

Becoming a welcoming congregation: Life reborn from dry bones, History moment #4

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I like the image of dry bones, being breathed to life by God. And I like the idea of framing our church split in this image of rebirth. Acknowledging that all history is subjective, dependent on the viewpoint of the researcher and presenter, I feel honored to be able to offer this glimpse into how God was faithful through a dark time in this church's history.

The early to mid eighties was a time of a new wave of growth at Faith Mennonite Church, as its mission expanded on many fronts. In 1982 members started the Jubilee Shop (now Ten Thousand Villages) which quickly became one of the country's top self help stores. Members sponsored refugees from Laos, Ethiopia, and Central America. Members became involved in the Overground Railroad Movement. An MCC unit was started in the Twin cities, and several persons from the church volunteered as part of that unit. Several small groups flourished. There were a number of people who moved into intentional community close to the church. Multiple MCC workers and mission workers were sent out from the church. St. Paul Fellowship was blessed as a church plant on the west side of St. Paul. The church was bursting at the seams with many children and young adults. Many new members came from non-ethnic Mennonite backgrounds. By now, nearly half of our attendance was "new Mennonites". But shadows were forming—focused on the issues of sexuality.

In 1983 the General Conference Mennonite Church, at the Bethlehem Assembly commissioned a study for congregations called "Human Sexuality in the Christian Life" which included study on homosexuality. Faith Mennonite adult education classes studied the document in 1984 but did not come to any specific congregational policy. In 1986 at the Saskatoon conference, the delegate body passed a resolution declaring that homosexual practice was sin. In the discussion time prior to that, both pastor Myron Schrag and another FMC member spoke out against it. No further specific work happened at the church, but some tensions were building.

In 1991 long time pastor Myron Schrag left and was replaced by Paula and Tim Lehman, a pastoral couple who some in the congregation already knew as the founders of Wilderness Wind camp. Meanwhile at Faith during the late eighties and early nineties, a number of events were impossible to ignore. Two marriages involving church members ended in divorce. Both couples had been active in the church and in leadership. Both ended when one of the partners came out as gay. BMC, the Brethren and Mennonite council on GLBT concerns, approached FMC for renting office space. One couple left the church in protest that we might even consider such a request. An openly gay couple requested membership in the church. Under the Lehman's leadership, the congregation began an in depth study of homosexuality in the church, to attempt to come to some consensus.

This came to a crisis in December of 1994, when the Lehmans did not show up for the annual Christmas Banquet. No general church announcement was made explaining their absence; they did not attend church or lead worship or preach during all of Advent and Christmas. A church meeting was called for January 4, 1995, in which Paula shared her struggles with sexual orientation and Tim and Paula announced that they were ending their marriage and that Paula was resigning as pastor. The church kept Tim on as pastor for another six months.

In summer of 1995, Kay Welsch was brought in as an intentional interim pastor and much of her job involved guiding the congregation through a process of discernment about sexuality, specifically whether GLBT persons should be able to be members of the church. She and congregational leaders including Kay Nussbaum put together a comprehensive series including Bible study, outside speakers including Mennonite physician Willard Krabill and representatives of organizations who claim to be able to heal homosexuality, and personal testimony from faith members across the spectrum of experience and belief. There was excellent attendance and it fostered an open and lively dialogue, with multiple viewpoints freely expressed. The intent was to move towards a consensus decision. As it ultimately became clear that this was not going to be possible, council called a congregational meeting on July 14, 1996 to recommend a vote on the following resolution:

“We believe that while scripture teaching leaves room for disagreement on the issue of homosexuality, Christian gays and lesbians whether single or in marriage equivalent relationships should be welcomed into the membership and leadership of Faith Mennonite Church.”

At the same time that this open process was happening, other countercurrents were taking place. Some letters were sent to selected church members, expressing hostility against gay members. Rumors circulated questioning the sexuality of certain people. This underhanded communication culminated in a counter resolution offered at the July meeting, asking FMC to welcome in essence “all persons regardless of sexual practice into full membership”. Although defeated, it set a discouraging tone in the proceedings.

At the well attended meeting, the statement of welcome was approved by a 2/3 majority. From some quarters, a sigh of relief went out.

But in the second week of September, suddenly a third of the congregation was absent. Again, there was no communication, just absence. Approximately 40 members and children left to start a new congregation, Emmanuel Mennonite Church. Some of these were charter members of faith. Those left at Faith dealt with a deep grief. Friendships and families were divided. But at the same time, there developed a renewed trust in Faith Mennonite’s own particular call by God. There was tremendous relief that this issue, which had sucked life from the congregation for nearly a decade, no longer needed to be the central focus of church life. Ongoing grieving occurred as others also left the church: some from the challenges of smaller size; some from exhaustion after the self-absorption of the process; some because the church was not pursuing a more radical course as a welcoming congregation.

In reflection on this time in our church life, it is clear that although sexuality was the lightning rod issue, it was not the only area of conflict. Many other issues were at play: Who has final authority, the local church or the national or regional conferences? Who carries the power in the congregation, the traditionalists who started the church or the new majority? What is the relationship between Mennonites-by-birth and Mennonites-by-choice? Does inclusive language bring expanded inclusion and insight or does it tear away at the fabric of familiar tradition and comfort?

This process had taken a vibrant alive congregation involved in many outreach ministries, and stripped away its flesh and life over ten years until in our

exhaustion we felt like nothing but dry bones. It was a painful process, but also a necessary stripping down to the essentials of our identity as a church. And the amazing thing is that in the years since then, God has been faithful to Faith Mennonite Church. God has breathed on us. God has added flesh and life to the old bones: new energy, new people, new leadership--a new church for a new day.