goshen, Indiana, in an historical twist that now reads as painful irony, Yoder volunteered for and became the faculty advisor for a seminary course entitled, “Women in Church and Society.” Yoder’s role in the course, which evolved from a feminist consciousness-raising group of seminary and surrounding community women, meant that “as the liaison with the student conveners he took responsibility for administrative duties, including grading.”<sup>238</sup> His wife, Anne Guth Yoder, also attended the course meetings, which she later explained to church officials as her attempt to curb possible sexual encounters between Yoder and his women students, as “she feared that her husband was interested in talk of sexual liberation.”<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> The Mennonite seminaries with which Yoder was affiliated went through several institutional iterations during the relevant years. Goshen Biblical Seminary (GBS), affiliated with the Mennonite Church (pre-MCUSA), and Mennonite Biblical Seminary (MBS), affiliated with the General Conference Mennonite Church, began to share a campus in the 1960s, and were known together as Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (AMBS). The two formally merged 1994. The school is now known as Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and the initialization AMBS, in Mennonite circles, is generally used to refer to the Elkhart campus both in the present and in the years before GBS and MBS became one entity.

<sup>238</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen, “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse,” 22.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

Yoder was certainly interested in talk of sexual liberation, but his application of that interest was undeniably patriarchal. Goossen details Yoder's own pursuit of what he considered an "experiment in human sexuality, devising his own guidelines and selecting his own subjects, whom he called 'sisters.'"<sup>240</sup> This "experiment" began in the 1970s, and in 1979 Yoder described it to seminary president Marlin Miller, his supervisor at the time, as based on ideas he took from the Gospels and the writings of Paul. His "subjects" were women students and, in all likelihood, other women from the seminary, and his experimental protocol was the notion that he could, if he desired, engage in almost every variety of sexual activity with a woman without violating his own marital contract.<sup>241</sup> Notably, however, Yoder was careful with definitions, and the testimonies of survivors of these encounters contain recollections of Yoder's insistence that what he was doing to them and their bodies was not, in fact, sexual. In a particularly incestuous twist, he often

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>241</sup> Goossen's account revealed that while Yoder sometimes argued that intercourse was the line he would not cross, his definition of intercourse was as arbitrary as his definition of what was sexual, and strongly suggests that at least one of his victims experienced what would qualify as rape by the present-day legal definition. The belief that Yoder did not have sexual intercourse with any of the women he violated was instrumental in the logic through which a number of Mennonites as well as fans of Yoder's theology minimized the damage he did to women. Examples are far too numerous to cite, but for representative examples, see J. Glenn Friesen, "The Church Discipline of John Howard Yoder," *Anabaptist Nation*, May 1, 2014, <http://emu.edu/now/anabaptist-nation/2014/05/01/the-church-discipline-of-john-howard-yoder-2/>, as well as Ted Grimsrud, "Reflections of a Chagrined 'Yoderian' (part Five—where to Now?)," *Thinking Pacifism*, August 6, 2013, <http://thinkingpacifism.net/2013/08/06/reflections-of-a-chagrined-yoderian-part-five-what-to-do/>, and Mark Thiessen Nation, "What to Say about John Howard Yoder's Sexual Misconduct?," *Anabaptist Nation*, August 13, 2013, <http://emu.edu/now/anabaptist-nation/2013/08/13/what-to-say-about-john-howard-yoders-sexual-misconduct/> (in the latter two examples, I refer particularly to the comment threads). Based on Goossen's analysis and Heggen's repeated testimony, it is clear that Yoder did have penetrative as well as oral sex with some of his victims, and that these incidents would likely fit current legal definitions of rape. I do not relate this detail with any intention to minimize the effects of Yoder's much more common pattern of abusing through non-penetrative sexual acts.

explained his sexual violations as “familial” in nature, even portraying his abuse as a form of “healing” for women suffering under the weight of repressive sexual norms.<sup>242</sup>

The tale of Miller’s sustained theological arguments with Yoder over his “experiment” was largely concealed in seminary archives for several decades, until Goossen was granted access to them in 2013. Her account, published in early January 2015, is still reverberating through Mennonite communities. What is clear now, which was less clear before Goossen’s article was published, was how deeply complicit Miller was in enabling Yoder’s abuses. Throughout the 1980s, Miller scrambled to contain the growing evidence that Yoder was systematically violating women on the seminary campus as well as in their own homes. Multiple women came to Miller with complaints about Yoder’s behavior. While Miller was clearly distressed by the evidence before him, he was not above threatening women whom Yoder had abused with expulsion.<sup>243</sup> Miller also received multiple letters of complaint from Mennonites around the world who experienced Yoder’s sexual advances when he went on lecture tours and other church-related travels. Miller kept detailed accounts of the complaints he received in his own private files, often taking notes on the specific sex acts described in letters before destroying them.<sup>244</sup> (While Goossen does not forward any such interpretation, one survivor’s advocate who knew Miller commented to me after the release of Goossen’s piece on the voyeuristic overtones of Miller’s secret archive. I cannot imagine that she is alone in naming that particular discomfort.)

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<sup>242</sup> Goossen, ““Defanging the Beast, ”” 12.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid, 35-36.

Miller did not alert women that Yoder was dangerous to them. Instead, he relied on his own relationship with Yoder, once Miller's mentor and now his seminary's most celebrated asset, to persuade Yoder that his biblical reasoning was flawed, using the information in his files to craft his own arguments. Yoder, it seemed, had no particular interest in denying that he was involved in various stages of "touching" with multiple "sisters," but he defended himself, with considerable confidence, on theological and experimental grounds. When women reported to Miller that they had not consented to Yoder's advances, Yoder assimilated the evidence as the inevitable collateral of experimentation: "there are experiences of being 'wrong' which clarify that one is also somewhat right."<sup>245</sup>

Regardless of whether or not Miller ever fully grasped how abusive and exploitive Yoder's behavior actually was, it is clear that protecting women was never his main priority. Even when he convened other seminary officials to assist him in his attempts to control Yoder, he withheld from them the full details of what he knew Yoder was doing to women.<sup>246</sup> The full impact of legal activism around sexual harassment and rape had yet to reach most institutions of higher learning in the early eighties, let alone the patriarchal power centers of Mennonites. Mennonites' most prominent theologian, already internationally renowned, sought to appropriate feminism in service of his own sexually violent impulses, going so far as to target and undermine feminist women with predatory intent—and he was now the person with whom seminary officials were trying to win a theological argument.

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, 40.

No one in charge of supervising Yoder seemed equipped to confront his behavior with a sexual ethic based on considerations of power and consent. And indeed, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect that they would have done so. In attempting to control Yoder, Mennonite seminarians were hampered by a hegemonic Christian sexual ethic that placed disproportionate responsibility on women for the maintenance of sexual boundaries and understood violations of those boundaries primarily in terms of their relation to a heterosexual marriage contract. Theological arguments with Yoder often circled around the question of whether or not what he was doing counted as adultery. Yoder, unquestionably a master of manipulative rhetoric, never conceded that it did. Miller, and the other seminary officials who tried to discipline Yoder, never managed to break free of Yoder's own intellectual terms for the discussion.

### **The Mennonite Women's Posse<sup>247</sup>**

*The women's network in the Mennonite Church knows more about this problem than you do.*

—letter from Ruth Krall to Marlin Miller, September 9, 1982<sup>248</sup>

Miller and his colleagues were not the only ones measuring the ethics of Yoder's behavior in the 1980s, however. Yoder's teaching commitments extended beyond the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (AMBS) to the University of Notre Dame, and women across these campuses had begun to meet, compare stories, and discuss

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<sup>247</sup> In a June 27, 1993 letter to Stanley Hauerwas, Yoder used this phrase to refer to the feminist activists pushing the church to do something about his behavior. ( J. Glenn Friesen, "The Church Discipline of John Howard Yoder," *Anabaptist Nation*, May 1, 2014, <http://emu.edu/now/anabaptist-nation/2014/05/01/the-church-discipline-of-john-howard-yoder-2/>. Some of these women continue to use the phrase ironically in emails to one another.

<sup>248</sup> Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 43.

possibilities for combating a predator that their male administrators clearly could not or would not handle. Among these women was Krall, a Goshen College faculty member with years of experience as a women's health advocate. When Krall arrived on at the AMBS campus to take courses (a privilege extended to Goshen faculty) she had already heard enough stories that she knew not only to avoid Yoder, but also to suspect high-level administrative complicity.<sup>249</sup>

Krall was already active in the women's health movement and in anti-rape activism. She had left a fast-track career in the colleges of nursing and medicine at University of Arizona, one of a handful of nurses in the U.S. to hold faculty positions at that point, working as a clinical supervisor as well as seeing patients. At Arizona, she encountered institutional sexism that included sexually exploitative dynamics between professors and women graduate students. "Those of us who got involved early were making the rules up as we went," Krall told me. "There was no word like sexual harassment in any woman's vocabulary...I had ethical training in my professional programs [as a nurse]. So I knew it was wrong. But I tended to see it in terms of womanizing."<sup>250</sup>

Krall's experiences counseling rape survivors help crystallize for her an understanding of sexualized violence—and violence more generally—as systemic and ideological. Her mid-life turn to theological studies was rooted in her desire to address violent cultural practices at their roots. By the time Krall came to AMBS, she came with an understanding of patriarchy and violence against women informed by feminist and womanist theology as well as by secular sources. Her analysis of Yoder's behavior

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<sup>249</sup> Ruth Krall, email message to author, February 19, 2015, used with permission.

<sup>250</sup> Ruth Krall, interview with author, January 21, 2015.

veered sharply from Miller's; she had no interest in tangling with Yoder on a theological level. Unlike Miller, Krall assessed the situation based not on what Yoder said but on what women told her about his behavior. And when she confronted Miller about his enablement of Yoder, she did not use the language of adultery; she spoke of Yoder unambiguously as a perpetrator of sexual harassment.

But Krall did not stop there. As Goossen put it, "Krall framed the problem as institutional, exacerbated by a male-dominated board, administration, teaching staff, and student body. At the seminary, male prerogative was simply taken for granted." Eventually the risks of continuing to employ Yoder outweighed the benefits, and in 1983, Miller and his colleagues succeeded in forcing Yoder to resign. Both Yoder and AMBS/GBS administrators agreed to secrecy as a condition of the resignation.<sup>251</sup> Yoder, who was already teaching at the University of Notre Dame, moved into a fulltime position in its theology department. His chair, Richard McBrien, complied with Yoder's request not to give the "delicate dimensions" of his resignation from the Mennonite seminary any "unnecessary prominence."<sup>252</sup> Yoder went on to an enormously successful academic career and remained on the faculty at Notre Dame for the rest of his life. While Yoder had harassed women at Notre Dame,<sup>253</sup> his behavior was enabled by parallel church and academic cultures that minimized or denied sexualized violence and at least covertly viewed sexual conquest as proof of masculinity.

In February 1992, Heggen and seven other women targeted by Yoder spoke to a task force appointed by the Indiana-Michigan Conference of the Mennonite Church, the

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<sup>251</sup> Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 45.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 44.

same conference that held Yoder's ministerial credentials.<sup>254</sup> This task force's work began a four-year disciplinary process involving various Mennonite entities that worked to curb his behavior with women, preserve his marriage, and rehabilitate him sufficiently

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<sup>254</sup> Carolyn Holderread Heggen, "Opinion: Misconceptions and Victim Blaming in Yoder Coverage," *The Mennonite*, accessed February 11, 2015, <https://themennonite.org/opinion/misconceptions-victim-blaming-yoder-coverage/>. Heggen, in an email to the author on March 3, 2015, described the contribution of these women for me in more depth in the following statement:

*We did a lot of work for them they had seemed unable or unwilling to do. Because some of the women were afraid Yoder might have learned about our gathering and feared for our safety, we met in the basement of a home while the host's husband stayed upstairs to keep watch. Some of us had not met before so we began by sharing our stories, sometimes crying together and offering mutual support and comfort. Then we wrote a composite story of our violation by John to be shared with the task force.*

*Since we had been repeatedly told by Marlin and others in church leadership that they had long been trying to stop Yoder's abuse but couldn't, we came up with a list of seven suggested steps we wanted them to take. These included: immediately suspend Yoder's ministerial credentials until the review process is complete and inform all church high schools, colleges, seminaries and agencies that until further notice it is not appropriate to use him as a resource person. We also suggested they warn Notre Dame of his patterns and history of sexual violence.*

*We stated our reasons for not believing that Matt. 18 was an appropriate model to use in this situation and said that our personal reconciliation with Yoder was not of primary importance and was not the responsibility of the committee. ( We thought a more appropriate concern of theirs was to work with John to reconcile him to God, to his wife and family, and the church.) Because a number of us were frightened by Yoder, we clarified that we did not want him to initiate direct contact with us in person, by phone, or in letter to make apologies or to justify his behavior. Anything he had to say to us should be channeled through the task force. We stated that we were aware of his powers of rationalization and debate and were not interested in engaging in further conversations with him. We said we were also skeptical of quick apologies and that indications of his true repentance would be his cooperation in a program of personal change and the making of financial restitution to women for counseling expenses incurred as a result of their victimization by him.*

*We also requested that they inform women in the broader church of the existence of our network of support and asked that if the ministerial credentialing committee did decide to suspend John's credentials, that they give a statement to the Mennonite press explaining that he has been suspended and the nature of the charges against him.*



that the church could continue to use him as a denominational spokesman for peace theology without incurring complaints. Heggen wrote of that process:

After we shared our stories, I went around the circle of church representatives and, calling them each by name, asked, “\_\_\_\_\_, do you believe us?”

Each responded, “Yes, I believe you.” Subsequently the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference released a statement that said: “From this work the task force concluded that the reports are true and that Yoder has violated sexual boundaries.”<sup>255</sup>

Soon after this, Tom Price, a reporter for the secular city newspaper *The Elkhart Truth*, spent several months interviewing the same women about the details of what Yoder had done to them. In late 1992, Price published a three-part investigative series in the *Truth*, containing explicit details of Yoder’s abuse of these women. Because of Yoder’s prominence, the story went national; for Mennonite leaders, such exposure was a nightmare. Price wrote that he had heard from at least thirty women in confidence about varying degrees of sexual harassment from Yoder.<sup>256</sup>

But Price also captured the Yoder story at the moment when it seemed like the Mennonite church was actually doing something to curb Yoder’s behavior. At the end of his piece, Price quoted three of Yoder’s non-Mennonite theological colleagues: Stanley Hauerwas, Glen Stassen, and James McClendon, who taught at Duke University,

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Tom Price, “John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Misconduct (1992 Elkhart Truth Articles) | Peace Theology,” accessed October 21, 2013, <http://peacetheology.net/john-h-yoder/john-howard-yoder%E2%80%99s-sexual-misconduct%E2%80%94part-five-2/>. Heggen, Graber, and Krall all told me of their conviction that the number of victims was actually much higher, possibly over one hundred. In January 2015, Goossen’s work confirmed these suspicions.

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary, respectively. All were fervent admirers of Yoder. They spoke in glowing terms of the disciplinary process that Mennonites were enacting with Yoder, confident that he could be restored to unqualified status as a renowned pacifist theological ethicist. The most unrestrained and portentous praise came from Hauerwas:

What's going on in Elkhart is one of the more important things that can happen... The fact that they can take their biggest guy and not try to protect him from possible wrongs he has done is, I think, one of the most extraordinary testimonies... It is to the Mennonites' great credit that they were able to engage in this kind of process...

John is the one who taught us that this is the way... I think the way he has submitted to the church process is a testimony to John's life... We're witnessing a moral event that we haven't seen in ages. After the shock wears off among many people who are receiving the news, this may well result in a strengthening of John Yoder's influence... When all is said and done, it's going to be enhanced not hurt, because he submitted to the process.<sup>257</sup>

Blogger and Pink Menno leader Tim Nafziger offered an assessment of Hauerwas's relationship to Yoder: "As one of the elite few who Yoder saw as a peer, the ocean of power and privilege they both floated on was immense and largely invisible to both of them."<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Tim Nafziger, "'Mennonite Women's Posse.' How Feminist Organized for Accountability for John Howard Yoder." *Young Anabaptist Radicals*. January 5, 2015, <http://young.anabaptistradicals.org/2015/01/05/mennonite-womens-posse-how-feminists-organized-for-accountability-for-john-howard-yoder/>.

Yoder's ministerial license was suspended and never restored, but as a career academic, he had little use for it anyway. The disciplinary process that started in 1992 ended in 1996 with an announcement from the Indiana-Michigan conference. "The release commended Yoder 'for participating in the process to its conclusion' and encouraged 'the church to use his gifts of writing and teaching' ... While it recommended use of an accountability plan, it offered no details. Nor did the release address the issue of restitution."<sup>259</sup> Less than two years later, at the age of seventy, Yoder died unexpectedly. For many admirers of Yoder, the conclusion of the process was enough to restore his work to its place in the canon of pacifist ethics. His death also made it easier to view him as repentant, as challenging the sincerity of his submission to the church process—or questioning the ethics of the process itself—became tantamount to nursing a grudge or speaking ill of the dead.

### **The over-and-done-with comes alive**

*Since Yoder assaulted many of his female students and rising female church leaders, his actions directly impacted a generation of women's leadership. The continued absence of women in so many center of pacifist theology at Mennonite institutions today means that new generations of pacifist theologians may also not be informed by a gender or power analysis or take into consideration the privilege and entitlements that males enjoy.*

—Lisa Schirch, "Afterward: To the Next Generation of Pacifist Theologians"<sup>260</sup>

How did Yoder's violence continue to loom so large in the Mennonite world, and yet stay so hidden? While many of the people who attempted to discipline Yoder were

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<sup>259</sup> Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 72-73.

<sup>260</sup> Lisa Schirch, "Afterward: To the Next Generation of Pacifist Theologians," in J. Denny Weaver et al., *John Howard Yoder: Radical Theologian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 377-395.

deeply concerned about the women he had hurt, the material results of those processes gave far more to Yoder's theological legacy than they did to his victims. In the decade after his death, Yoder's theology provided pivotal inspiration for a new generation of Anabaptism-influenced theologians—few of them Mennonite by background—who came to Mennonite or Anabaptist faith through encounters with his work. In the post-9/11 period of intensifying U.S. militarism, peace theology was an important refuge for many Christians disillusioned by evangelical complicity in neoconservative war-making. Yoder's place at the helm of that tradition ensured a steady stream of posthumous edited volumes of his work.

With this continued admiration of Yoder in the background, Krall undertook a massive project. She wanted a better understanding of the cultural and theological roots of sexualized violence. "I'm convinced that there is a structure to this stuff," she told me. "If we really could understand it, we might be able to break it open."<sup>261</sup> In the years since her time at AMBS, she had completed a doctorate in theology and personality at the Southern California School of Theology at Claremont, and then returned to the Goshen/Elkhart area to develop Goshen College's peace and justice program. Krall's earlier professional life had put her in contact with a number of Roman Catholic survivors and perpetrators of abuse. Seeking a deeper understanding of what she encountered there, she turned to the work of Catholic abuse experts such as Father Tom Doyle and the victims' advocates of SNAP (Survivors Network of People Abused by Priests). Krall saw in Mennonites' responses to sexualized violence a set of institutional patterns that fit well into the larger context of clericalism. For the purposes of

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<sup>261</sup> Krall interview, January 21, 2015.

understanding its role in sexual abuse, Krall defines clericalism as “self-protective and morally-compromised administrative practices in situations where allegations are made regarding clergy sexual abuse of the laity.”<sup>262</sup>

Krall envisioned creating a book on religious sexual abuse that would be both scholarly and widely available to survivors. The result of this ambition was *The Elephants in God’s Living Room*, a four-volume, interdisciplinary work that draws on psychology, theology, and ethnographic research in an attempt to interpret the structures of meaning that undergird sexualized violence in Christian contexts.<sup>263</sup> While Krall wrote the series in consultation with a number of academic peers, she chose to self-publish online rather than seeking a book contract, aware that the prohibitive expense and limited reach of academic books could shut out the very audience she intended to reach. She devoted the third volume of the book entirely to the Yoder tragedy. Unlike almost everything that had been written about Yoder’s behavior before, Krall’s interpretation reflects extensive contacts with Yoder’s survivors.

For those who read it, the third volume of *Elephants* disrupted the persistent fiction that Yoder’s offenses could be characterized by words like “dalliance” and that the disciplinary processes of the seminary and the church had resolved the entire problem. Krall’s analysis cut deeper than that. In its mismanagement of Yoder, Krall saw evidence of the ways in which the Mennonite church enabled and reproduced the violent

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<sup>262</sup> Ruth Krall, *Volume One: The Elephants in God’s Living Room: Clergy Sexual Abuse and Institutional Clericalism* (Enduring Space: Transforming Cultures of Violence One Person at a Time, One Moment at a Time, 2012), <http://ruthkrall.com/downloadable-books/elephants-in-gods-living-room-volume-one/>, 305.

<sup>263</sup> All four volumes are downloadable in their entirety at Ruth Krall, “Downloadable Books” Enduring Space: Transforming Cultures of Violence One Person at a Time, One Moment at a Time,” accessed February 23, 2015, <http://ruthkrall.com/downloadable-books/>.

structures around it. “In an era when his denominational church was often conflicted and confused about its beliefs in modernity and post-modernity, Yoder chose a behavioral path which distracted his church from mature theologizing,” she wrote. While Yoderian theologians almost entirely disregarded Krall’s work, its meticulous research, interdisciplinary scope, and unapologetically feminist analysis chipped into the “cracks and rigging”<sup>264</sup> of the institutional and cultural edifice that kept the scope of the Yoder tragedy in shadow.

For scholars who had made their careers editing and interpreting Yoder’s theology—many of whom were Yoder’s students or mentees—Krall’s insistence on placing Yoder in the larger context of patriarchal clericalism was much more convenient to ignore than it was to digest. Their descriptions of Yoder’s behavior painted a picture of a painfully awkward man, inspired by leftist ideas about sexual liberation but without the social skills to approach women appropriately. The Yoder that emerges from their descriptions is bumbling and inept, but not predatory.

Among these theologians, a related explanatory trend for Yoder’s violence began to circulate after his death: speculation that Yoder had Asperger’s syndrome. Stassen compared Yoder to his own son with Asperger’s, writing, “My struggle through all this is to stay grateful for my strong friendship with John, and his being my intellectual mentor, while strongly rejecting the harassment and hurt he did, as others have made very clear. It helps me to think of John as a super-genius Asperger’s.”<sup>265</sup> Stassen wrote that he was unaware of Yoder’s sexual abuse of women until the 1990s, and while he expressed

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<sup>264</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

<sup>265</sup> Ted Grimsrud, “Glen Stassen’s Reflections on the Yoder Case (guest Post),” *Thinking Pacifism*, accessed February 6, 2015, <http://thinkingpacifism.net/2013/09/24/glen-stassens-reflections-on-the-yoder-case/>.

empathy for the harm these women had experienced, he also suggested that Yoder's behavior came from a psychiatrically-rooted and unmet need for intimacy. Hauerwas, suggested something similar in his own recollections: "The power of his intellect and well [as] his shyness and personal awkwardness meant that he often seemed 'alone' ...Annie, John's wife, is a wonderful person and their children are equally impressive, but John seemed to need something else that I suspect neither he nor those who loved him quite knew how to describe."<sup>266</sup>

Disability advocates within the Mennonite church challenged the careless and ableist implications of entertaining postmortem speculation about Asperger's to explain the actions of a sexual predator. But it was a hard association to fight; some who loved Yoder's work demonstrated a need for an explanation that can somehow make it possible for them to distance his work from the tremendously inconvenient reality of his behavior. Goossen, her distaste for such speculation clear, wrote, "Such explanations deflect attention *away from institutional complicity* [emphasis mine] and reveal Yoder's followers' attempts to explain away his misdeeds so that they might reclaim his theology."<sup>267</sup> Krall also pointed out that the armchair diagnostics are based on a selective reading of Yoder's behavior; not only do they ignore how far Yoder's sexual coercion actually went, but they ignore Yoder's own social flexibility. "When Yoder saw it as professionally necessary or socially useful to his personal goals, he was capable of a certain kind of conversational charm. This intermittently applied charm allowed others to

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<sup>266</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 244.

<sup>267</sup> Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 77.

trust him and to confide in him.”<sup>268</sup>

The allure of the Asperger’s syndrome explanation to Yoder’s friends and theological faithful also points to a desire to see Yoder as an atypical predator. How could a peace theologian possibly do the things of which he had been accused? Theologian Ted Grimsrud, who was among the first of Yoder’s ardent theological followers to take the stories of his abuse seriously, wrote on his blog in 2011, “*Yoder did not really seem to fit the profile I would have in mind of a more typical sexual predator.*”<sup>269</sup> Moving on to talk about the possibility of Asperger’s, Grimsrud leaves the phrase “*more typical sexual predator*” unpacked. Yoder was, in fact, quite intelligible as a predator, both as religious patriarch acting within male-dominated institutions that enabled and justified his behavior, and as one of innumerable leftist men who embraced an enthusiasm for sexual revolution without absorbing the sexual ethics and power critiques of feminism. His ability to manipulate the people around him, his obsessions with secrecy, and, later in life, his attempt to claim victim identity for himself are also identifiable predatory traits. In my communications with women who knew Yoder, few things provoked more incensed frustration than the ignorance of Yoderian theologians on the subject of sexualized violence and the behavior of sexual predators.

Mennonite women like Krall, Heggen, Graber were not, however, much rewarded for delivering this analysis within the professional circles of theology and peacebuilding that sustained Yoder’s fame. On the one hand, some Yoderian scholars scolded them with

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<sup>268</sup> Ruth Krall, *Volume Three: The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder, Collected Essays*.159.

<sup>269</sup> Ted Grimsrud, “Word and Deed: The Strange Case of John Howard Yoder,” *Thinking Pacifism*, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://thinkingpacifism.net/2010/12/30/word-and-deed-the-strange-case-of-john-howard-yoder/>.



the suggestion that they were making the problem of sexual abuse all about Yoder when there were plenty of other perpetrators in the Mennonite world; at the same time, their feminist analyses of pacifism and clerical sexualized violence were often dismissed as dehumanizing to Yoder as an individual. After Goossen's detailed account was released in January 2015, Lisa Schirch, an EMU professor, Director of Human Security at the global nonprofit Alliance for Peacebuilding, and former student of Krall, wrote about her own experiences talking about sexualized violence with male peace theologians "They chastise me for not forgiving Yoder. In doing so, they make the assumption that forgiving Yoder would silence my critique of sexual violence in the church."<sup>270</sup>

### **Pacifism and gender**

*The Church will either have to morph into a new church that is far more accountable, open and accepting of all persons, or continue to die. I observe a dying Mennonite Church here in North America, because extremely talented people have lost patience with the Church and left. If you have to ask why then you need to ask some more hard questions and do a little bit more critical thinking about pacifism and whether the Mennonite Church is truly a pacifist church. Is it possible that it is just a passive church? What a humbling thought to those who have devoted their lives to the Mennonite Church.*  
—Sharon Detweiler, "John Howard Yoder"<sup>271</sup>

In November 2013, a small group of Mennonite scholars and writers held a conference on Mennonite mothering at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas.<sup>272</sup> Knowing that I was following the renewed discussions about Yoder's abuse, they asked me to submit a paper proposal on sexualized violence that would put the Yoder story in a context relevant to Mennonite parents. As I drafted the paper, I sorted through my own

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<sup>270</sup> Quoted in Tim Nafziger, "Mennonite Women's Posse."

<sup>271</sup> Detweiler, "John Howard Yoder."

<sup>272</sup> Organizers of the conference were Rachel Epp Buller, Jennifer Chappell Deckert, and Christine Crouse-Dick.

memories of learning about peace and pacifism, in Sunday school as well as in the catechism classes through which my family's church prepared teenagers for baptism.

Gender was overwhelmingly the lens through which these memories flowed back to me. They began with martyr stories from the sixteenth century, of early Anabaptists tortured on racks, silenced with tongue screws, burnt at stakes, their stories collected into an enormous volume entitled *Martyr's Mirror*, a prized text in the Mennonite institutions of my home community. These stories have never ceased to captivate Mennonites. Poet Julia Kasdorf writes that "the book was most often printed in conjunction with an impending war, the need for stories felt most keenly in relation to the [Mennonite] community's fresh fears of persecution."<sup>273</sup> I learned about the suffering of these sixteenth-century martyrs during the first Gulf War, when pastors and Sunday school teachers were perhaps more than a little worried that the militarism of our politically conservative surroundings might lure us away from the peaceful convictions embodied by our spiritual (and sometimes literal) ancestors.

While early Anabaptists were hardly egalitarian in their gender relations, the women who were tortured and executed as Anabaptists are beloved figures for many Mennonites, celebrated for courage that led them to speak of their faith in defiance of oppressive and inquisitorial European state authorities. Notably, sexual violence is absent from the *Martyr's Mirror*, despite extensive descriptions of the mechanics of torture. Still, Kasdorf and other Mennonite women scholars and writers have remarked on the role of martyrdom in the silence around sexual abuse in Mennonite churches and communities. In her essay "Writing Like A Mennonite," Kasdorf explores the ironies of this enabling:

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<sup>273</sup> Julia Spicher Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life: Essays and Poems* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 180.

martyrdom is celebrated in part as an act of speech, of bearing witness to one's truth, despite the punishment it incurs—and yet communal narratives of trauma also produce complex forms of silence. Silence may be rooted in fear, but Kasdorf also finds resistance in the refusal to speak. She notes how often Mennonites have refused to speak in defense of themselves within civil society and in a legal context, “as when Jesus refused to speak before Pilot.”<sup>274</sup>

Martyr narratives also enable silence around sexualized violence through their sacralization of suffering. In a Christian context, silent suffering is one way that those unable or unwilling to speak are interpellated, or interpellate themselves, into the body of Christ.<sup>275</sup> Suffering creates a form of kinship with Christ's literal martyred body. In 1991 (the date matters for reasons I will explain), theologian Carol Penner wrote the following:

In Mennonite theology little effort has been made to distinguish between different kinds of suffering, between the pain of sickness and the pain of sexual assault, the anguish of natural disaster and the anguish of family breakdown. The common message in Mennonite thought is often that suffering, all suffering, must be endured, just as Jesus endured the cross.

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>275</sup> For a nuanced treatment of the theology of suffering in another martyr-heavy tradition, Roman Catholicism, see Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). A more extensive treatment of the phenomenon among Mennonites can be found in Carolyn Holderread Heggen, “Sexual Abuse by Church Leaders and Healing for Victims,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* LXXXIX, no. 1 (January 2015): 81–93. For a memoir approach that speaks more broadly to the relationships between “redemptive suffering” theology and violence, see Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, New edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

This theology is not good news for people who have been abused.<sup>276</sup>

Penner goes on to discuss Yoder's iconic *The Politics of Jesus*, a book whose gender politics have long been subject to debate.<sup>277</sup> Yoder theologizes the meaning of Jesus's execution on the cross as "revolutionary subordination": because Jesus belonged to the kingdom of God and not to worldly powers, he could submit himself to the Roman authorities who executed him. Likewise Christians, Yoder argued, knew that the worldly authorities were ultimately of no consequence. As communities following the peaceful example set forth by Jesus, it was actually incumbent on Christians to be subordinate to such authorities, to even accept punishment from these authorities when necessary, knowing that the ultimate authority was elsewhere.

Yoder was ambiguous on how such an injunction might apply to patriarchal submission. In his "revolutionary subordination" argument, he wrote, "It is because she knows that in Christ there is no male or female that the Christian wife can freely accept that subordination to her unbelieving husband which is her present lot."<sup>278</sup> It is unclear from this whether the greater sin of worldliness is that the wife must submit to her

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<sup>276</sup> Carol Penner, "Content to Suffer: An Exploration of Mennonite Theology from the Context of Violence Against Women," in Elizabeth G. Yoder, *Peace Theology & Violence Against Women*, 99.

<sup>277</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), Rosetta Ross, "John Howard Yoder and Pacifism," in Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Miguel A. De La Torre, eds., *Beyond the Pale: Reading Ethics from the Margins* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 199-207, and Karen V. Guth, "The Feminist-Christian Schism Revisited," *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 13, no. 2 (November 2014), <https://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/volume-13-number-2-november-2014-navigating-john-howard-yoders-the-jewish-christian-schism-revisited/the-feminist-christian-schism-revisited/>.

<sup>278</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 191.

husband or that the husband is an unbeliever. In any case, Penner finds little hope there. “Yoder’s theology of suffering as it is expressed in *The Politics of Jesus* seems to be particularly bad news to women who suffer abuse.” Mennonite feminist blogger Hannah Heinzekehr hints at a more intersectional reading of Yoder’s omissions: “On the one hand, I understood Yoder’s point, but the sacrifice he, as a white man, seemed to be advocating seemed to be a rather harmful one and one that he himself would not have to bear.”<sup>279</sup>

Penner’s critique came at a pivotal moment in the history of Yoder’s abuse. In October 1991, at which point Yoder was already largely unwelcome on the AMBS campus, the seminary hosted a conference on violence against women. Ruth Krall and Carolyn Heggen were among the speakers, in addition to Penner, who delivered the analysis that I cite here. Their papers were compiled into a book entitled *Peace Theology and Violence Against Women*, a book that makes no *direct* mention of Yoder’s abuse despite the fact that anyone with knowledge of the authors and the context of its creation can find indirect references everywhere. “Let’s not fool ourselves; it *does* matter what people believe. There is a relationship between abuse and theology,” wrote Heggen. I imagined Heggen delivering that line at AMBS in 1991, the audience full of people who taught the work of the theologian who had harassed and abused her. When I asked Krall and Heggen about the timing of the conference, Heggen told me that Krall, who knew of her experiences with Yoder, used the conference as an opportunity to introduce her to Martha Smith Good. In 1982, Good was one of the first Mennonite women to be

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<sup>279</sup> Heinzekehr, “Can Subordination Ever Be Revolutionary?”

ordained;<sup>280</sup> in 1991, she was serving as the campus pastor of Goshen College. But she had also dealt with Yoder as a sexual predator. Several months later, she and Heggen were among the eight women who confronted Yoder's church and went to the press with their stories.

In 1991, in a different Mennonite stronghold, it was Yoder's theology, not the work of his feminist challengers, that guided the teachers and pastors who oversaw my own induction into Mennonite pacifist tradition. In catechism, we learned of Mennonite boys and men who stood before draft boards to attain conscientious objector status, answering questions that were ostensibly designed to test the rigor of their pacifism. Such questions were inevitably framed as interrogations of masculinity: by the measures of a martial, nationalist masculinity that defined a man as a warrior and protector of femininity, men who resisted conscription were emasculate and queer. Sexualized violence haunted these interrogations as well. Mennonite men were sometimes asked how they would respond if their wife or daughter were threatened by a rapist. There was, of course, no right answer to this question: a real man would defend his female property, but a religious pacifist worthy of exemption from military service would not. Normative pacifist knowledge has developed as a conversation among men about how to both resist military conscription and properly embody masculinity in the face of a dominant discourse that brands men who will not fight as less than fully male. The woman or child

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<sup>280</sup> Dave Rogalsky, "I Don't Have to Prove Anything," *Canadian Mennonite Magazine*, March 7, 2011, <http://www.canadianmennonite.org/articles/i-dont-have-prove-anything>.

enduring the rapist was not the subject of this discourse. The victim of a *Mennonite* rapist—not a stranger, not a soldier or militiaman<sup>281</sup>—that victim was not meant to exist.

At the Mennonite mothering conference at Bethel College in November 2013,<sup>282</sup> I presented a version of these arguments about Yoder, gender, pacifism, and sexualized violence, and at one point posing the question, “How, then, does a man who won’t fight wars be masculine?” I continued:

Mennonite men have had a variety of answers: bureaucratic responsibility within Mennonite institutions, international mission work that often operated in place of military service, and patriarchal obligation... I think the fantasy of responsible, benevolent dominance has been terribly seductive to many Mennonite men. But even when masculinity is conceived as protective of women and children, there are almost always sub-classes of people who are deemed unworthy of that protection. Such people are made invisible and yet vilified when convenient. Sexualized violence survivors, with the inconvenient truths that they carry, are often cast into this category. From nearly all available evidence, violence against women, children, and gender non-conforming individuals is endemic to

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<sup>281</sup> The most commonly-repeated stories of rape in many Mennonite communities are those told about Russian Mennonites during the Russian Revolution, during which Mennonite homes and villages were frequent targets of revolutionaries. A number of Mennonites did dispense with pacifism and form their own self-defensive militias during this era.

<sup>282</sup> Melanie Zuercher, “Symposium Combines Mothering and Mennonites in Many Ways and Contexts,” November 5, 2013, <http://www.bethelks.edu/news-events/news/post/4905/>.

patriarchy. Mennonites are not separate from this history. Mennonite patriarchy is part of this history.<sup>283</sup>

As one would expect at a conference on mothering, the audience of approximately forty people was primarily women, and the responses to the paper that many of them shared with me later were overwhelmingly positive. However, I recognized a retired Bethel history professor at the back of the room, James Juhnke, whom I knew had been deeply influenced by Yoder and well acquainted with him. When no one else in audience put forth a question, Juhnke raised his hand, asking me if I had psychological evidence that Mennonite men who went before draft boards were looking for an alternate means of being masculine.

I responded that disciplinary lens probably had a great deal to do with how one interpreted the available evidence, and that as a gender scholar I was attentive to how gender performance and gendered expectations are always at work, whether or not people are aware of the work such expectations are doing. I was baffled at a historian asking me for “psychological evidence”—I was familiar with Juhnke’s work<sup>284</sup> and found it fairly disciplinary in its methods, aside from his clear interest in theology—and yet, from another angle, I wasn’t. Behind Juhnke’s question I sensed a gendered challenge, a

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<sup>283</sup> Stephanie Krehbiel, “Code Words, Consent, and John Howard Yoder: The Trouble with Mennonite Sexual Ethics.” Paper presented at the Mothering Mennonite Symposium, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, October 26, 2013.

<sup>284</sup> See James C. Juhnke, *A People of Two Kingdoms: The Political Acculturation of the Kansas Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1975), James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Pr, 1989), and James C. Juhnke and Carol M. Hunter, *The Missing Peace: The Search for Nonviolent Alternatives in United States History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004).



challenge to my authority in interpreting the actions of men, whose own intentions, he seemed to imply, should be the final word on the meanings of their behavior.

### **Breaking the rules**

*It is quite clear to me that the Roman Catholic Church's hierarchy and the Mennonite Church's hierarchy have both used twentieth-century debates about homosexuality as a diversionary tactic in their efforts to manage, hide and evade institutional transparency in situations of clergy sexual misconduct and acts of sexual violence.*

—Ruth Krall, “Anywhere But Here”<sup>285</sup>

Several months ago, in the midst of several email exchanges about MCUSA politics, Gerald Mast, a communications professor at Bluffton College, shared with me his worry that a large portion of the support for reinvestigating the Yoder story came from denominational actors and constituents who were primarily enthused about sexual regulation. His suspicion was not directed at Krall, Heggen, or Graber—all of whom he held in respect. But he feared the uses to which the process of investigating Yoder could be used.

If there is any authority here, doesn't it partly have to do with the tie—at least in the conservative imagination—of Yoder's violence to sexual transgression, which the conservatives are not going to object to investigating and punishing? In other words, isn't the main engine that drives the investigation of Yoder, not the feminist concern about violence but the neo-conservative anxiety about non-conformist sex (which they mistakenly attribute to Yoder, whose sexual practices

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<sup>285</sup> In Ruth Krall, *Volume Four: Bearing the Unbearable; A Collection of Conversational Essays* (Enduring Space: Transforming Cultures of Violence One Person at a Time, One Moment at a Time, 2014), <http://ruthkrall.com/downloadable-books/volume-four-bearing-the-unbearable-a-collection-of-conversational-essays/>.

were actually disgustingly conventional, except perhaps in his theological imagination).<sup>286</sup>

I cannot say to what extent Mast's suspicion is correct, but I share his worry about how an organized denominational response to sexualized violence could be co-opted for repressive purposes. MCUSA's biennial national convention, scheduled for July 2015, is slated to host a "service of lament and repentance" for the harm done to victims of the Yoder tragedy, and more generally, for all Mennonite victims of sexualized violence. At the same convention, where Pink Menno and BMC are already planning their collective presence, queer Mennonite bodies will almost certainly serve yet again as symbols for Mennonites' intractable conflicts over what kind of community they should be. To what other symbolic uses might they be put? In my July 2014 essay on sexualized violence that I quoted earlier, I wrote, "I fear that the sexual abuse repentance service will become the MCUSA leadership's claim to higher ground in the realm of sexuality, and those leaders for whom it is convenient will use their public commitments to sexual abuse prevention as a means of once again ignoring and trivializing the lives, experiences, and commitments of LGBTQ Mennonites." When my essay was published, several individuals involved in the new Yoder investigation contacted me to tell me that they shared my fear.

What would such a co-opting look like, sound like? One hint is in the work of Mark Thiessen Nation, an EMU theology professor who was both Yoder's friend and his biographer (a biography that spends little energy on Yoder's sexual violations). In the 1990s, together with Stassen and Hauerwas, Nation lobbied the disciplinary committees

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<sup>286</sup> Gerald Mast, email message to author, August 30, 2014. Used with permission.

working with Yoder to finish their process more quickly, suggesting that the process was keeping Yoder from more important church work. In the 2000s, queer Mennonites with interest in theology came to know Nation as one of their most prolific opponents. In 2013, he wrote:

*I hope we have learned from this situation with John Howard Yoder. We, I hope, have learned why the Church has across the centuries drawn clear lines about sexual immorality. I believe we can learn from history that men, in particular, are tempted by sexual immorality (which can lead to harassing, abusive and even violent behaviors **when desires are unmet**). We have learned, I hope, that no one should be a law unto themselves.<sup>287</sup>*

This is the substance of the sexual ethic that enabled John Howard Yoder to sexually violate women for over twenty years. Within the category of “sexual immorality,” anything can be supported or condemned; all that remains is to deploy whatever social power one may have in arguing over the details. This is where Miller spent years of pointless sparring with Yoder, his former mentor, a man whose verbal gifts caused many to label him a genius but whose manipulative uses of those gifts within a religious setting made him a very ordinary predator. With his reference to men and “unmet desires,” Nation also backhandedly suggests that sexualized violence happens because men don’t get what they want from women. If this analysis, uninformed, heterocentric and rigidly gendered, represents all that Mennonites have learned from “this

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<sup>287</sup> Mark Thiessen Nation, “On Contextualizing Two Failures of John Howard Yoder,” *Anabaptist Nation*, September 23, 2013, <http://emu.edu/now/anabaptist-nation/2013/09/23/on-contextualizing-two-failures-of-john-howard-yoder/>.

situation with John Howard Yoder,” it is not good news for queer Mennonites, or for anyone vulnerable to sexualized violence.

Despite all that that has been done to keep the intersections of heterosexism and sexualized violence in a ghostly realm, however, Mennonites with knowledge of those intersections have been increasingly vocal and strategic in the past year. “The church has and continues to use the LGBTQ population as an example of sexual dysfunction. They shame queerness and sexual relations beyond the confines of straight ‘God-ordained’ marriage and place LGBTQ populations on the outside of their ‘sacred’ church walls, all the while protecting and defending men—mostly straight white men—who engage in sexualized violence,” wrote Rachel Halder, creator of the blog *Our Stories Untold*, which in the Mennonite blogosphere has led the way in its insistence on treating anti-queer politics as a form of sexualized violence.<sup>288</sup> And Jennifer Yoder, a queer Pink Menno leader with a long history of professional advocacy work in sexualized violence prevention, sent me this message recently: “New realization: it is my Mennonite duty to write a new Anabaptist sexual ethic so that syllabi everywhere can read: ‘JA Yoder versus JH Yoder, Sexual Ethics Beyond Purity.’”<sup>289</sup> Regardless of the fate of MCUSA, the next generation of Mennonites is likely to be having much different conversations about sex, violence, and peace.

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<sup>288</sup> Rachel Halder, “Unpacking the Lies: What Being Queer Has to Do with Sexual Abuse,” *Our Stories Untold*, January 12, 2015, <http://www.ourstoriesuntold.com/2015/01/12/unpacking-the-lies-what-being-queer-has-to-do-with-sexual-abuse/>.

<sup>289</sup> Jennifer Yoder, Facebook message to author, February 7, 2015. Used with permission.

## Conclusion

*It is often in the spaces between belonging and exclusion where the politics of religious life compel us to work for what is possible.*<sup>290</sup>

—Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture*

*Don't look over it, if you can't get over it.*

—Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*<sup>291</sup>

### Scenes from a movement

On a cold Chicago afternoon this past November, Jennifer Yoder, Tim Nafziger, and I walked down a hallway in the Cenagle Retreat and Conference Center in Lincoln Park to greet Carol Wise, who stood in the lobby, grinning at us. “Oh, here comes trouble,” she said.

It was the beginning of three full days of a queer Mennonite gathering that drew over 120 people to Chicago. Organized jointly by Pink Menno, BMC, and the Inclusive Pastors Network, the gathering was dubbed Fabulous, Fierce, and Sacred: A Gathering of the Anabaptist lgbtqa\* Community. The purpose was to be together and worship together. The purpose was also to plan. The Mennonite Church USA will hold its next biennial national conference in July 2015, in Kansas City. Throughout the time that I have worked on this dissertation, I have kept one eye on the plans for Kansas City, both from the queer organizers I have written of, and from MCUSA. The latest development is a coalition of around one hundred conservative churches, mostly located in Ohio and Pennsylvania, calling themselves the Anabaptist Renewal Movement. Their

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<sup>290</sup> Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 220.

<sup>291</sup> Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham; Duke University Press Books, 2012), 187.

spokesperson, Matt Hamsher, has stated that their commitment to staying within MCUSA hinges on how executive leadership deals with the Mountain States Mennonite Conference (MSMC), an MCUSA area conference that licensed pastor Theda Good—who lives with her spouse, Dawn Kreider—to serve First Mennonite Church in Denver, Colorado. Another Mennonite area conference has also announced its intention to license and ordain an openly gay pastor, Mark Rupp, who is already serving as Pastor of Christian Formation for Columbus Mennonite Church in Columbus, Ohio. The implicit threat in the formation of Anabaptist Renewal Movement seems to be that if executive MCUSA leadership does not condemn these actions in more explicit terms than they have used up until now, then its churches will leave, and presumably form a new institution of their own.

*Persons Associated With a Group Calling Itself Anabaptist Renewal Movement*, I thought glibly when I read their announcement. Then I wondered what I thought I was doing playing Anabaptist authenticity games. There was no point in casting them out of the figurative Anabaptist body; in their threats, their selective invocation of church statements, their identification with a renewal (alluding to a better, purer past), they fell squarely into an Anabaptist historical pattern. When the world is everywhere, it's hard to stay separate from it. But Anabaptists can always form another group, and give it another try.

On Friday night, Jennifer Yoder took the pulpit in the first worship service of the weekend. I noticed, in the startling way we often notice things about people we know primarily online, that she knew exactly how to command the room like a preacher.

My beloved community members. My queer folks. My gender queers. My lesbians, gay folks, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, trans folks, intersex, two-spirit, gender variant, androgynous, butches, femmes, studs, third gender, multi-gender, genderless, single folks, partnered folks, and folks in solidarity with us, those my limits have failed to name, and names we have yet to find together:

The state of our movement is sacred. The state of our movement is fierce and it is fabulous: look around you! Are we not fierce? Are we not fabulous? And the state of our movement is brave.<sup>292</sup>

There was a lot of singing. There were, as usual, some tears. After the service, I loitered around the pews with Jennifer, Katie Hochstetler, Patrick Ressler, and Audrey Roth Kraybill, where we discussed which Lincoln Park bar to hit. Though it was close to nine in the evening, a small group had gathered in the alcove off of the sanctuary to sing more hymns. “There are two kinds of Mennonites,” Audrey said. “The ones who hang around to sing more hymns, and the ones who go out drinking.”

On Saturday, November 23, the second day of the gathering, we convened in a large conference room for a debriefing before splitting into caucuses: LGBTQIA+ (Pink Menno’s first official foray into this more expansive initialization), Pastors, Parents (of queer people), People of Color, Ally, and LGBT Over 60. Each caucus had an appointed leader, and each leader was supposed to briefly talk about what they thought they had to offer the movement for LGBTQ justice.

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<sup>292</sup> Jennifer Yoder, “State of the Movement,” *QueerMenno*, March 6, 2015, accessed April 5, 2105, <https://queermenno.wordpress.com/2015/03/06/state-of-the-movement/#more-420>.

When it was Frank Trnka's turn to speak for the LGBT Over 60 group, he stood up first and took a long pause before addressing the approximately one hundred people sitting in the room.

"I'm going to describe some people, and I want you to stand if you know who I'm talking about," he said.

"Stand if you know the name of the person who wrote many articles on inclusive theology, throughout the eighties and nineties, for BMC's Dialogue, as well for as the ecumenical magazine *The Other Side*."

I knew that it was John Linscheid. I had read many of those articles. I grew up going to the same church as John's mother. My personal archives had pages of letters that she had written to denominational leaders over the decades since John had come out and lost his ministerial credentials. But I knew that Frank knew that I knew. These questions weren't for me. I sat on my hands. A handful of people stood; all of them looked to be over fifty.

"Stand if you know the name of the BMC member who spent decades involved in the wimmin's music scene." *Wilma Harder*, I thought, turning in my seat to look for her. Frank was not naming the names; he was letting people wonder, and notice who was standing up.

"Stand if you know who Franconia Dyck is." There were scattered chuckles and more people standing. Franconia Dyck was Frank's drag persona, named after a conservative Mennonite conference, and the most phallic of an uncomfortably high percentage of phallic ethnic Mennonite last names. I had entire CDs full of pictures of



Franconia Dyck in Amish drag, performing at BMC conventions in her plain dress, cap and apron.

“Stand if you know what David Deutcher, Carson Glick and Roger Hochstetler had in common.” These answers, I didn’t know, but again, I saw older people standing and solemn again. When I asked Frank later for the answer to the question, he told me that all three of them were gay Mennonite men who had died of AIDS.

“Younger folks,” he said, “Please look around you. This is your history. You stand on these shoulders. We probably still have some things to teach you.” Frank didn’t look particularly comfortable up there, and I could hear the emotion in his throat, some of it tinged with anger. He wasn’t showboating or preaching. I had talked with Frank for hours about his own queer Mennonite history: his divorce from his wife, his abusive encounters at Saskatoon, his years of trying, as an adult Anabaptist convert, to navigate the baffling respectability codes of “ethnic” Mennonites. I knew he worried about people forgetting, ignoring, and erasing the history of which he had been a part. Building this movement had been so many decades of work, and to MCUSA leaders, that work was invisible. What would happen if that work was also invisible to successive generations of Mennonite queers and allies? What violence would that do?

I worry about history, too. There are dangers built into a movement that is so widely associated with youth, danger posed not only by the oppressive forces of the denomination but from within the queer movement itself. Older straight allies sometimes slip too easily into a parental role in relation to the entire movement; they want so badly to make the church welcoming for queer youth that they forget that not all Mennonite queers are young. I worry about older straight supporters who seem more comfortable

with LGBTQ youth than with queer folks their own age. I know that those relationships between queers and straights of the baby boomer generation are layered and haunted with more stories than I will ever begin to make sense of as a researcher.

I worry about the uses to which queer young people can be put. I worry when I hear straight people praise queer youth for their lack of cynicism, knowing how easy it is to sound bitter when trying to tell the truth about how Mennonite churches have treated queer people for the past forty years. I get nervous around the constant repetition of words like “vibrant,” and “gifted” in relation to queer people in church, the implication that the only queers who matter are the ones with beautiful singing voices and skills to offer a worship planning committee.

I worry about all these things, and I still agree with Jennifer: the state of the movement is brave. And it needs to be. There are formidable challenges ahead.

### **Broader implications, future work**

If the patterns I describe in this work continue to threaten queer Mennonites, it is in large part because those patterns extend far beyond the endlessly contested borders of the Mennonite world. This dissertation began with a description of my own upbringing in the last decade of the Cold War amidst social justice-oriented and even leftist Mennonites who rejected Reaganite economic policies and the militarism that went with them. But underlying this study is the neoliberal iteration of a phenomenon that Max Weber described in the early twentieth century in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which is that Mennonites, for all their refusals to participate in the most visible manifestations of state violence, have been quite prosperous under Western

capitalist regimes.<sup>293</sup> In the century since Weber wrote this, the missionary efforts supported by that prosperity have transformed the Mennonite world, from a scattering of ethnically bound separatist groups of European and Euro-Americans to a global network of churches defined largely through evangelical theology. To discuss the politics of the many communities that make up this network in relation to global capitalism is beyond the scope of this study; suffice it to say that the U.S. Mennonites featured in this study approach the imperialistic shape of that network with varying degrees of awareness and critique. In the complex web of power relations that they must negotiate within their churches, sexual politics seem to offer a seductive path to moral clarity, allowing people to state definitively what they are for, and what they are against.

All this is not to say that sexual politics are a distraction from matters. Indeed, to argue that would, I think, undermine one of the primary purposes of this dissertation, which is to challenge the persistent notion that sex and intimacy are irrelevant to the larger work of social justice. That challenge is nothing radical within feminist and queer activist circles. But it remains antithetical to the underlying logic of liberalism, a social and economic order that requires abstract masculine subjects to run things and subservient bodies to do the work of intimacy in private.

MCUSA represents a particular manifestation of that pattern in its approach to historically marginalized groups of people. Those who can be de-politicized into abstraction can be interpellated into the communal fold, however imperfectly; those who cannot must serve as the embodied representation of threat to the survival of the collective, particularly when they overstep the subservient roles to which they are

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<sup>293</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905; repr., London: Routledge, 1992).

assigned. Yet these complex processes of interpellation and exclusion are continually obscured by the binaries that I named in the introduction: *church/world, sacred/secular, individual/community*. As I work to transform this dissertation into a book, I plan to look more closely how and why Mennonites are so invested in these constructs, and what those investments might tell us more generally about the collusions of community and capitalism.

But this still leaves me with a question that I have barely addressed in this dissertation: Why do queer Mennonites stay Mennonite? Looking at the totality of the evidence and analysis that makes up this study, I imagine that many readers will wonder why the adult subjects of my study voluntarily endure the treatment I have described, and in my book, I hope to bring more ethnographic depth to that question. My best current response lies in the epigraph quotes at the beginning of this conclusion from Felipe Hinojosa and Sara Ahmed, statements that stood out to me for their resonance with the queer voices I have tried to represent in this work. I might summarize their reasons like this: *We stay because we're not over it. We stay because of what is possible.*

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