

# Timeline of Human Sexuality Conflicts

within the Church of the Brethren

In the late 1950's, the Church of the Brethren reached its highest membership of about 210,000 and began declining from that point forward. This was due to several factors. During the 1960's, dues payments increased slightly but enough that some congregations began dropping inactive members in order to enhance their financial position. A second contributing factor to the steady decline was an incremental change in theological interpretations of the Bible from a small segment of the denominational membership. Society itself was changing because strong cultural winds were blowing from an unpopular war in Viet Nam, an escalating Cold War with the Soviet Union, technological spinoffs from NASA's space program, and the secularization of the middle class due to an explosion of rock music and styles of dress. Biblical theology was under fire, especially following the April 8, 1966, issue of Time Magazine's lead article: Is God Dead? Why? Perhaps continuing advancements in science had marginalized the need for religion to explain the dynamics of life and the origin of the universe. God was becoming less important in the mainstream of life.

More cultural shifts would occur in the next decade. "*The Generation Gap*" was a frequent topic of debate at most societal levels, that being the differing world views of parents compared with that of their children. University professors gradually began championing the ideologies of Marxism and Collectivism, wherein focus was placed on the group instead of the individual. Secondary schools had dismissed God in favor of humanism, and Evolution was incrementally replacing Creationism.

During this time a small number of Brethren assumed a more liberal posture in the realm of biblical interpretation and relevancy. Their voices grew in both number and prominence at Annual Conference. Denominational literature soon reflected this change. The *Gospel Messenger* dropped the word "Gospel" in 1965 and gradually altered its format from numerous biblically based articles and personal testimonies to its present structure. The General Brotherhood Board would also drop the word Brotherhood to become a less exclusive sounding General Board. In future years Bethany Biblical Seminary would be renamed Bethany Theological Seminary.

## 1970

A business query was presented to the 1977 Annual Conference to address issues regarding new attitudes toward the relevancy of the Bible. It had been a major cultural shift for a German subculture to face the social changes during the last century. Now they were faced with greater challenges to the authority of the Bible itself. The study committee's final report was adopted by the 1979 Annual Conference and titled: Biblical Inspiration and Authority. It was seventeen pages of reflections on

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what the committee presumed was the then current sentiment of the denomination, but it also appeared to speak from two different perspectives. At several points, it appeared to be placating both sides of the issue. The first seemed to voice biblical finality to the authority of scripture and the second voice that of spiritual uncertainty.

VOICE OF FINALITY (page 3, paragraph 8)

*“We are to give first importance to the message which was of first importance to the early church (1 Corinthians 15:1-5). We are to guard against twisting God's word with our private misinterpretations (2 Peter 1:20). We are to allow scripture to serve its intended purpose of leading others to life in Christ (John 5:39-40). We are to handle the word of God with integrity and openness rather than play games with it (2 Corinthians 4:1-2). And we are to declare anew the wonderful deeds of the God who called us out of darkness into light (1 Peter 2:9).”*

VOICE OF UNCERTAINTY (page 12, paragraph 11)

*“We are not yet agreed on whether inspiration is a finished or continuing process. Some of us believe that God's Spirit inspires new prophetic witness in the community of believers in every age, in continuity with the biblical witness. Others of us believe that the work of the Spirit in guiding the biblical writers was unique and now completed, and that the present role of the Spirit is entirely one of illumining what the Bible says.”*

On the whole, the report is impressive and foundational but retains enough wiggle-room for both conservatives and liberals to justify their larger agendas. This is not to blame the study committee in any way, but it more properly reveals their own assessment of the spiritually divided climate of the Brethren at that time.

The decade of the 1980's was one of cultural shock. American iconic models and beliefs were shattered. Some for the good and some not so good. Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court. IBM introduced the personal computer. John Lennon of the “Beatles” was assassinated. General Secretary of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev instituted the policies of glasnost (“openness”) so that people could voice their opinions without fear of reprisal, and perestroika (“restructuring”) of the nation's economic structure. Space shuttle Challenger explodes and the Soviets launch the MIR space station. The Berlin Wall was torn down by students without intervention, yet students were massacred in China's Tiananmen Square. The World Wide Web side of the Internet was invented.

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A sexual revolution was taking place during the 1970-80's unparalleled in US history. Every facet of life was affected by an increased focus on sensually oriented matter seen on television, in the movies, books, pictures, literature, and magazines. Prior to 1960, cohabitation was nearly impossible in the United States. Laws forbade unmarried couples from registering in hotels or obtaining mortgages. That status gradually changed from being disreputable to normal, and even convenient. Banks, employers, and hotels all ceased to discriminate against couples living together. Illegitimate births skyrocketed and abortion became legal in 1973.

But the most crucial event of this decade may have been the sexual revolution that put new words into mainstream dialogue: lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual. This social change actually began in the late 1970's but hit the nation hard at the beginning of the next decade. The feminist community was segmented into warring factions by the most vitriolic debates over "the roles" that women should play in society. Topics that were formerly discussed only in private family settings was now brazenly popularized on national television. It was difficult for Brethren to maintain their spiritual moorings in such a progressive and unstable climate. Once again, Annual Conference was requested to formulate a statement on human sexuality that would satisfactorily address the divergent voices of both liberals and conservatives.

## 1980

In the 1983 Annual Conference statement: Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective the study committee's fourteen-page report covered a vast scope of the human sexual experience involving the importance of covenants, the need for love, guidance offered to churches, biblical commentary, marriage fidelity, and celibacy. Section four of the report examined and offered commentary on seven passages of scripture regarding sexuality. Genesis 18- 19; Judges 19; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:26 ff; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; and 1 Timothy 1:10. One of the committee's main conclusions is found on page 9 paragraph 6:

*"The Church of the Brethren upholds the biblical declaration that heterosexuality is the intention of God for creation. Nature, in the very functional compatibility of male and female genitalia, confirms this biblical revelation that males and females are meant for each other. This intimate genital contact between two persons of opposite sexes is not just a physical union; it also embodies the interlocking of persons. This intimate companionship is heterosexuality at its fullest. It is the context for the formation of family."*

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It would first appear as though the conservative wing had prevailed with embedded language so clear and binding. Yet once again, in perhaps the interest of forbearance, the committee also stated on page 10, paragraph 6:

*“There are special ways in which the church can extend Christ-like comfort and grace to homosexual and bisexual persons ... welcoming all inquirers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior into the fellowship of the church ... engaging in open, forthright conversations with homosexuals ... advocating the right of homosexuals to jobs, housing, and legal justice ...”*

God’s grace is certainly available to everyone but the word “welcome” has been interpreted differently by both liberals and conservatives, as also “engaging in open conversations” or “advocating the rights of.” From this moment on, both camps have endeavored to capture the high ground of opinion, and the homosexual voice has been the most assertive and the most focused.

See Annual Conference statements, especially the 1983 statement from:

<http://www.bunkertownchurch.org/news.htm#SpecialDocuments>

## 1994

Womaen's Caucus, a very progressive special interest group, invited Martin Rock to speak at their Annual Conference luncheon, in Wichita, Kansas. Rock is the founder of Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian & Gay Concerns, a liberal activist group that strives for full acceptance of all persons regardless of sexual lifestyles. It created such a furor that Standing Committee gave new screening instructions to the Program & Arrangement Committee that all speakers at any Conference event, those requesting exhibit space, or persons seeking booklet distribution privileges, must sign a copy of the new policy and submit names of proposed speakers or performers.

Interests targeted would be those who advocate conflicting action with Annual Conference statements, lobbying for pending business, engaging in ad hominem arguments, or disrupt the bond of peace. This action was sound and just but as time passed there was little visible evidence that the policy was actually being enforced.

## 1995

Due to the continuing lack of decisive action on the part of denominational leadership relative to the homosexual issue, the Bunkertown Church of the Brethren expressed its frustration by taking action through a Congregational Business Meeting to divert the required annual payment of \$8,000 from Elgin’s general distribution

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account to a mission or disaster fund. In 2007 that amount was dropped to \$6000, due to Bunkertown's own budgetary and other financial constraints.

## 1998

On Earth Peace meets with Women's Caucus and Brethren / Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns to examine commonality in their mission statements and project goals. Each group is extremely progressive.

## 2001

Matthew Smucker of the Skyridge Church of the Brethren, Kalamazoo, Michigan, was approved for licensing in that district in 1999, relicensed in 2000, and graduated from Bethany Theological Seminary in May 2001. All this time he was "openly gay" in sexual preference. At a pre-ordination interview in July 2001, the district decided to wait until after Annual Conference, perhaps to avoid the inevitable gossiping.

In anticipation of this possible action from their neighboring district, the Northern Ohio district board in August, 2001, sent a query to the 2002 Annual Conference that was titled: Licensing for Ordination of Homosexual Persons.

## 2002

On April 27, 2002, the Michigan district board approved the ordination for an "openly gay man" with ordination services set for June 9. This was a watershed moment in the history of the Church of the Brethren. No district had ever taken such an action. Under pressure from denominational wide discussions, the Michigan board agreed to revisit their decision on June 1, 2002. After deliberation in both closed and public sessions, the board suspended the ordination of Smucker until guidance could be received from Annual Conference. The Skyridge congregation ordained Smucker in spite of the district boards decision. Later that same month, Annual Conference convened in Louisville, Kentucky, on June 29. The delegate body voted by a two-thirds majority the recommendation of Standing Committee that homosexual licensing and ordinations violated the spirit of the 1983 Human Sexuality paper: *"...it is inappropriate to license or ordain to the Christian ministry any persons who are known to be engaging in homosexual practices, and will not recognize the licensing and ordination of such persons in the Church of the Brethren."*

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## 2003

Meeting in August the Michigan district conference approved a petition affirming the Annual Conference decision of 2002 that would discontinue both licensing and ordinations of any known homosexuals. Smucker's ordination was then terminated. He is now ordained in the United Church of Christ.

## 2009

Query to Annual Conference meeting in San Diego, California: Language on Same Sex Covenantal Relationships asks the delegate body, *"to consider whether it is the will of the church that this language on same sex covenantal relationships (1983 AC Statement) will continue to guide our journey together."* A second Query: A Structural Framework For Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues was adopted that would upgrade the now governing 1988 paper to a more complete process for wide area conversations on special issues. The 1988 paper only called for resources to be provided for such conversations and lacked direction over how to process the responsive information that would be gathered from such discussions.

Opinions were sharply divided between maintaining status quo (1983) and full acceptance of homosexuals. Several persons expressed weariness over the entire matter. A few wanted to reopen the 1983 Statement for revision. Others expressed that unity is impossible from two vastly diverse points of view. Still others recommended a denomination wide conversation, while others pointed out that the denomination has already been in conversation for more than twenty years. A few cited that at the heart of the real issue is a lack of biblical authority in the life of the believer.

The delegate body accepted the Standing Committee's recommendation to combine the Language on Same Sex query with the Statement of Confession query from AC 2008 into one item of business, thus initiating the two yearlong Special Response Process for Controversial Issues.

Rainbow colored clothing was first worn by supporters of gays and lesbians throughout the week of Annual Conference 2009. They handed out free multi-colored scarves. A few people willingly accepted and happily donned these scarves until they realized what the colors really symbolized, at which point the freebies were discarded.

## 2011

Annual Conference meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, finalized the Special Response process by following the recommendation of Standing Committee that both queries from 2009 be returned to their place of origin with the following: *"In light of the*

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*Special Response process, as outlined by the 2009 paper 'A Structural Framework For Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues,' the Standing Committee recommends to the 2011 delegate body that 'A Statement of Confession and Commitment' and 'Language on Same-Sex Covenantal Relationships' be returned. (plus Amendment) It is further recommended that the 2011 Annual Conference reaffirm the entire 1983 'Statement on Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective' and that we continue deeper conversations concerning human sexuality outside of the query process."*

See complete record at: <http://www.cob-net.org/ac/ac2011.htm#UnfinishedBusiness>

During their September meeting, the On Earth Peace board of directors expressed their displeasure with the results of Annual Conference 2011 and issued a paper titled Statement of Inclusion: "*We are troubled by attitudes and actions in the church which exclude persons on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or any other aspect of human identity. We believe God calls the church to welcome all persons into full participation in the life of the faith community.*"

## 2012

Annual Conference Program & Arrangements Committee decides to grant exhibit space to all applications, instead of being accused of misplacing or never receiving applications from homosexual groups. This was the first time that the Brethren / Mennonite Council for Lesbians and Gays obtained permission for an exhibit booth. This was technically not a violation of the 2011 Annual Conference decision, since that delegate body had voted to keep human sexual issues outside of the query process, thus, an exhibit booth was not a part of the business proceedings.

## 2013

Prior to Annual Conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, the Standing Committee held a specially called session with On Earth Peace executive director Bill Scheurer to address their Statement of Inclusion. Both sides remained firm in their positions but agreed to meet again later in the fall of this same year.

Standing Committee meets again with On Earth Peace in September to consider ways to resolve the impasse between the two groups. Nothing productive evolved but each agreed to meet at a future time.

## 2015

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On Earth Peace flyer that accompanied the On Earth Peace report in the Annual Conference delegate packet referenced the scripture, *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, She has anointed me to...'* referring to God as She. This same flyer also included a picture of a rainbow-scarved female speaker promoting the concept of Inclusion."

## 2016

Three queries in the realm of human sexuality were presented to the delegate body of Annual Conference: Same Sex Weddings, On Earth Peace Reportability / Accountability to Annual Conference, and Viability of On Earth Peace as an Agency of the Church of the Brethren.

The recommendation of Standing Committee to the delegate body regarding the query on Same Sex Weddings states: *"Standing Committee recommends to the 2016 Annual Conference that the conduct expectations of the general membership, as stated in the 1983 Annual Conference statement "Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective," which was reaffirmed at the 2011 Annual Conference, and the conduct expectations of licensed and ordained persons, as stated in the 2002 Annual Conference statement "Licensing/Ordination of Homosexual Persons to the Ministry in the Church of the Brethren," make it clear that for credentialed ministers to officiate or provide leadership at a same sex wedding is to go against the stance of the Church of the Brethren. It shall be considered a matter of pastoral/ministerial misconduct. The districts shall respond with discipline, not with allowances based on personal conscience. The consequence for officiating or providing leadership at a same sex wedding is the termination of the ministry credential of the one officiating or providing leadership at a same sex wedding. This shall be for a period of one year, pending review by the district ministerial leadership team."*

Delegates voted to refer Same Sex Weddings to the Leadership Team and to also include consultation with the Council of District Executives.

Standing Committee combined both On Earth Peace queries into one item of business. *"Recognizing that the Review and Evaluation Committee has the responsibility to consider the balance and unity of denominational agencies, Standing Committee recommends that the 2016 Annual Conference refer the "Query: On Earth Peace Reportability/Accountability to Annual Conference" and the "Query: Viability of On Earth Peace as an Agency of the Church of the Brethren" to the Review and Evaluation Committee for their consideration."*



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Delegates accepted the recommendation of Standing Committee that a report will be given to the 2017 Annual Conference in Grand, Rapids, Michigan.

See complete record at: <http://www.cob-net.org/ac/ac2016.htm#NewBusiness>

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