

**On Becoming an Affirming Congregation:  
Bethel Mennonite Church, Winnipeg Manitoba  
June 12, 2016**

At its annual congregational meeting on June 12, 2016, Bethel Mennonite Church officially became an affirming congregation. Numerous background factors contributed to this nodal decision. Here are just a few of the main moves:

- 1) At least 15 years of diligent and careful study of the relevant biblical materials around human sexuality; contextual historical, social and psychological perspectives; and implications for church membership.
- 2) Responding to an expressed need, in 2004 Bethel established a 'Pilgrim Group' ministry whose mandate was to provide a safe space for LGBTQ Christians and their families to discuss matters of faith and sexuality.
- 3) Careful and diligent attention to the multi-year Mennonite Church Canada *Being a Faithful Church* process, including much scriptural discernment, prayer, and worship.
- 4) Numerous educational opportunities (both formal and informal), offering avenues for continuous discussion and feedback for both individuals and groups.
- 5) In 2014, the deacon executive board established a formal Coordinating Group for discussion on human sexuality, whose express purpose was to coordinate information gathering and provide educational opportunities for the church to consider a more inclusive approach while simultaneously attending to the unity of the congregation.
- 6) On May 12, 2016, this Coordinating Group reported to Bethel's Church Council (their Report is attached as Appendix A), proposing that Bethel become an affirming congregation; the Council then prepared a statement for consideration by the entire congregation.
- 7) The congregational meeting on June 12 proved to be a most fruitful gathering. While several opportunities were granted, no call for a ballot vote was received. The clear expression of an overall spirit supporting the recommendation to be an officially affirming congregation was sensed as a collective movement of the Spirit. The report of the Pilgrim Group to the congregation at that meeting is attached as Appendix B.

Having experienced diligent gracious guides, the congregants have become ready to promote Bethel as an affirming congregation. The beauty of Bethel's process provides space for a wide variety of individual theological and personal expression without thereby breaking our bond in Christ.

The undergirding and overarching desire of Bethel Mennonite is to continue a strong presence and ministry within Mennonite Church Manitoba and Mennonite Church Canada.

**Appendix A:**  
**Report of the Coordinating Group**  
**Given to Church Council, May 12, 2016**

Preamble

Bethel's Coordinating Group for Discussion on Human Sexuality was appointed in 2015 to coordinate information gathering and educational opportunities and to help our church wrestle with the issue of a more inclusive practice with regards to human sexuality. We have also been asked to give special care to the unity of the congregation as we engage in this dialogue.

The discernment process

As a Coordinating group, we recognize that Bethel has engaged this topic over the past 15 years:

- The Pilgrim Group was established in 2004 after a three year congregational Bible study and dialogue on homosexuality. This support group for LGBTQ+ people and their families and friends was established by Bethel's Deacons and Council and endorsed by the congregation.
- From 2009 to the present, Bethel has participated in the "Being a Faithful Church" (BFC) process outlined by Mennonite Church Canada.
- In connection with the BFC process, there has been prayer, worship and Bible study.
- In Oct 2015, a report was shared in adult education about the conference session on Human Sexuality in Winkler which was facilitated by MC Manitoba in September, 2015.
- The BMC Coordinating group on Human Sexuality, appointed by Church Council has:
  - Provided a list of online and church library resources on the Bethel website.
  - Hosted the play *This Will Lead to Dancing* by Theatre of the Beat in November, 2015, and led an Adult Education discussion on the play.
  - Facilitated 2 Sunday School classes in Jan 2016, including a panel discussion and a video on the experiences of LGBTQ+ persons in the Mennonite Church.
  - Reviewed the BFC 7 recommendations at the congregational meeting in Feb 2016.
  - Solicited private feedback from the congregation to pastors and deacons.

Biblical background and guidance

The BFC documents have provided thoughtful discussion on the role of the Bible in our discernment process and we hold the Bible to have authority for Bethel. We note several themes:

- Scripture is best understood from within the midst of the hermeneutical discerning community.
- Using Biblical text in isolation from the rest of scripture is not helpful. We recognize the inter-textuality of the Bible, believing that the Bible interprets and comments on itself and that Jesus interprets scripture in new ways.
- Jesus provides the interpretive key for understanding scripture. He calls upon his followers to create an inclusive community.

## Findings

Our Coordinating group perceives that there are many in our congregation who hold to the view that inclusion of those with a different sexual orientation or gender identity is an important and Biblically mandated way to show the love of God to all.

There are also some who hold to a view of sexuality that honours a traditional interpretation that sexual orientation is consistent along gender lines and that other forms of sexual orientation are considered sin.

There are a significant number of people in our congregation who wish to include those of different sexual orientations in the faith community while recognizing different levels of acceptance. They are prepared to continue on a journey of learning and faithful discernment.

There is a desire on the part of congregants to maintain unity in the congregation. This includes congregants that hold various and differing views on the question of sexuality.

## Recommendations and a Reflection of Bethel Mennonite Church

Based on our discernment we make the following recommendations:

1. That Bethel Mennonite Church support the adoption of the BFC7 recommendations at Assembly 2016.
2. That Bethel declare itself a welcoming and affirming congregation.

## Next Steps and further recommendations

1. That Council develop a welcome/inclusivity statement.
2. That this statement be reflected in our bulletin, website and other publications of the church.
3. That Bethel review its policies and procedures and signage in light of the new welcome/inclusivity statement.
4. That Bethel foster opportunities to learn more about sexual orientation and gender identity. This would be done from a perspective of learning and relationship building, not from a perspective whether non heterosexuals belong in the church.
5. That Bethel continue to encourage the Pilgrim group as a support for LGBTQ+ persons.
6. That Bethel Council develop a procedure to monitor progress on these recommendations, and that our congregation, through Bethel Council, remain sensitive to the nudging of the spirit.
7. That Bethel consider holding a service of confession and lament with regards to how we have alienated and turned our backs on people whose sexual orientation or gender identity has not been understood.

**Appendix B:**  
**Report of the Pilgrim Group**  
**Given at Bethel Congregational Meeting, June 12, 2016**

Bethel's Pilgrim Group was established in 2004 after a three year discernment process on sexuality issues. We have reported to the congregation every year of this Group's existence. Although the Group is a ministry of Bethel Mennonite Church, its ministry is closely felt by many people from outside of Bethel. The Group meets monthly except during holiday times; there are usually 10 – 12 people who attend, of which 4 – 6 are from Bethel. The PG relates to all LGBTQ persons and their families and friends, but the past year has seen a greater attendance by people with transgender children. Group meetings are times of sharing, praying, learning and celebrating God's love for all God's children.

Apart from the Group meetings as such, individual members of the Pilgrim Group also engage in advocacy for LGBTQ inclusion at Bethel and in the larger church. In the fall of 2014 some of us suggested a process of discernment (in conjunction with the BFC process happening in MC Canada) which, we suggested, might culminate in a declaration by Bethel at our AGM in 2016, that we are a welcoming and affirming congregation. Although the process that was followed was somewhat different from what we envisioned, we are so humbled and gratified that Church Council endorsed just such a declaration at its meeting in May 2016. That declaration will be more fully explained at the congregational meeting on June 12 – but it means that there is much less ambiguity about the place of Christian LGBTQ people and their families in the life and work of this congregation. As a Pilgrim Group, and as Bethel members of that Group, we see the hand of God at work here. The Spirit has been breathing on our church – and we have responded!

This is by no means the end of the work by the Group or its members. There is still much misinformation, mythology and even prejudice about non-heterosexual reality at Bethel. So much education remains to be done – and the Pilgrim Group invites engagement by people with questions or concerns. We also note the tremendous harm that has been inflicted over the years on LGBTQ people at Bethel and beyond. That harm must be addressed in healing and wholesome acts of repentance and reconciliation. The Spirit of God is not finished with us yet!

We realize that not everyone at Bethel accepts the possibility of same-sex marriage or non-heterosexual relationships as consistent with their Christian faith, even with the declaration that we are now an affirming faith community. But we celebrate the fact that, despite our disagreements on these (and so many other) issues, we continue to fellowship together, to worship our God, to serve the people in our neighbourhoods, and to be the Church for our members and community. Above all, we celebrate our love for God and for each other! That surely trumps all else. We can live in unity and in love. Praise God!