

# Responses to “The LGBTQ+ Community and the Brethren in Christ”

## Introduction

By Joshua Nolt\*

### *Why?*

Why circle back to an issue we printed a year ago (August 2024) on the subject of “The Brethren in Christ Church and the LGBTQ+ Community”?<sup>1</sup>

- Because the Historical Society wants to keep a controversial issue front and center?
- Because the Historical Society is looking to help influence the denomination’s theological position on a controversial topic?
- Because the Historical Society is advocating for a position that does not align with our denomination’s theological position?

All of these are questions that have been asked and assumptions that have been communicated to the Historical Society—both in response to the printing of the August 2024 edition of the journal, and now the August 2025 edition that you hold in your hands.

I became Executive Director of the Historical Society in January 2025—*after* the August 2024 edition was published, and so I wanted to take an opportunity to share why the board of the Historical Society voted unanimously to publish this follow up issue.

## Encouraging conversation

The intent of the August 2024 edition was clearly stated by the editor. You might find it referenced in several places of this edition. Harriet Sider Bicksler describes the intention, and I have bolded words and phrases that will help answer the question of “why”:

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\* Joshua Nolt is senior pastor of the Lancaster (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and executive director of the Brethren in Christ Historical Society.

<sup>1</sup> See *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 47, no. 2 (2024): 151-263.

How does a denomination **deal with conflict or disagreement**, especially when the disagreement is over core theological beliefs and established institutional policies? That might be the primary question at the heart of this edition of *Brethren in Christ History and Life*. Rather than explore various aspects of the “history” of the previous 246 years of the Brethren in Christ Church, **this edition focuses on its current “life,” invites dialogue**—even when the issues are difficult, controversial, and personal—and calls for a **real-life test of the meaning of our core values**, “belonging to the community of faith” and “pursuing peace.”<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the editor also alluded to a forthcoming edition that would invite responses from additional voices to those articles. This edition holds the intentions of the first one by inviting new voices into the conversation.

Within western culture we live in a world full of voices but void of dialogue. In place of robust dialogue are statements of opposing viewpoints talking past the persons or groups being spoken to. In place of humility is hubris. In place of a posture of learning is the posture of power. In place of seeking common ground, we mark dividing lines. These characteristics describe our public and social discourse, and they have also shaped the dialogue within the Church.

The Brethren in Christ Historical Society, primarily through the use of this journal, desires to contribute to a robust and healthy dialogue within the Brethren in Christ Church. We do this not as part of the denomination, but as an organization in relationship with the denomination that cares deeply for our Church family. As family systems theory would teach us, not talking about difficult things does not lead to a healthy family system. Instead, how we talk about things, especially the hard things, helps to define who we are as a community.

How did our three authors dialogue in the August 2024 issue? In their essays and responses, did they embody the values of who we

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<sup>2</sup> Harriet Sider Bicksler, “From the Editor,” *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 47, no. 2 (2024): 148.

call ourselves to be as Brethren in Christ? The focus is not just on the what of the subject matter, but how they interacted with both the subject matter and one another.

How did they do in living into our shared values of “belonging to a community of faith,” “pursuing peace,” and “believing the Bible” through their dialogue? That’s what this issue and responses are intended to reflect on.

I will mention two things that struck me about each of the essays.

First, Lynn, John, and Jay all presented their positions by “Believing the Bible.” Their positions were shaped by their commitment to forming those positions on the basis of scripture. They sought to “value the Bible as God’s authoritative Word, studying it together, building our lives on its truth.”

Such effort does not mean agreement, and this is why dialogue is necessary. Absence of dialogue is absence of learning. We learn from those who are different than us. In the body of Christ, we learn and grow as we trust God’s presence in our sister and brother. We also trust that the heart of our brother and sister is to honor God.

Lynn, John, and Jay trusted that the responses of one another came from a place of faithfulness to God and to the authority of Scripture.

Second, Lynn, John, and Jay communicated with a tone that “pursued peace” as they “belonged to a community of faith.” They had honorable and honest conversation in their writing. They disagreed and they worked to fill in the gaps of one another’s perspectives. They wondered aloud and asked questions of each other. They used each other’s work to reflect on their own.

I also noticed what was absent. Absent was the presence of fear. Their writing was neither threatening or threatened. Instead of accusation they sought understanding. Instead of othering they addressed one another as “brother.” They modeled a kind of conversation I hope will continue to be reflected in the work of the

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<sup>4</sup> For a short, readable account of Anabaptist beginnings, see John Longhurst, “True Evangelical Faith,” *Anabaptist World*, January 2025, 9-14.

<sup>5</sup> Longhurst, “True Evangelical Faith,” 10-12.

Historical Society and in the Brethren in Christ Church at large.

### **Returning to the questions**

The Brethren in Christ Historical Society does not publish the present edition to keep the subject of LGBTQ+ inclusion front and center. We are doing what we set out to do with the initial issue: provide opportunities to reflect on the conversation that was had and how well it was or wasn't had based on our core values.

The Brethren in Christ Historical Society is not advocating a change in the Church's theological position. What we *are* advocating for is a posture of dialogue and conversation in the life of the Church. Such dialogue is already present in our life together and must continue to be fostered.

Finally, I would suggest that the August 2024 and 2025 editions will also act as a history for future generations of this present generation's *life*.

To brothers Lynn Thrush, John Yates, and Jay McDermond: thank you for doing your best to model our core values in your conversation. Your conversation encourages and challenges us all.

## Peacekeepers or Peacemakers?

By Warren M. Eshbach\*

As a member, pastor, chaplain, district executive minister and adjunct professor in the Church of the Brethren for nearly seventy years, I appreciate the invitation extended to me by editor Harriet Sider Bicksler to respond to three articles presented in the August 2024 edition.

Within my lifetime, no other issue has fractured the church as much as issues surrounding human sexuality. Whether accepting the role of women in ordained ministry, the issue of abortion, or extending the bond of Christian care and welcome to the LGBTQ+ community, the church as the body of Christ (*ecclesia*) has become broken and splintered.

In this context I commend *Brethren in Christ History and Life* for striving to delineate and clarify three perspectives in its denomination on this topic by three well-versed and articulate persons. Each of these leaders outlined their views from a strong biblical and theological perspective including practical experience based on how they observed the issue playing out in congregational, denominational, and personal living. At the forefront of this issue (as with many others today) is biblical interpretation and relational faith. Different interpretations of Scripture lead to differing perspectives on life which tend to become hardened in tradition. When this happens, a tear in the fabric of the faith community causes harm and imposes pain on relationships. The result is significant conflict.

The handling of the LGBTQ+ topic in the journal is an attempt to prevent further conflict by seeking honest dialogue and realignment of the issues. This always takes courage, humility, and open mindedness. The articles in the journal brought to my mind a book by C. Christopher Smith entitled *How the Body of Christ Talks*. One

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\* Warren M. Eshbach, DMin is retired from many years of service and ministry in the Church of the Brethren and now lives with his wife at Messiah Lifeways, Mechanicsburg, PA.

chapter of the book, “Sustaining Conversation through Conflict,” mentions the importance of acknowledging our fractures and then seeking to re-align ourselves. Before any realignment can occur, the pain of the fractured parties and the reasons behind it, whether scriptural or cultural, need to be shared and understood with **like-heartedness** rather than **like-mindedness**.

To align ourselves is to reaffirm that it is Christ who created us and Christ who unites us in his death, resurrection and ascension and that our bonds in Christ run deeper than any disagreement we may have. . . . The intent of this sort of conversation is not to convert the other side but to illuminate our like-heartedness in Christ.

I believe the articles and responses by and between Thrush, Yeatts, and McDermond begin an open and sensitive effort toward like-heartedness in a “community of faith” (ecclesia) where, at the center, is a desire toward honest discipleship molded in the footsteps of Jesus (Nachfolge Christi.) Such an effort brings to mind the scriptural advice “to seek peace and pursue it” (1 Peter 3:1).

As witnesses to the shalom of God in these times, it is imperative that we distinguish very clearly between the issue of *peacemaking* and *peacekeeping*. Peacekeeping is about keeping the status quo, agreeing to disagree, glossing over our differences, and burying the hurt that those differences have caused only to make the hurt deeper. Peacemaking, on the other hand, is about empathy and striving to understand the individual person before arriving at a conclusion about them. Peacemaking is about seeking justice in relationships based on love and fairness as proclaimed in the scripture by the Prophets and Jesus. Peacemaking always takes courage! Are we being peacekeepers or peacemakers in the community of faith around the issue of LGBTQ+ persons in our midst?

The articles and responses of Thrush, Yeatts, and McDermond are a good first step toward understanding the biblical, doctrinal, pastoral, and relational aspects of this issue. The conclusion of this

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<sup>1</sup> C. Christopher Smith, *How the Body of Christ Talks: Recovering the Practice of Conversation in the Church* (Brazos Press, 2019), 153.

dialogue will only be brought to fruition when pastoral and lay leaders of the denomination begin to study and dialogue with each other and with congregations toward the goal of self-examination and learning from others on both sides of the issue. The tears of hurt and anger on all sides of this issue will only then begin to be placed equally at a place where redemptive love and healing can take place.

It seems to me that the big question we must ask from our Anabaptist/Pietist theology on this issue is: are we willing to be peacemakers through the agape love of Jesus? Only then can we genuinely wash one another's feet. This will only happen with trust and patience in the Spirit of God to produce repentance and reconciliation. Contrary to the social media and norms of the day that focus on quick and easy answers that move us away from painful displeasure, the challenging process of peacemaking takes time and patience.

As one who has seen my own denominational body study and struggle with this issue to the point of major disruption and division in congregations and districts, it has become more apparent to me that our usual strategy for "peacekeeping" is not helpful. In our attempts to endorse a position on one side or the other of the issue, we have given less attention to relational understanding of persons who hold differing positions or stances and have created even more frustration and brokenness. In so many instances, "peacemaking" that focuses on talking to one another in genuine agape love has been absent.

This is why I see a ray of hope in the aforementioned articles. They begin with a sense of grace in the positions outlined. The test of discipleship for the wider denomination will be whether laypersons and ministry leadership in the body of Christ will be able to present this issue as more than assent to a particular position but will come to understand each other's views as sacred. Understanding our human sexuality is a gift of God's grace. Is the love of Christ being extended

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<sup>13</sup> "A Copy of the Confession of Faith of the Brethren," reprinted in Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Evangel Press, 1978), 554.

<sup>14</sup> David J. Minderhout, "Native Americans of the Susquehanna River Valley: An Archaeological Summary," *Journal of the Pennsylvania Academy of Science* 88, no. 1 (March 2014): 28-39.

to the other in these discussions?

Some points to ponder regarding this issue:

1. Can we deal with the issues of human sexuality without dealing first with ourselves as sexual beings created by God?
2. Are we confusing uniformity with true unity in the body of Christ as we seek to find common ground ?
3. Is it possible to be doctrinal and relational in the best sense of those terms as the discussions take place?
4. How can we maintain Jesus as the “pioneer and perfecter” of our faith? (Hebrews 12:2)

If we understand our human sexuality as a gift of God’s grace, then it behooves us to be grace-filled in discussing our differences. This is where real peacemaking will happen. The articles by Thrush, Yeatts, and McDermond provide a good starting point. If their perspectives are handled with care and respect by congregational and denominational leaders, they would provide an excellent model for the wider church.

While preparing this response to the issue at hand, I ran across a devotional on John 21:15-17, where Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” and then directs Peter to “feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, and feed my sheep.” A comment on this passage in the new *Anabaptist Community Bible* says:

“... the call to discipleship happens more than once throughout our lives. . . . What it looks like to love Jesus right now may be different a year, five years or ten years from now. As disciples, we continue to revisit Jesus’ question—“Do you love me?”—as we discern the implications of loving Jesus here and now.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Anabaptist Community Bible* (Menno Media, 2024), 1326.



## Nothing About Us Without Us

By George Payne\*

I joined the Brethren in Christ Church thirty years ago while attending Messiah University (then College), and after graduating from Asbury Seminary, I served as the first youth pastor at the Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church where I still attend.

My engagement with the issues affecting the LGBTQ+ community has been extensive, reflective, and committed. As a cisgender and heterosexual male, my perspective has evolved from a position of love without endorsement to one of affirmation. I did not have any family or close relationship that influenced my searching, but I am haunted by this truth: how do we address the place and presence of those in same-sex marriages whose fruit and gifts demonstrate God's unequivocal anointing in their lives?

Scripture's guidance is critical for me and anyone who seeks to be faithful. I studied the pertinent passages and the totality of Scripture about LGBTQ+, relying on my Biblical Studies major and my seminary training and avoiding biased sources. Over five years, I wrote about my studies on my blog (<https://bit.ly/GodsLoveWins>). I have had significant discussions with senior denominational leaders, the former president of my Alma Mater, and my faith community, and submitted a published contribution.

All three authors of the articles clearly articulated the necessity of fostering a sense of "belonging to the community of faith" in their pastoral implications and provided recommendations accordingly in their essays. Each author employed distinct terminology and constructs to describe "belonging to the community of faith," yet all relate their concepts to the "experience" of it by LGBTQ+ members.

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\* George Payne served as an associate pastor of youth at the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church in the 1990s and taught some introductory college Bible classes at Messiah (College) University. He and his wife are members of the Harrisburg congregation. They have one daughter, Alyssa.

Similarly, the authors unanimously emphasize the importance of respectful dialogue and interaction with diverse perspectives while meting out different methods of pursuing peace for opposing and varied paths.

Bishop Thrush emphasizes belonging as a deep need intrinsic in and of itself: “belonging in order to belong.” He calls for structured gatherings, organized with trained mentors and prepared curriculum, for sharing, meeting needs and Scripture study where persons who are LGBTQ+, amongst others, can join and experience belonging. In these groups emotional brains become renewed and rewired through constantly experiencing deeply loving behavior such as “presence, kindness, hopefulness and perseverance,” within the convictional living constructs of God’s intended creation telos.

In pursuing peace, Bishop Thrush references key principles from Caleb Katenbach’s *Messy Truth*. He states that disagreement over theological ideas is acceptable, but dehumanizing others or those with whom you disagree is not. Individuals who feel valued are more open to you and others like you. Everything connects back to belonging when he quotes Katenbach that “we need more churches where people can belong so they can belong.” Bishop Thrush concludes that “creating environments and fostering attitudes where belonging precedes belonging does not imply compromising theology. It requires firm biblical convictions and strong leadership. It is complex” (174).<sup>1</sup>

While Bishop Thrush’s structured gathering is more granular, Dr. Yeatts’s Pastoral Accommodation View ties “belonging to the community of faith” to the local congregation and at the broader ecclesiastical level.<sup>2</sup> It is at that level where he also addresses “pursuing peace” among diverse views. As with Bishop Thrush, for Dr. Yeatts these two core values are interrelated.

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<sup>1</sup> This number and those in footnotes 2-5 refer to the page numbers in the *August 2024 edition of Brethren in Christ History and Life*.

<sup>2</sup> His construct is at the congregational and denominational level right at the very formation of a doctrinal standard: “Brethren in Christ practice is for the “gathered church” under the direction of the Holy Spirit to investigate the teachings of Jesus to come to “doctrinal agreement” (191).

Dr. Yeatts contends that our congregations and denomination can maintain doctrinal standards, foster a sense of belonging, and achieve discernment and resolution through peaceful unity rather than divisive schisms, provided individuals are allowed to hold differing beliefs without affecting their inclusion. By “inclusion” he means non-exclusion from membership, licensing, and belonging experienced at the congregational and denominational levels. He emphasizes that these processes should be guided primarily by biblical teachings, Christology for biblical interpretation, and the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit for contemporary implementation.

Dr. McDermond, in the Full Inclusion View, unsurprisingly moves beyond Dr. Yeatts’s motive of not excluding in the local and denominational community of faith. His construct for “belonging to the community of faith” begins at the Body of Christ level which dictates how Jesus’s body should function in all other mirrored levels, whether denominational, local or structured group.<sup>3</sup> God’s goodness and gifts are for all. In all aspects of ecclesiology, thereafter, belonging to the faith community is governed by Christology, specifically Jesus as the radical includer.

All authors in their work and their response to each other demonstrate respectful treatment and highlight points of commonality and connection. Like their common thread to care for one another, this should model how we can earnestly listen, openly dialogue, and honestly challenge each other as we peacefully discern God’s truth through God’s Spirit and Word together.

Moreover, the authors’ recommendations involve being experiential; i.e., they call for intentionally rubbing shoulders with each other. Bishop Thrush’s calls for redemptive experience through structured gatherings with leaders and mentors and guided content. Dr. Yeatts emphasizes non-exclusion and keeping the platform mutual for diverse sides to honor, hear, and discern together. Dr.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. McDermond writes of belonging to the People of God, the entire Church, God’s Kingdom: “I believe the core matter is, as my title suggests, inclusion. Who can be included among the people of God?” “I believe the Holy Spirit is given to every believer, and the Spirit in turn gives each believer gifts that are intended to benefit the entire Church and the building of God’s kingdom” (230).

McDermond exhorts freedom for pastors and their congregations together to explore their calling and for the denomination to process diverse views together like in Acts 15. Simply put, exposure and fellowship for those with differing views, vantage, or life experience must be intentional, unencumbered, and on equal footing.

As for my own conclusion, I believe the three constructs related to “belonging” can be achieved. Starting from the broader perspective, the Body of Christ enables all members to freely partake in God’s sacraments and exercise God’s gifts to strengthen any level of Jesus’s community to which they belong. At the denominational and congregational levels, fostering inclusion rather than exclusion can promote discernment within the body in a spirit of peace rather than division. On the small group level, intentional, well-prepared, and trained experiences can facilitate mutual discernment and discipleship through God’s love. I acknowledge that this interpretation may not align precisely with the intentions of the authors who presented these concepts.

All three articles encourage fostering environments for dialogue. They model showing love and respect for opposing sides. Dr. Yeatts refers to the Brethren in Christ historical model where congregational discernment processed upward to a combined congregational council facilitated by leadership,<sup>4</sup> while Dr. McDermond draws comparison to the council in Acts 15, which he frequently references. Both Yeatts and McDermond imply that this is not how it is currently done, at least for this specific topic.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> **Yeatts:** “When faced with such issues, the Brethren in Christ begin with the Bible. In the past, controversial issues usually arose in the local congregation or district councils. If the issue was deemed significant to the life of the brotherhood, it was passed on to the Regional Conference for consideration. In this process, the issue next made its way to the General Conference where a decision was considered and determined by this representative gathering of ministers and members. The resulting decision was binding on the belief and practice of congregations and their members, and church discipline enforced the decision (189). See also footnote 1 on the “gathered church” for doctrinal formation.

<sup>5</sup> **McDermond:** “Second, it is my sense that the entire denomination has not been given the opportunity to process this matter. So far as I know, nothing akin to the Acts 15 council meeting has been organized. . . . I have heard that current leadership has decided this matter is resolved, but I do not believe a handful of leaders deciding and then dictating their decision is an adequate or acceptable approach to such a crucial topic (254).

This critique is important because top-down decisions, no matter how well prepared, risk being shaped by a limited group of leaders. This is particularly concerning if the leaders who develop core beliefs and institutional policies believe that their extensive study, experience, and deliberation have considered all pertinent factors, thereby resolving the matter. The critique presented in the articles indicates that this method allows minimal space for the Holy Spirit to guide denominational leaders in interpreting and applying scripture alongside the experience, reason, and discernment of the broader faith community, as referenced in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

When the disagreement concerns core theological beliefs and established institutional policies, as is the case on this issue, the Traditional View appears censured and restricted. Bishop Thrush's "structured gatherings" are not characterized as open venues for genuine dialogue or reciprocity. In this context, a curriculum imparts set principles rather than fostering mutual learning.<sup>6</sup> The missional emphasis of demonstrating God's love to others for the purpose of rewiring the emotional brain takes precedence over "loving one another" in reciprocal mutuality. The undertone suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals who join may need to be formed or reformed. It does not address or seem to have considered what to do if same sex Christians who are faithfully married and show God's character and gifts in their lives desire to belong.

Conversely, both the Pastoral Accommodation and Full Inclusion perspectives advocate for the removal of barriers to facilitate open exchange. I support eliminating obstacles to ensure truly open dialogue.

I applaud the presentation of three articles that juxtapose three different views. That itself shows acceptance for open conversation. The responses demonstrate the interchange of written communication, modeling dialogue characterized by respect, esteem, and candid feedback. The model of gracious presentation, attentive listening, and constructive feedback needs to be applied to

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<sup>6</sup> In response to openly listening to the experiences of our LGBTQ+ community, Bishop Thrush expresses caution that this might influence youth to experiment and prefers that they are instead guided by stories rooted in the established understanding of New Creation (263).

other forms of conversation, whether face-to-face, one-on-one, in groups both large and small, in a hallway, or at General Assembly.

The next step should be follow-up because while dialogue produces thought and reflection, prayerful consensus produces resolution. The articles have made suggestions for open, honest dialogue that I also recommend. Inclusion in the functions and roles of the congregation or denomination should be based solely on belonging to Jesus's family. Without that our conversation will not be inclusive, open, let alone honest or healthy. The narrower decision circles become, the broader the feedback from vested voices must be, if we truly want communication to be honest. It is the only way to make room for God's Spirit to confirm or to challenge and move us forward in truth.

In the social services world, there is a motto, "Nothing About Us Without Us." The same should apply in this context: any conversation in the church must include LGBTQ+ individuals and should be as broad as possible.

## Healthy Conversation is Good

By Martha J. Lockwood\*

My connection to the Brethren in Christ Church has deep roots. I became a follower of Christ at age 18 in a Brethren in Christ church in Canada in my hometown. I was baptized, mentored, and grew in faith by the instruction and example of many former Brethren in Christ leaders and colleagues. In 1992, I was the third woman ordained in the denomination and served churches both in Canada and the U.S. I was very involved in all levels of church life, including being part of the group that gathered at Roxbury in 1999 to formulate the ten core values of the Brethren in Christ, two of which are focused on in this response. In spite of not being an “ethnic BIC,” I was as committed to the church as anyone named Sider, Winger, or Heisey.

In the early 2000s I began to come to terms with my sexuality and the fact that I was a closeted lesbian. While my personal epiphany gave me greater self understanding, I did not act on it for some time. Instead, it began a seven-year journey of deciding either to remain closeted and continue on being less than the totality of who I was, or live an authentic life being fully who God created me to be. Choosing the latter meant most aspects of my life would change dramatically. The Brethren in Christ Church would no longer have a place for me. As the church had been my world, I would lose friends, a place to fulfill my calling, and the faith community in which I had lived for over twenty-five years. During those years I never doubted God’s love for me or the calling that was placed on my life, but I was pretty sure how the church, my church, would react.

In a few years God led me to the United Church of Canada. The Methodist church was one of the original denominations of the formation of the UCC and I felt strong theological compatibility. My

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\* The Rev. Martha J. Lockwood is pastor of the Central United Church in Welland, ON

gifts and call were not only accepted but celebrated and I have been at my current church for eight years. I have also become a resource for many of my Brethren in Christ friends who have travelled a similar path or find their child or sibling or they themselves identifying as LGBTQ+. I appreciate and value the foundation I received in the Brethren in Christ Church and hope to speak with anyone who is sincerely looking to our Creator and God's children to bring greater understanding to this reality in the church. That being said, I DO have a vested interest in this topic and I am NOT objective.

Belonging is a basic human need. In my opinion, there is no better place to find this need fulfilled than in a community of faith. Your church often becomes your family, whether you have a positive or negative family dynamic at home. At the same time, a healthy family system requires peace. That does not mean there cannot be robust debate, differences in opinions and political views, and simply unique ways of approaching life. The values of trust, respect, and openness must be present to maintain a healthy and peaceful system in the life of the church. I believe all of the authors—Thrush, Yeatts, and McDermond—do their best to be respectful and to avoid combative or argumentative phrases. Like their assigned perspectives, and I would guess their personal doctrinal positions, they all show strength and weakness.

The Traditional View is heavily weighted on Scriptures, an almost sola scriptura approach. Thrush seems to lack consideration of the other three components of Wesley's Quadrilateral: tradition, reason and experience. If he had much experience with the LGBTQ+ community, it does not show here.

There is also a subtle suggestion that homosexuality has a choice component to its expression. This view has been refuted time and time again, and if anyone still believes being gay is a choice, please believe me when I say it is not. Our sexuality—being straight, gay, or other—is something with which we are born. Thrush's essay and Yeatts's to a lesser degree make an assumption about homosexuality being sinful and unnatural. Both my wife and I are followers of Christ who fell in love, got married, and are active in our faith community. Might I add, we did not live together before we were married (yes, just two old fashioned lesbians). What is sinful in that? Also wouldn't



it be more unnatural for me to be married to a man to whom I had no physical attraction and I would be living a lie? This is something that might want to be considered. As Thrush refers to Yarhouse's writings, he uses the phrase "relating to the LGBTQ+ community." Again there is a subtle othering to the LGBTQ+ community which tells me there is a lack of openness to erasing this sexuality litmus so that we may all be community.

In Brethren in Christ tradition and fashion, Yeatts is far more open and conciliatory. He hearkens back to the Harvey Sider/John Byers days when delicate and controversial situations could be discussed with kindness and give space for others to grow. Yeatts also includes a number of "testimonies" in his article that remind us this is not an exercise in hermeneutics and exegetical precision. It is the way a particular group of people in our faith communities are looked at, judged, and treated. Yeatts has included a sense of humanity in his article. Early in his writing, he makes the statement, "Ministers believe and support this position. . . ," in regards to the traditional view. I would challenge that statement and ask "Do they really?" I'm sure many do but I submit there are many who do not and just follow the directive to keep their jobs. They have witnessed what denominational leadership does to clergy and others when they support or even offer a differing view. This is not the Brethren in Christ Church I knew; speaking up has become too risky.

Regarding scriptural interpretation, I appreciate that Yeatts has given less definitive perspectives, especially regarding the "clobber passages." While many of us have studied these passages ad nauseum, Yeatts reminds us that there are more ways to understand Scripture.

Yeatts identifies the inclusion of the LGBTQ community, especially into full fellowship, as a subject that potentially is divisive. This is true. My current denomination, the United Church of Canada, removed any barriers to membership and ordination based on sexuality in 1988. You read that correctly, 1988. They were years ahead of most churches and governments on affirming and blessing gay and lesbian people, but as with most controversial things, there was a cost. Many left the United Church, factions were formed, and groups tried to get the decision reversed. However, I believe they had the courage of their convictions, stood firm, and the United Church

of Canada is still the largest Protestant denomination in Canada. When an individual or denomination takes a stand for inclusion, there will be a cost. It is difficult to be a trailblazer and one will be met with all kinds of opposition, but sometimes you just need to rip the bandage off (to mix metaphors a bit!). I don't think the Brethren in Christ Church is at this point yet.

McDermond's article on full inclusion addresses the seven biblical passages that many call the "clobber passages." These are the passages that are routinely cited when justifying the exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. I appreciated his interpretations and comments.

Too often we use texts without considering context, historic setting, and culture. Today, how many Brethren in Christ women wear traditional head coverings to church? At love feasts do you still greet one another with a holy kiss (men kissing men and women kissing women)? There are many resources that address these passages from both sides and I will recommend two in my concluding paragraph.

There are two very compelling ideas from McDermond. The first is the radical inclusion of Jesus. If your church sign says, "Everyone is welcome," then you had better mean it. There is a wonderful term in Italian called "campanilismo." It means whoever can hear in the range of our church bell tower. All those people within earshot, usually about one thousand, belong to the community. At least once a year in the Tuscan region, streets are blocked off and a great celebration dinner is served to everyone within the sound of that church bell. All people regardless of wealth, age, faith, sexuality, or anything else is invited. That is the way Jesus included people. I also believe it is the way we are called to include people—belonging, inclusion, being affirmed as who God created us to be. This must be our attitude for the Queer community, those of different skin colours, different educational and socioeconomic levels, different philosophies, even old white guys. All together. Everyone within earshot of our bell. This is the community and belonging that Jesus calls us to be.

The second is the freedom to allow individuals, congregations, and faith communities to wrestle with this particular membership litmus test. Ministers must be allowed to discuss issues of inclusion freely without fearing for their jobs. People need a safe place to

share, and often the church has not been a safe place. In 1988, each United Church was given the freedom to decide whether they would or would not allow their minister to conduct same sex unions and the minister was also able to determine whether they would or would not officiate. The majority did. Others did at a later time. Thirty-seven years later some congregations and clergy have still not. The leadership had confidence in their vast number of people and gave the ministers and the congregations time to grow, and continue to do so. I am sure there are some progressive Brethren in Christ congregations that would celebrate the marriage of a same sex couple next week, as well as some traditional congregations who would still use the word sodomite. Denominational leaders need not be threatened by conversations and inevitable change.

Healthy conversation is good. I am heartened that my former church family is having these discussions. I weep for some who are still closeted and as a result are being less than who God created them to be—some suffering with mental health issues as a result. I encourage any who are sincerely seeking how to include the LGBTQ+ into your church, to read the book *UnClobber* by Colby Martin and view the documentary “1946: The Mistranslation that Shifted Culture.”<sup>1</sup> Continue to seek and let others have space to learn and grow. Until we meet again, I quote John Wesley: “Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, to all the souls you can, in every place you can, at all the times you can, with all the zeal you can, as long as ever you can.”

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<sup>1</sup> Colby Martin, *UnClobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2022); “1946: The Mistranslation that Shifted Culture,” <https://www.1946themovie.com>.

## Upholding the Traditional Position

By Grace Holland\*

As a person deeply involved in the Brethren in Christ Church over a lifetime in missionary work and leadership training, I have been asked to respond to the three articles published in the August issue of *Brethren in Christ History and Life* regarding the Brethren in Christ Church and the LGBTQ+ Community. I appreciate the way in which the three writers have delved deeply into the subject yet show respect for each other's positions, thus illustrating the core values of "belonging to the community of faith" and "pursuing peace." Since I strongly agree with the church's position, as expressed in the first essay by Lynn Thrush, and clearly disagree with the third position, expressed by Jay McDermond, I would like to focus my thoughts on points that stand out to me in the Pastoral Accommodation View written by John Yeatts.

My brother John quotes the Brethren in Christ doctrinal statement, "Human sexuality is affirmed within the chaste single life or a lifelong marriage between a man and a woman," and states that Brethren in Christ pastors believe this and practice its implications. Since he is credentialed by the church, I assume that he affirms this position, though he proceeds to present many thoughts that seem to soften this position.

I appreciate John's emphasis on Scripture and his attempt to examine each of the passages commonly brought forth to address the subject. I am sorry to see him refer repeatedly to what he calls Jesus's greatest commandment, "Love God and love others." Jesus does not refer to the commandment in this way. The greatest commandment, Jesus says, is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). "Love your

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\* Grace Holland is retired from many years as a missionary to Africa and professor at Ashland (OH) Theological Seminary. She attends the Dillsburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

neighbor as yourself” is like it, but it is the second commandment. Even if we consider the two commands to be equally important, we cannot allow love and compassion for others to conflict with our love and obedience to God. Further, if gay marriage is wrong, approving of such relationships of folks in our congregations is not compassion—it is encouraging them to sin. And if church leaders are never to call out sin because they may have logs in their own eyes that need forgiveness, as John implies, then how is sin ever to be addressed?

John states that translators of Romans 1:24-27 may have used words that are too harsh in condemning gay relations, implying that they may not refer to the loving committed relationships that exist today. But I note that N. T. Wright, renowned theologian and authority on First Century culture (in a podcast on “Sex, LGBTQ+, Pre-Marital Relationships and Identity”) cites materials written during that century that refer to the existence of same-sex relationships ranging from what would be considered pedophile today to loving lifelong commitments between adults.<sup>1</sup> John’s strong caution regarding the idea that words used in the Scriptures may not mean what they do today casts doubt on our ability to trust our translators and apply these Scriptures presently.

John’s introduction to the book, *Invitation to Conversation: Becoming More Inclusive of LGBTQ+ People in the Brethren in Christ Church*<sup>2</sup> and the testimonials that he quotes from the book in his journal article bring sorrow to my heart for two reasons: 1) LGBTQ+ people have often not been treated well in our churches. 2) The impression is given that there is no way out, ignoring the fact that joyful Christians who have stood by the traditional understanding, even in celibacy, have found great fulfillment in life. Perhaps if the same amount of effort and finance had been invested in gathering and publishing such accounts, LGBTQ+ people currently struggling with various responses to same-sex attraction would take hope, receive God’s strength to

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, “Sex, LGBTQ+, Pre-Marital Relationships and Identity,” August 4, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l62zv8nrMCQ>.

<sup>2</sup> John Yeatts, “Foreword,” in *Invitation to Conversation: Becoming More Inclusive of LGBTQ+ People in the Brethren in Christ Church*, eds. Helena Cicero, Eric A Seibert, and Julie Weatherford (SacraSage, 2024), 1-4.

maintain biblical standards, and remain in the church.

With their permission, I share the experience of two close relatives. My son, Phil, who lives in Iowa has dealt with same-sex attraction most of his life. At age 17 he came to us, his parents, explaining his struggle, declaring that he would not give in, and asking our help. We did our best to show him our love and support. He says that he felt abundant approval and care. At age 29 he married a lovely young lady. It has not been an easy journey, but he has maintained a good marriage and now has four children and thirteen grandchildren who are his pride and joy. A few years ago, I asked him how he came to make the decision to resist same-sex relations. He said that it was the influence of adults around him he knew would disapprove and who uphold a biblical lifestyle. Had he been exposed to a book like *Invitation to Conversation*, who knows where he would be today? Phil makes it clear that although God sometimes removes same sex attraction from individuals, in his case, God visited him with victory in the struggle and joy in serving him.

A niece of mine lived in a lesbian relationship for a number of years in a western state. I kept in touch. She knew my position and knew that I loved and prayed for her. After some years, she sought help from a retired missionary lady of another denomination nearby who counseled and prayed with her. They went through the Bible study by Neil T. Anderson—*Victory Over the Darkness: Realizing the Power of Your Identity in Christ*. She was delivered from her lifestyle and her self-perception that she was gay. She served God in another country for a number of years and currently assists in a Brethren in Christ church. She would not have been helped by acceptance of “married” gay couples in the church.

Certainly, in our present cultural atmosphere, we need to be reaching out to LGBTQ+ people in general. This is not the same as approving of the marriages of gay couples in our congregations. I understand that we have not always been loving to people with same-sex attraction and those wrestling with other temptations in the church. With the current cultural emphasis on sexual issues, I would like to see us follow Preston Sprinkle’s recommendations, as John recommends. These include: creating an atmosphere where people experiencing same-sex attraction can talk about it, listening to stories of LGBTQ+ people,

putting homophobia to death, and promoting biblical (not cultural) masculinity and femininity. Some of John's further suggestions could also be followed without approving "married" gay couples in our churches, though it seems that following all of these study suggestions might threaten to make the church's teaching overly focused on sexual issues. It seems a little unfair for John to quote so many of Sprinkle's caveats, and even end with one, without fully registering approval of his position on celibacy for anyone outside traditional male and female marriage.

The writers who examined LGBTQ+ issues in the three journal articles spent a great deal of time studying and suggesting ways the church should respond to people facing such issues. Being willing to discuss this area of concern will help these friends recognize that we acknowledge their genuine challenge. Preparation of a book giving testimonies of those who have maintained the traditional view would show that the church recognizes the pressure placed on our friends and loved ones by our current society that is so preoccupied with sexual pleasure and the lie that life is worthless without it.

Sunday School classes and small groups in the church could access the studies from Preston Sprinkle that clearly reveal the pressures while upholding the traditional position. I would especially like to see us promote singleness as noble and God-given when called for. Jesus, Paul, and a host of notable missionaries throughout church history have set a powerful example for us. I was impressed with the recent issue of *Shalom!* on singleness. Specifically, I appreciated the list of ideas for us to follow in caring for single people in our congregations by Cindy Agoncillo. She suggests: "1. Invite us to do life with you. 2. Think of us around holidays. 3. Share how we can ask for help. 4. Sit with us or invite us to sit with you at church. 5. Introduce us to other people. 6. Show interest in our lives and celebrate us. 7. Encourage and pray for us."<sup>3</sup>

May God grant us wisdom and strength to understand and follow his will. May we who "belong to the community of faith" "pursue peace" as we continue dialogue regarding this concern, while being faithful to God's plan.

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<sup>3</sup> Cindy Agoncillo, "Seeing God in Singleness," *Shalom!: A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation* 44, no. 3 (2024): 7.

## We Are Family

By Keith Miller\*

I deeply appreciated reading the August 2024 edition of *Brethren in Christ History and Life*, as it explored different perspectives on our theological posture and relationships with those within the LGBTQ+ community. This is an important topic to me. I have been a full time pastor for over twenty years, nearly all of them as a licensed minister in the Brethren in Christ. Thirteen years ago, my wife and I moved to Delaware, where we planted LifePath Church, a part of the Atlantic Conference. Over the course of the next decade, my pastoral and theological journey brought me to a point of affirming the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ disciples in our church as they followed Jesus with us, including married couples. This process was rooted in prayer, Scripture study, and bearing witness to the Holy Spirit in the lives of those I pastored. Three years ago, after having come to a place of peace regarding these theological convictions, I was no longer able to keep my ministerial credentials in the Brethren in Christ. In order to retain me as pastor, my church voted to dissociate from the Brethren in Chrst. While this was difficult, it was done as family, with a spirit of mutual love and respect between myself, our bishop, and the Atlantic Conference Board. I have written more about my journey elsewhere, but I share this for context.

These details explain that while I am no longer a Brethren in Christ pastor, I continue to see myself as a part of the Brethren in Christ in much of my identity, theology, and values. In light of that, I feel that it matters deeply not only the convictions we hold, but the way we hold them with Jesus at our center. Lynn Thrush, John Yeatts, and Jay McDermond each modeled this posture in exemplary ways in their lively interplay. While there were obvious differences shared across both theology and practice, I learned from each perspective

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\* Keith Miller is pastor of LifePath Church, Newark, DE.



and found significant overlap in the desire to be faithful to Jesus and to fully express love for God and neighbor. We are one body. The Brethren in Christ are my sisters and my brothers, and I was glad to see us pursue the way of peace together so clearly through their work.

One of our greatest Brethren in Christ theologians and historians, Luke Keefer Jr., (somewhat) famously described the Brethren in Christ as having “a difference.” We’re Anabaptists, with a difference. We’re pietists, with a difference. I hope that the “difference” he was speaking of was our ability to send each of our traditions and postures through the lens of Jesus at the center of our communal identity. If we do so, then I believe that even the way that we disagree about LGBTQ+ inclusion should be “with a difference” from the larger conversations and culture wars that swirl around us. We can model something better to the world. We can model something that does not demean or disrespect each other or those who live with these identities and are seeking to simply exist with dignity in our world.

Given these distinctives, I do find that with a core value of “belonging to the community of faith,” we seem to be at risk of limiting belonging based primarily around this single theological perspective of LGBTQ+ inclusion. I also acknowledge that some could rightly retort that I haven’t modeled this value very well to our Brethren in Christ family, since my beliefs have moved me out of belonging with you all (though not by choice)! Friends, it’s a difficult journey to live with both openness to each other and distinct conviction in matters of faith. So I trust we’ll continue to keep that beautiful vision of belonging together in Christ, even as we work out our divergences.

I sensed a few significant points of divergence from what was written regarding our current theological stance on same-sex relationships.

First, I found myself wondering if we have truly made space to listen to voices of LGBTQ+ individuals who are seeking to follow Jesus. It struck me from some of the wording that many Brethren in Christ leaders and members may only know LGBTQ+ people who have either left Christianity or who have never had Christian faith. In order for us to have a more robust conversation, I believe that we must create space to listen to those within the LGBTQ+ community

who have the Spirit of Christ in them and express a mature, developed faith. I am privileged to have these people in my life and it has been profoundly important for me.

Second, I noticed that central to Bishop Lynn's perspective was the point that sexual integrity matters to God, and that sexual immorality is mentioned as a consistent theme in the Scriptures. This, of course, is unequivocally true and I appreciated his thoroughness and explanations. Brother Thrush takes great pains to share examples from the entirety of the biblical narrative that name the sins of illicit sexual encounters, prostitution, and adultery. These things erode our relationship with God and each other.

However, I found this perplexing to include in this conversation, because none of these attitudes or behaviors are present in any of the the LGBTQ+ disciples that I pastor. In fact, nearly all of them would emphatically agree that sexual ethics matter a great deal. I would not be overspeaking to share that the sexual integrity that I have witnessed among faithful LGBTQ+ disciples (often decades of celibacy and prayerful discernment before stepping into dating and marriage) exceeds that of most heterosexual Christians that I know. We must be careful not to equate the fact that someone is naturally attracted to the same sex as meaning that they hold no sexual ethics. This is completely untrue, and a point of incredible importance. In my pastoral experiences, selfishness and lust are not the driving force in same sex relationships among people seeking fellowship and belonging within the church. Love and natural attraction are the driving force. The only difference here is that what is natural for my same sex attracted siblings is not the same as what is natural for me. Therefore, denying another's natural desire for faithful lifelong sexual intimacy while I am free to enjoy that gift as a heterosexual Christian feels dangerously close to tying up heavy burdens and putting them on others' shoulders, unwilling to lift a finger to move them (to paraphrase Matthew 23).

Like my brother Lynn, I deeply desire God's kingdom ethics to be central in the lives of all of our people and I'm grateful for his emphasis on this.

I appreciated the scholarship and the way forward that Brother John offered us. I hope that at the very least, the reader would be

reminded that the challenge of language and culture from two thousand years ago require us to do fresh work with the Spirit today. While we are given many things in the Scriptures, we are not given an example of two same sex attracted individuals approaching Jesus with their questions of how to express their selfless love faithfully. That is my current context. Therefore, pastorally, I must do my best to listen for God's Spirit and imagine how God's kingdom may be expressed through these lives. I must acknowledge how very different of a reality this is from those individuals spoken of in the Romans 1 passage that all of our authors referenced. The offending individuals gave no gratitude to God, worshipped idols, were filled with lust, and traded their natural desires. This is not the same as those who humbly worship God, love God deeply, want to be obedient, and ask the Spirit for guidance. I have to trust that the Holy Spirit will meet them in that conversation as much as the Spirit meets me in mine.

This conversation in Romans brings me to a further point that I would have appreciated seeing discussed in these three perspectives, particularly as it relates to us as the Brethren in Christ. With the rich theological work done by all three authors, the importance of Romans 14 seems to have been left out of our conversation. This passage offers a significant commentary on how we might approach various convictions within the Brethren in Christ family.

The Apostle Paul is addressing the deep disagreements among the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, as they learn to live together amidst differing convictions. He uses one primary example of clean and unclean foods, yet he is speaking about a number of convictions about which Christians may differ. And while Paul offered his perspective, he does not suggest that differing convictions should lead to exclusion in any way. In fact, he strongly states the opposite:

The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them" (14:3).

One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind (14:5).

So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead,

make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean” (14:12-14).

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food” (14:19-20).

Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (15:7).

It's not difficult to see that this philosophy models a way of unity without requiring agreement in theology or praxis. It is absolutely possible for our churches to be full of people who have various views on areas of human sexuality while still loving each other and sharing in faith and community. This matter need not destroy the work of God in our body.

I am proud of my brothers for modeling this conversation, and I'm glad that the Brethren in Christ Historical Society is willing to publish thought-provoking perspectives so that we might grow together.

As someone who is now sitting on the outside edge of a denominational family I love and respect, I'd like to offer a final warning and a final encouragement. Multiple times in our writing, reference was made to our “tradition” or the “historic” posture. These are helpful as descriptor words, but we must practice deep caution in giving them moral weight. Our “historic” posture denied membership to anyone who had been divorced (or whose skirts were too short!). Our “tradition” until only forty years ago was that women were not affirmed to use their God-given ministry gifts to lead us. The “historic” posture of Christendom for centuries was a willingness to kill other Christians over theological disagreements. I'm thankful for so much of our Brethren in Christ tradition and history, but we must realize that changing those traditions has often helped us reflect Jesus even more clearly, which we now celebrate.

Finally, I was so encouraged by a common emphasis of Thrush, Yeatts, and McDermond. Each one called us to be people who seek out the Holy Spirit. This must remain at the forefront of our journey, because the Spirit will help us maintain our unity in Christ, but also because the

Spirit is full of surprises. If we have an emphasis on listening to the Spirit and looking for the Spirit, we should not be surprised if we are led into new ways of relating, loving, and even understanding the kingdom of God. Indeed, in times of discernment the Spirit reforms at least as much as it re-enforces, as so many previous generations have learned.

I'm thankful to be included in this conversation, and I'm thankful for every member of the Brethren In Christ that continues to keep their eyes on Jesus, seek truth, and walk in faith. We are family.

## Is It Time for New Understandings?

By Susan Felix\*

I grew up in a Brethren in Christ family living in Franklin County, Pennsylvania where there were and still are numerous Brethren in Christ congregations. I saw and heard similarities and differences in expressing our faith and beliefs in Franklin County as well as across our region and country while attending Kenbrook Bible Camp, regional and general conferences, as they were known then, and national Brethren in Christ youth events like YouthQuest.

As expected, I regularly participated in footwashing and attended evangelistic or revival services in addition to the usual Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening services. As an adult I have had several roles including childcare worker, quiz coach, and deacon. I am also mother of an adult transdaughter.

Coming from an Anabaptist heritage and with supportive parents, I had freedom to question church doctrine and compare it to what I read in Scripture. I appreciate our denominational history of meeting together and coming to a consensus at multiple levels of governance as appropriate.

Regarding inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgender, and questioning plus others (LGBTQ+), it seems our top leadership has leaned toward an authoritarian approach with little guidance for pastors. I base this statement on essays written in *Invitation to Conversation: Becoming More Inclusive of LGBTQ+ People in the Brethren in Christ Church* and conversations with several pastors.

I am concerned that pastors are not receiving practical guidance for pastoral care while living with the threat of losing their credentials if they openly affirm, and accept LGBTQ+ as members of their congregations. Typically local pastors and congregations have initiated vision for change in policy, but the fear of punishment should not limit the Holy

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\* Susan Felix is a physical therapist assistant and is active in the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church, Mechanicsburg, Pa.

Spirit's leading. Might it be an option to allow congregations to choose whether to accept LGBTQ+ members, much like is done with pastors and members who are not in agreement about serving in the military?

I think it is challenging to model belonging to the community of faith when the discussion is about inclusion or exclusion of a group of people. Lynn Thrush, John Yeatts, and Jay McDermond are (or, in the case of Jay, have been) Brethren in Christ even though they have different visions of the church. They have demonstrated belonging to the current community of faith by participating in the discussion, stating their position and their reasoning, clearly aware of official Brethren in Christ values and thought. They pursued peace by writing the articles to further understanding and by responding to each other with respectful language and tone.

These articles are a good demonstration of the complexity of theology, even when we are talking about people, combined with a desire to hear and understand a different perspective. The writers noted areas of agreement and disagreement. They also noted ideas that could have been more fully developed for better understanding, thus inviting further discussion.

We need to pray for the Holy Spirit's vision of the church. Each person praying should realize they may be challenged by the Holy Spirit to change. I want our denomination to come to a consensus without a schism while recognizing we need the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts for this to happen. I believe this area of conflict does not need to cause a huge rift that cannot be handled, but it requires the creativity of the Holy Spirit.

We need to pray about how to deal with conflict or disagreement over core theological beliefs and established institutional policies. We should hold conversations on neutral ground (rather than one side having "home advantage") and have ground rules regarding respect for the other, agreement to listen without trying to convert to your side, maintain nonthreatening discussion and confidentiality to keep the environment a safe place, and endeavor to hear and understand different perspectives.

I think these articles and responses were well written, provided perspective and modeled being "open, honest, healthy." The articles were inclusive in terms of presenting each view, but they were not inclusive

because the LGBTQ+ people at the heart of the discussion were not represented by anyone, even though they had an advocate in one of the writers.

The next step should be the initiation, if not continuation, of praying for the Holy Spirit's vision of the church. It is important for each person to realize they may be challenged by the Holy Spirit to change. Pray, asking the Holy Spirit for guidance and wisdom in relating to LGBTQ+ people.

Talk to people in your congregation and other family members you know who have close contact with someone identifying as LGBTQ+. Ask how you can be helpful and welcoming. This can be done informally, being aware of the surrounding environment and circumstances that might feel awkward. We have children and teens in our midst who identify or will identify as being LGBTQ+. Are we going to reject them and their families for being who they are? This is not just about adult Christians being welcomed or allowed to worship with us.

Is it possible we live in a time when new understanding is necessary for the kingdom of God? Perhaps it is time Christians stop excluding people who are attracted to people of the same sex. The Holy Spirit might be calling for a change in who we think can be a Christian.

It is possible that the Holy Spirit is giving us a further revelation of God's kingdom, moving the Church another step closer to His idea of the kingdom. In *Invitation to Conversation: Becoming More Inclusive of LGBTQ+ People in the Brethren in Christ Church*, several writers experienced what sounded like affirmation from the Holy Spirit regarding church and identity.

I suggest discussion at the congregational level. Set appropriate guidelines for a safe sharing space: respectful language, one person talks at a time, allow others time to speak, have an open mind to what is being said, do not plan what you will say next. Keep the discussion confidential to decrease the threat level. Set up the chairs in a circle to be more inviting than rows with a speaker or leader up front; avoid the appearance of judgment or lecture. If LGBTQ+ people are included in the discussion, consider choosing a neutral place, mindful that many have been hurt by the church and may hesitate to meet in a church building.

I am hopeful that we can find a way forward in unity with God's will.



## A Call for Free and Open Conversation

By Aubrey Hawton\*

Although the Hawton surname may not be as Brethren in Christ-ish as some others, I'm a "cradle BIC," with roots running at least six generations deep in the denomination. My paternal great-grandfather was Bishop Charles Baker, featured in E. Morris Sider's book, *Nine Portraits*. My maternal great-, great-great-, and great-great-great-grandfathers were ministers in the denomination, in both Pennsylvania and Ontario. My grandfather was one of a group of Brethren in Christ pioneers who headed to Saskatchewan in the early 1900s, seeking both land and the opportunity to establish a new congregation there. He was actively involved in the Merrington Church and then in the Clearview and Kindersley congregations.

My own involvement began in my teens, about fifty years ago. I served as the leader of our local Christ's Crusaders group. Does anyone else remember that as the official Brethren in Christ youth group name? I served as delegate to both Canadian and General Conferences several times. I was a member of the Canadian Conference Board for Congregational Life, and was active in Bible Quizzing as a teen, and later as the Canadian Conference Quiz Director. I also served three terms as the Brethren in Christ Denominational Quiz Director, and initiated the CAN-AM Bible Quiz Tournament, which drew teams from both Canada and the USA and from many other denominations. And to think that I managed to do all this as a (mostly-) closeted gay man!

I want to express my profound thanks to the Brethren in Christ Historical Society for publishing the three initial articles by Bishop Lynn Thrush, the Rev. Dr. John R. Yeatts and the Rev. Dr. J. E. McDermond, as well as for the invitation to submit a response. The Society's publication followed closely on the heels of the publication

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\* Aubrey Hawton is a retired school teacher and lives with his family in Oro-Medonte, ON.

of *Invitation to Conversation: Becoming More Inclusive of LGBTQ+ People in the Brethren in Christ Church* earlier in 2024. It is unfortunate that both of these publications, as well as the publication of these responses, faced resistance from Brethren in Christ leadership. This attitude of stifling conversation about LGBTQ+ issues isn't new; it's happened before.

If, as they say, "confession is good for the soul," then I'll confess that I'm no longer a Brethren in Christ Church member. Hardly surprising, I suppose, since I'm a gay man, living with my husband of ten years (together for forty-five), our three adult children, and our daughter's boyfriend. While I value my Brethren in Christ heritage and the nurture the denomination (and in particular, my home congregation in Stayner, Ontario) provided, I came to a point where I knew I could no longer live an authentic Christian life while hiding (or perhaps, attempting to hide) a huge part of who I am: a beloved child of God, a Jesus-follower, AND a gay man. I withdrew my membership from my local congregation before I had to be excommunicated and spent several years AWOL from any church activities—praying, studying, learning, and growing in my understanding of my sexuality and of God's love for me. About twenty years ago, our family joined a local congregation of the Presbyterian Church in Canada where I currently serve as an elder, my husband Michael serves as the church office administrator and audio-visual guru, and our children have been baptised (one even by trine immersion at our summer island cottage. How's that for maintaining Brethren in Christ tradition?!).

I should also confess that, as a gay Christian man with significant church involvement and a very "lived" understanding of the church's traditional treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals and their loved ones and allies, I read Thrush's article with significantly less interest than the other two articles in the original Brethren in Christ Historical Society publication. After being repeatedly accosted with the so-called "clobber passages" that will be cited later, I really felt no need to retraumatize myself by reading them, or any other love-the-sinner-hate-the-sin attempts to justify why I, as a born-again, Jesus-following believer, should be prevented from belonging to the community of faith in which I was nurtured as a child, a teen, and a

young adult. Therefore, my comments will focus less on the church's exclusionary stance, as presented by Thrush, and more on the inclusionary stances presented in Yeatts's and McDermond's articles.

"Belonging to the community of faith," as one of the Brethren in Christ core values, was discussed by all three of the articles' authors. Before I share my observations, it's important to understand the difference between "belong" and "belonging." "Belong" focuses on the action of joining or being a member of something. "Belonging" goes deeper, relating to the emotional and psychological aspect of feeling connected to, and accepted within, a group.

Not surprisingly, I feel that Thrush's article, while purporting to offer belonging as the Brethren in Christ Church's position, really offers neither of the two. Non-celibate LGBTQ+ individuals cannot officially BELONG to a Brethren in Christ congregation, nor would they feel any sense of BELONGING in an organization that will not allow them to honestly and fully live as their true selves.

While I'm not familiar with the membership covenant that is used in Brethren in Christ churches today, I'm guessing it probably doesn't ask prospective members if they've given up any of a number of "sins." However, it's expected of LGBTQ+ individuals to give up the supposed "sin" of sexual intercourse in order to be eligible for membership.

And for ministers and congregations, the bar is set even higher. They are not permitted to disagree with the Brethren in Christ Church's position that genital sexual relations must be carried out in marriage between a male husband and a female wife. Disagree at your peril. My heart—and I believe God's heart—has been broken when I have read and heard stories of loving, life-giving, Spirit-filled Brethren in Christ pastors and congregations being chased from the denomination which they love and to which they have dedicated the proverbial blood, sweat, and tears.

I do see hope, though. Yeatts and McDermond offer a sense of both the ability to belong, and belonging. Yeatts's contention that "... a pastoral response to LGBTQ+ persons among us may make it less likely that divisions will occur. Strong exclusionary policies might cause persons to carry feelings that will make it unlikely that they can ever be restored to fellowship" speaks to allowing grace to guide

the church as it deals with ministers and congregations who affirm LGBTQ+ individuals and the individuals themselves.

I appreciate, and echo, Yeatts's and McDermond's call for a pastoral approach to LGBTQ+ inclusion similar to the one that the Brethren in Christ Church has for those who do not share the Church's policy on participation in war: "While respecting those who hold other interpretations, we believe. . . ." And this comes from someone who grew up under the ministry of the late Bishop E. J. Swalm, likely the Brethren in Christ Church's greatest champion of nonresistance.

McDermond's statement that "God generously gives a variety of spiritual gifts to individuals for the entire Church's good. . . . [A]ny believer who is spiritually gifted can, and should, serve at any level of congregational and denominational life" clearly exemplifies both the ability to belong, and the sense of belonging, that should be felt by all Christians. The Brethren in Christ Church impoverishes itself by prioritizing who one chooses to love, and the support of those who choose to love someone of the same gender, over the clear manifestation of the Holy Spirit at work in someone's life and ministry.

As a teacher by profession, and definitely NOT a theologian, I appreciate Yeatts's careful examination of the tiny number of Scripture passages that purport to deal with same-sex relationship, none of which, in reality, deal with committed, consensual, life-long same-sex relationships or marriages. He clearly identifies that at least one of the passages does not deal specifically with same-sex relationships (Genesis 19), the passages from Leviticus 18 and 20 may deal with temple prostitution and that, ultimately, "their connection in Leviticus is with ritual uncleanness and idolatry rather than with morality as we understand it today." New Testament passages, beginning with Paul's words in I Corinthians 6:9-10 and I Timothy 1:8-10 should lead us to the conclusion that Yeatts reaches after careful study of the Greek words *malakoi*, *arsenokoitēs* and *arsenokoitais* which have been translated and mistranslated in a variety of ways over the centuries: "It seems arbitrary to selectively enforce church discipline on [an] ambiguous word[s]." Unfortunately, much of so-called evangelical Christianity continues to use these "clobber passages" as their proof-

texting way to denigrate and sideline LGBTQ+ Christians.

If I were a pessimist, or one who didn't firmly believe in the Holy Spirit's power to bring about change, I would likely have permanently severed all ties with the Brethren in Christ Church decades ago. However, I have seen the Spirit alive and active in my present church denomination and congregation, and I believe the same can be true for the church to which I owe my Christian upbringing—the Brethren in Christ.

So, where can “we” go from here? (Yes, I say “we” because I still feel a sense of being connected to the Brethren in Christ, although I currently can neither belong to, nor feel a sense of belonging in the denomination.)

Let me offer a few suggestions, based primarily on the forty-five-year journey that my current denomination, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, has taken.

Firstly, the Brethren in Christ should begin by affirming that same-sex activity between consenting adults is a private matter, and should not be recriminalized. Canada decriminalized “homosexual activity” in 1969; the United States did so in 2003. There are still groups, primarily conservative evangelical groups, pushing for the repeal of these laws. The Brethren in Christ Church's pronouncement on this would be a small first step in allowing gay and lesbian people to feel like they are not regarded as criminals by the Church.

Secondly, “[t]he church as a whole must repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy. The church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supportive community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported.”<sup>1</sup> Far too many Brethren in Christ people have left the denomination, contemplated suicide, or completely rejected Christianity. I know of at least a dozen who fit these three categories. God's heart must be broken.

Thirdly, I echo McDermond's call for the entire denomination[s]—both Brethren in Christ U.S. and Be in Christ Church of Canada—to process this matter. Like McDermond, “I do not believe a handful of leaders deciding and then dictating their decision is an adequate or acceptable approach to such a crucial topic.” Reiterating the denomination's current position is NOT open and honest discussion. The exclusion of LGBTQ+ Christians from the process is NOT open

and honest discussion. The exclusion of allies of LGBTQ+ Christians from the process is NOT honest and open discussion. The exclusion of de-credentialed former Brethren in Christ ministers, or members of their disaffiliated congregations, from the process is NOT open and honest conversation. If the denomination is so sure of the correctness of its beliefs, then I see no reason for avoiding open and honest discussion.

Fourthly, if the Brethren In Christ Church truly wishes to put its two core values of “pursuing peace” and “belonging to the community of faith” into practice while having honest and open discussions about the role of LGBTQ+ individuals in the denomination, then it must agree that potential censure (in whatever form it might take) with respect to the denomination’s current stance on same-sex relationships be suspended indefinitely in order to allow free and honest participation in the discussion.

Finally, I hope that the Brethren in Christ Church will, in my lifetime, allow for the full participation of all Christians in all aspects of the life of the denomination, without having to pigeonhole their identity with some letter in an ever-changing initialism. In 2021, the following definition of marriage was adopted by my current denomination, and may provide a framework for the Brethren in Christ Church:

The Presbyterian Church in Canada holds two parallel definitions of marriage and recognizes that faithful, Holy Spirit filled, Christ centered, God honouring people can understand marriage as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or as a covenant relationship between two adult persons.<sup>2</sup>

That same year, the participation of LGBTQI individuals was adopted in the following manner:

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<sup>1</sup> “Church Doctrine Recommendation No. 1, 1993,” Section 6, Homosexual Relationships, *Acts and Proceedings of the One Hundredth and Twentieth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (1994), 267.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix L, “Policy Regarding Same-Sex Marriage and The Ordination of LGBTQI Persons,” Remit B, *Acts and Proceedings of the One Hundredth and Forty-Sixth General Assembly of the Prebyterian Church in Canada* (2019), 5.

That congregations and presbyteries may call and ordain as ministers and elect and ordain as ruling elders LGBTQI persons (married or single) with the provision that liberty of conscience and action regarding participation in ordinations, inductions and installations be granted to ministers and ruling elders.<sup>3</sup>

The amateur historian in me will finish with the account of a former River Brethren bishop Matthias Brinser of Dauphin County, Pennsylvania. He and his followers built a small meetinghouse near Middletown in the early 1850s. Whether this was the first River Brethren meetinghouse is the subject of some debate, but it certainly caught the attention of the Lancaster County River Brethren leaders, who, in 1855, issued a decree of excommunication to Brinser and his followers. Following his excommunication, Bishop Brinser is reported to have remarked, “*Sie Fressen einmal...[was] sie now kutzen*” (“They will sometime eat what they now vomit”). Within a decade, other meetinghouses began to be built by River Brethren groups in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

While a decade may be a short timeline, my prayer is that the Brethren in Christ Church will eventually (the sooner, the better) “eat what they now vomit.” Lord, hear our prayer!

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix L, “Policy Regarding Same-Sex Marriage,” Remit C, *Acts and Proceedings* (2019), 5.