

Contextualizing the MBCM PFLT's Theological Report regarding River East Church

Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba
Provincial Faith and Life Team
November 2023

Dear MB Church Leader,

We write you today to address an important matter that concerns us as a community of churches. We believe that this requires our collective wisdom and understanding.

Alongside this letter, you will have received a report from the Provincial Faith and Life Team (PFLT) on the theological concerns pertaining to River East Church. This report was written as part of our mandate to the MBCM board. On May 10, 2023, MBCM sent a letter to all Mennonite Brethren churches in Manitoba announcing the suspension of River East Church. As per the process outlined in MBCM's constitution, the PFLT conducted a review of the circumstances that have led to this suspension. On October 2, 2023, the PFLT presented our report to the MBCM board.

We recognize that this report has significant theological implications and requires thoughtful consideration. It is with a heart full of compassion and respect that we urge you to approach the reception of this report with a spirit of discernment and grace.

The theological concerns presented in the report are framed within the context of evaluation and assessment. It is important to understand that this assessment is a specific viewpoint, guided by our particular MB theological evaluations and convictions. Consequently, we must recognize that it would be difficult to circulate this document among our Mennonite Brethren congregations without careful translation and contextualization. Our commitment to open dialogue and mutual understanding should encourage us to ensure that every member of our faith community can access and engage with this report in a meaningful way.

Furthermore, it is crucial for us, as leaders of the Mennonite Brethren Church, to emphasize that the assessment of REC, as provided by the PFLT report, does not capture a holistic response. We must remember that this report, while valuable in its own right, does not say everything that needs to be said. It does not capture our heart for LGBTQ+ persons. It does not capture the areas of agreement and appreciation between REC and the wider MB conference.

We recognize that Jesus calls us to love one another, to seek reconciliation, and to engage in constructive dialogue even when faced with theological differences. It is in these moments of challenging dialogue and disagreement that we need to reflect a posture of curiosity, kindness, gentleness, love, grace, and mercy.

As we navigate these complex discussions, let us remain steadfast in our commitment to understanding and respect. We want to encourage you to personally engage with this report as a means of deeper discernment for the way you will translate this to your congregation and community. The following represents some considerations that would be helpful as you seek to engage your community in the discernment of the PFLT Theological Concerns of REC.

The reason for naming our theological disagreements: The theological concerns represented in our report are not formed for the goal of drawing battle lines, but rather, articulating the theological differences we are observing in our sister church. We do not name these differences as an attempt to “other”, shame, or exclude. We do not assume a posture of condemnation or judgment, but rather a generous discernment. Part of the task of healthy unity is the ability to name the places of tension and disagreement. We name the differences from the posture of identifying the distance between our two perspectives in hopes of working towards clarity and understanding. We share in the desire of the MBCM board which has hoped this process would lead to a restoration of REC membership in MBCM.

This is not an *us vs them* discussion. Our brains are wired naturally to categorize people and things. This categorization creates an “us vs. them” with multiple side effects, including: we view ourselves as better, we view “them” as all the same while viewing the “us” as all unique, and we think we know what they already think about us and that this opinion of us is negative. In a quest for better self-esteem, we also often set “us” up as a gold standard and put down “them,” particularly if we are heavily invested in a group identity.

There are many points of agreement and appreciation that we have for REC. We share the goal of wanting to love LGBTQ+ folks well. We share the goal of wanting to create space for belonging that allows people to journey with Jesus in a process of discipleship. Our recent work with Posture Shift and future work with the LGBTQ+ inclusion task force is towards this end. Though we have significant points of disagreement, we recognize and appreciate the work that REC has done to try to understand and navigate many complex issues.

In our shared posture towards REC, we implore you as a church leader to be gracious, non-combative, generous, humble, curious, and kind. Make it a goal to embody the fruit of the Spirit as we dialogue with our sister church REC. We pray the words of James the brother of Jesus would be true of MB leaders at this moment:

“You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” -- James 1:19-20, NRSV

We also need to name that our theological concerns for REC are not born out of a heterosexual vs LGBTQ+ divide. As a discernment body, we have heard from LGBTQ+ voices within our tradition who have discerned that the witness of Scripture, Jesus’ teaching, and tradition does not give allowance for the blessing of same-sex marriage. We have heard countless stories from MB pastors, leaders, and members who identify on the LGBTQ+ spectrum but have heard the Spirit’s call to remain faithful to Jesus’ teaching on marriage. We have discovered that there are alternative third-way approaches to this complex discussion.

We have also observed that some Christians have put tremendous energy into their messages of disapproval. They can hold rallies, sign petitions, and write letters to the government to show their opposition to the “gay agenda”. All of their active energy goes into the “we don’t approve” message. But what about the “we love you” message?

The message of love to the LGBTQ+ community is usually given a token response, often in the middle of longer messages intended to make clear that “we disapprove”. What if we have it completely backwards? We should be pouring our active energies into the “we love you” message. Christians should be the first to look out for the human rights of any oppressed group, including LGBTQ+ people. We should find practical ways to serve the LGBTQ+ community, always showing them the utmost respect as image-bearers of God.

It is our hope that MB leaders would be the first to form mutually respectful friendships without necessarily being in complete agreement on all of the issues that affect us. We hope we can model what it means to be people of truth and grace. Ultimately, it is this kind of mutually respectful acceptance that will, at the end of the day, provide us with the most opportunities to imitate Jesus as we grow, love, and learn in a world that is increasingly divided.

Keep the main thing, the main thing. The PFLT report was written in conversation with REC’s Talking Points from the Bible for Full Inclusion of LGBTQ+ Persons. We addressed the various concerns that were represented in that document. As such, the document may appear to present every concern with equal weight. This may not produce a fruitful discussion in your community. So it would be helpful to name what the primary focus of our disagreement is about: Our primary area of concern and disagreement is our understanding of marriage and singleness. As an MB conference, we affirm the importance of loving and welcoming all people regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other category of division. However, we struggle to see a Scriptural, historical, or theological basis for the blessing of same-sex marriages. We believe that marriage is a sacred covenant between a man and a woman, as

outlined in Article 11 of the MB Confession of Faith¹. We agree with Preston Sprinkle when he writes,

Some people race to certain prohibition passages like Leviticus 18 or Romans 1 to show that same-sex sexual relationships are sin. But I think this approach is wrongheaded. The main question in our conversation is not “Does the Bible prohibit same-sex sexual relationships?” The main question is “*What is marriage?*” To believe in same-sex marriage, you must understand marriage to be something like a lifelong union between two consenting humans. According to the traditional view, while marriage is much more than sex difference, it involves no less than sex difference. Simply put, sex difference is an intrinsic part of what marriage is. That is, sex difference is built into the very nature of what marriage is.²

In this large and complex conversation on sexuality, we encourage you to focus on the vast Scriptural vision of marriage from Genesis to Revelation. Specifically, on Jesus’ teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman (Matt. 19:3-6) and that any sexual activity outside of this context is sinful (Matt. 15:19). Many people, including Christians, struggle with aspects of this teaching, but in choosing to follow Jesus, we also seek to follow the teaching of Scripture. The Apostle Paul teaches us that our bodies are not our own and that our sexual acts are inherently spiritual in nature. As followers of Christ, God becomes a party to our sexual acts (1 Cor 6:12-20). So followers of Jesus need to be discerning on what we do with our bodies because: *we are not our own*.

In Genesis 1-2, we see several elements that give meaning to marriage: (1) A Sexuate Difference (2) Unitive (3) Generative Potential, (4) Mutual, (5) Equality, and (6) a fulfilment of God’s call to be vice-regent image bearers and caretakers of creation. Jesus reinforces the creation design in his own teaching in Matthew 19:1-12, with the addition of a view of celibacy as faithfulness to the Kingdom. Our marriages are to point to the ultimate marriage of Christ and his church (Eph. 5:32). The wider biblical narrative shows us that the union of the man and woman in marriage is actually a picture of the union of Heaven and earth in Christ. Ultimately, what we think about marriage should be closely connected to how we express our vision of following Jesus as Lord.

The consistent intention of God is either marital faithfulness, chaste singleness, or spiritual friendship. In every case, it is a call to a lifestyle of sexual holiness. Unlike a ‘rights-based’ discourse that asserts that individuals have an indisputable right to seek sexual fulfillment

¹ “Marriage is a covenant relationship intended to unite a man and a woman for life. At creation, God designed marriage for companionship, sexual union, and the birth and nurture of children. Sexual intimacy rightfully takes place only within marriage.” - Article 11, The MB Confessions of Faith

² Sprinkle, Preston. Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?: 21 Conversations from a Historically Christian View (pp. 36-37). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

according to their sexual attractions, God calls us to sexual chastity outside of marriage and sexual faithfulness within lifelong marriage.

See the plank in our own eye. We would encourage MB leaders to model Jesus' teaching on seeing the plank in our own eyes. We should be the first to name the various areas in which we have failed to love like Jesus. If there are ways we have sinned against REC or the LGBTQ+ community— we need to repent and work toward reconciliation.

Part of the way we can model a 'plank eye' posture is by understanding that we are all sexually broken people. We do not enter these discussions as distant observers. The concept of sexuality is one that is complex and multifaceted, and it is something that affects each and every one of us, regardless of our sexual orientation. In understanding this, it becomes clear that there is no divide between same-sex attracted individuals and those who identify as heterosexual. Rather, all of us are beautiful, precious, and infinitely loved by God, regardless of our sexual brokenness. This understanding is rooted in the Scriptural vision of sexuality, which extends to all who seek to follow Jesus. By acknowledging our own sexual brokenness, we are able to cultivate a sense of empathy and compassion towards others, regardless of their own struggles with sexuality. Ultimately, it is through this recognition of our shared humanity and brokenness that we are able to come together as a community and support one another in our journeys toward living a Jesus-shaped vision of sexuality.

Understand the emotional temperature of this conversation. Many folks in the LGBTQ+ community and their families have experienced deep pain and isolation as a result of their sexual orientation. There are stories of rejection. Stories of hurt. Stories of being hated. People are kicked out of their families. Sibling against sibling. Parents against a child. People are no longer welcome in churches. We need to hear and understand those stories. We need to deeply grieve and lament the ways in which the wider church has contributed to the marginalization of LGBTQ+ persons.

As we navigate these complex and sometimes sensitive conversations surrounding differences in LGBTQ+ inclusion within our faith community, it is crucial that we not only focus on theological and doctrinal aspects but also understand and address the emotional aspects of these discussions. Our ability to listen with empathy and compassion is key to fostering an environment of understanding, love, and support. Here are some tips for listening with emotion and engaging in these conversations with sensitivity:

Start with Humility: Begin by acknowledging that you might not fully understand the experiences, emotions, and challenges that LGBTQ+ individuals face. Begin by appreciating the work REC has done on this complex discussion. Approach the conversation with an open heart and a willingness to learn.

Active Listening: Pay close attention to what is being said. Listen not just to the words, but to the emotions behind them. Make eye contact, nod, and provide non-verbal cues that you are engaged and empathetic.

Empathize: Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Try to imagine what it's like to walk in their journey, acknowledging the challenges and emotions they've faced. Empathy goes a long way in demonstrating care and understanding.

Resist the Urge to Immediately Correct: It can be tempting to immediately offer counter-arguments or theological perspectives. However, sometimes, what people need most is someone who will listen without trying to "fix" their feelings or beliefs. Validate their emotions first.

Ask Open-Ended Questions: Encourage open dialogue by asking open-ended questions that invite individuals to share more about their experiences and feelings. Questions like, "Can you tell me more about that?" or "How has this affected you personally?" can be helpful.

Be Patient: Understand that emotions run deep in these conversations, and it may take time for individuals to express themselves fully. Allow them to share at their own pace and be patient with any silences or pauses.

Avoid Making Assumptions: Don't assume you know someone's story or journey. Each individual has a unique experience, and it's important not to generalize or make assumptions based on stereotypes.

Offer Support and Resources: Sometimes, these conversations may uncover pain or confusion. Be prepared to offer emotional support and direct individuals to resources or support groups that can further assist them.

The LGBTQ+ conversation is a discipleship opportunity. It is not uncommon for us to feel a sense of discomfort, fear, or hesitation when it comes to addressing LGBTQ+ issues within the church. This discomfort may stem from concerns about potential divisions, theological disagreements, or uncertainty about how to navigate these sensitive topics. However, it's crucial to remember that these discussions are not only necessary but also have the potential to foster transformation and deep learning among our congregations.

Consider the following discipleship opportunities we have before us:

1. **An Increased Biblical Engagement:** This conversation invites us to dive deeper into the Bible and examine how we interpret and understand Scripture.
2. **Growing in Listening and Empathy:** These discussions encourage us to practice active listening, empathy, and compassion. They offer a platform for us to grow in our ability to truly understand and support individuals who may have different perspectives or experiences.
3. **Strengthening Unity:** Addressing differences can lead to a stronger, more resilient unity within our churches. When we engage in these conversations with respect, grace, and love, it demonstrates our commitment to working through conflict and growing into maturity.
4. **Spiritual Growth:** Tensions and discussions about LGBTQ+ issues can be a catalyst for our spiritual growth as individuals and as a congregation. They challenge us to deepen our faith and understanding, relying on God's guidance and wisdom.
5. **Building Bridges:** Embracing these conversations helps us build bridges of understanding and humility in our polarized age. It creates opportunities for reconciliation, healing, and understanding, ultimately fostering a more harmonious community.
6. **Modeling Truth and Grace:** As leaders, we have the privilege and responsibility to model Christ's truth and grace in our interactions. Leaders model the way. Engaging in these discussions with a posture of love and respect can set a powerful example for our congregation to follow.

Conclusion

We encourage you to access some of the additional resources available to you from our National Faith & Life Team. We have included a helpful list of resources for you to consider in your own study and research at the end of this letter.

Ultimately, we would encourage you to take the next step and be present in person for the various conversations we will engage in the coming months and years. We cannot overstate the value of face-to-face conversations. The various documents you have received can be helpful as a conversation starter, but not as a holistic approach to the vast conversation around faith, sexuality and gender. These kinds of conversations require patience, proximity, and space.

If you have additional curiosities and questions, we encourage you to reach out to conference staff or contact a member of the PFLT for further engagement.

In closing, we wish to express our heartfelt gratitude to all MB church leaders for your engagement in this process. As we move forward in this process of discernment, we pray for continued wisdom, strength, and inspiration as you lead in your context. May God's grace continue to shine on you.

With deep gratitude,
The Provincial Faith and Life Team

Additional Resources


- a. MB Confession of Faith

<http://www.mennonitebrethren.ca/resource/the-mb-confession-of-faith-detailed-edition/>

- b. Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application

<http://cmbs.mennonitebrethren.ca/theological-resources/1999-mennonite-brethren-confession-of-faith-current/>

- c. Loving Well Resource - NFLT

 Loving Well Resource 3.6 April 2022 CDS.pdf

- d. God Sex and Church: A theology of healthy sexuality

<http://studyconference.mennonitebrethren.ca/2014/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Study-Guide-2015-letter-sized.pdf>

- d. A Theological Summary Of Human Sexuality (IVCF)

<https://www.scribd.com/document/326684433/InterVarsity-Christian-Fellowship-Theology-of-Human-Sexuality-Paper>

- e. NFLT Pamphlet Series

- i. [A more excellent way: Christian marriage in the world](#)
- ii. [When marriages fail](#)
- iii. [Why not just live together?](#)

- f. The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender

- i. Pastoral Papers

1. https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources?field_product_category_tid=1

- ii. Podcasts

1. https://www.centerforfaith.com/podcast?field_product_category_tid=7

- iii. Books

1. https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources?field_product_category_tid=4

- iv. iv. Recommended resources
 - 1. https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources?field_product_category_tid=5
- v. Online Courses
 - 1. <https://ondemand.centerforfaith.com/>
- g. Recommended books for further study on marriage & sexuality from a historical Christian view:
 - i. Marriage, Scripture, and the Church Theological Discernment on the Question of Same-Sex Union by Darrin Synder Belousek
<http://bakerpublishinggroup.com/books/marriage-scripture-and-the-church/399250>
 - ii. People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue by Preston Sprinkle (Zondervan, 2015).
 - iii. Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality, by Wesley Hill (Zondervan, 2016)
 - iv. Sprinkle, Preston. Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?: 21 Conversations from a Historically Christian View David C Cook.
 - v. Bunt, Andrew. Finding Your Best Identity. IVP. 2022
 - vi. vi. Sprinkle, Preston M.. Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say. David C Cook.
 - vii. A War of Loves: The Unexpected Story of a Gay Activist Discovering Jesus, (Zondervan) 2018
 - viii. Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church edited by Preston M. Sprinkle (2016).
- h. Recommended books to understand an affirming perspective³
 - i. Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate by Justin Lee (2013).
 - ii. God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-sex Relationships by Matthew Vines, (2014).
 - iii. Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships by Karen Keen
 - iv. Unclobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality by Colby Martin

³ Though these books do not represent our shared MB understanding and practice, we add these resources for the sake of a fair and thorough engagement of this discussion.

v. Letter to My Congregation, Second Edition: An evangelical pastor's path to embracing people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender into the company of Jesus by Ken Wilson (2016)

i. Recommended videos & podcasts for further reflection

- i. [Bruce Miller with BCMB pastors](#). Bruce led some of our BCMB pastors through a day of teaching around developing a biblically faithful inclusion model for your church. Time was given to process input and develop ministry guidelines, values and inclusion parameters.
- ii. [Let's Talk About \[Homo\]sexuality](#) Two Christian gay men respectfully debate if gay and lesbian Christians ought to be celibate or if they are free to embrace same sex marriage.
- iii. [Ask NT Wright Anything - Episode #13 - Christian sexual ethics, homosexuality, and transgender](#)
- iv. Theology in the Raw podcast: “[#901 - The Historically Christian View of Marriage: Part 1](#)” and “[#902 - The Historically Christian View of Marriage: Part 2](#)”
- v. [A Time to Listen - LGBTQ+ stories of the MB church](#)
June 24, 2021 | September 22, 2021 | January 12, 2022 | June 8, 2022
- vi. [Pray Away](#). Available on Netflix. Ex-leaders and a survivor of the conversion therapy movement speak out about its harm to the LGBTQ+ community.

j. Recommended articles & websites

- i. [“Doing Process Well: Recommendations for Brethren Congregations”](#) by Carol Wise (2010).
- ii. <https://spiritualfriendship.org/> Musings on God, sexuality, relationships
- iii. [“15 Reasons for Affirming Same-Sex Relations - and 15 Responses”](#) by Preston Sprinkle
- iv. [“What Is Marriage For? Tracing God's Plan from Genesis to Revelation](#) by N.T. Wright (2014).
- v. [A Glossary of terms -](#) A reference for understanding the language of the LGBTQ+ community.