



---

Home

Past Issues

Authors

Bibliographies

Submissions

Letters to the Editor

Subscriptions

About

Subscribe

---

## WITH ALL DELIBERATE SPEED

[Rachel Waltner Goossen](#)

[Issue 2019, vol. 73](#)

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 says:

To everything there is a season,  
and a time to every purpose under the heaven:  
A time to be born, a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;  
A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

A time to rend, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;

A time of war, and a time of peace.

Thank you for this invitation to be with you this morning and to bring a message of Good News! It's good to be among friends.

The sense of welcome that you extend is expressed in the statement that's included every week in your bulletin: *"Bethel College Mennonite Church welcomes into fellowship and membership all persons who confess faith in Jesus Christ, without regard to their race, ethnic background, gender, age, sexual orientation, education, ability, and other factors which give rise to discrimination and marginalization."*

The history behind this Welcoming Statement dates back more than 15 years. Nudged by the Seekers Sunday school class and others, this congregation took up a discernment process around how to extend welcome, especially to those whose sexual orientation put them on the margins of most Christian places of worship. While there was animated discussion over the parameters of this statement, for years now it has signified, up-front, a stance of inclusivity. A question that this congregation likely wrestles with is: How are these words lived out and put into visible expression in an ongoing way? How proactive are we in walking with people who've been marginalized in various ways?

The Christian ethicist David Gushee – most closely associated with Baptist theological institutions – in his recent book *Changing Our Mind* calls on fellow Christians to end the marginalization of people identifying as LGBTQ in congregations and church settings. He says that many evangelicals, historically and on up to the present, have “inflicted a damaging and *ultimately unchristlike body of Christian tradition, amounting to . . . a teaching of contempt, against sexual minorities.*” He continues:

“This teaching of contempt has been grounded in what is actually a relatively small number of biblical texts, as they have been interpreted by Christian leaders. ... The church’s anti-gay teaching was comprehensive. The church taught a disdain for LGBTQ people as a whole and all individuals in the group. ... The church at times was willing to welcome individual LGBTQ people into its fellowship, but this welcome was equivocal [that is, cautious, guarded]. LGBTQ people were often relegated to second-class status, surfacing especially in relation to questions of leadership in the church. ... [And] when LGBTQ people were excluded or targeted by the state, few Christians could be found who would stand up for [them].”<sup>1</sup>

Gushee concludes with this challenge to the broader church: Those who are being discriminated against in religious spaces and communities don’t like to wait long for those harming them to stop, and they shouldn’t have to.<sup>2</sup>

Within Mennonite contexts, in Mennonite Church USA and our own Western District Conference, conflicts and exclusion have most recently not centered on membership of LGBTQ-identified people in our congregations – membership is accepted in many places. But controversies have been intense over same-sex marriage and the hiring, licensing, and ordination of openly queer pastors.

Here too, discrimination is harmful. Many Mennonite congregations in the United States are integrating and embracing LGBTQ members and voices, but the progress has been, and continues to be, slow. Hiring practices and licensing opportunities for LGBTQ candidates in Mennonite settings lag behind those of more progressive denominations. This is problematic not just because it signals discrimination against qualified people who feel called to ministry. It also contributes to disillusionment and disengagement from the Mennonite church among those who regard discrimination based on sexual orientation as untenable.

In the Western District, some pastors have officiated marriage ceremonies of LGBTQ couples, and certainly this will continue, following the landmark 2015 U.S.

Supreme Court case that legalized same-sex marriage. Yet many LGBTQ persons in Mennonite congregations, while embracing new opportunities at this moment in our denominational history, are also weary from painful experiences of exclusion. And certainly, Mennonites are not alone in bearing such costs – conflicts over LGBTQ inclusion and exclusion run through mainline and evangelical Protestantism and in Catholic faith communities, as well.<sup>3</sup>

Our sermon title this morning, “With All Deliberate Speed,” references the Supreme Court’s phrase in another, earlier, civil rights case, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Back in 1954, the court unanimously struck down segregation policies in public schools, not only here in Kansas but across the nation. The justices knew that Southern segregationists were poised to resist a sweeping legal decision that would place brown and black children in schools with white children. With this coming turmoil looming, the justices ordered lower federal courts to “enter such orders and decrees” ... to admit to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed. ...<sup>4</sup>

From 1954 onward, as civil rights advocates sought to implement this decision, they worried that the phrase “all deliberate speed” was code-language for “slow” – and that those white segregationists resisting the new inclusive mandate for schools would be allowed drag out the integration process for years. They had reason to worry: The process of desegregation would take a very long time to put into practice. The case’s lead attorney, Thurgood Marshall, was dismayed by this court language. When asked what he thought of the words “all deliberate speed,” he lamented, “It means ‘S-L-O-W.’”<sup>5</sup>

Regarding LGBTQ justice, it’s clear that there has been somewhat of an evolution in our own Mennonite churches, though slower, certainly, than in our broader North American culture. Consider, for example, the experiences of Mennonite theologian and biblical scholar John Rempel, who came out gradually – at least to himself and a few trusted friends – as a gay man while in his 40s, after his marriage to a woman had ended in divorce. (At the time, he was chaplain at Conrad Grebel University College in Ontario.) Through the 1990s, he pastored the Manhattan Mennonite

Fellowship in New York City with few people aware of his sexual orientation and his struggles with expressing that sexual identity. Mennonite Central Committee, with whom he held a part-time position at the United Nations office in New York, did not know he was gay. In 2003, when he joined the faculty of Associated (now Anabaptist) Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Indiana, he cultivated a quiet sensibility – among those who worked with him – that he was celibate in his Christian call to ministry. During his decade at the seminary in the early 2000s, he was “out” to seminary students, some of whom came to him for counsel, though even then, he was reticent. “I didn’t push that,” he remembers, “but I tried to be responsive.”

Now in semi-retirement, and with the freedom to pursue occasional preaching and writing assignments without losing his professional identity or a salaried job, Rempel says, “There’s been a sea change in North American culture.” As a result, he’s become more transparent about his identity as a gay man, and also more convinced than he was, earlier in his life, about how this identity connects with his theological stance. “Why has the church become fixated on the question of sexual identity,” he asks, “when there are a host of issues crying out for attention? Some things we won’t resolve, and we have to live with them. Why can’t we live with this one?”<sup>6</sup>

What about in this congregation? In this Kansas context? One of this congregation’s longtime, faithful members, for decades, was Ruth Linscheid. She was the parent of a gay son who became a Mennonite minister. Ruth’s steady voice, in letters to the editors of Mennonite papers and beyond, repeatedly called for churches, agencies and institutions to be places where each person, queer or straight, could freely exercise their gifts – intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, reflecting the goodness of God’s creation, sharing Christ’s love.

Over the past several years, researching the experiences of Mennonite leaders who identify as queer, I’ve gradually moved into some of the circles that Ruth and her fellow allies advocated for, beginning in the 1980s and ’90s. As a result of the work done by Ruth and many others, including those in the Supportive Communities Network (SCN), some Mennonite and Brethren church leaders who identify as LGBTQ, long cast out, expelled, are finding their way back into these denominations.

They're experiencing reconciliation. And this "Good News" story is occurring just as other, younger, leaders are graduating from seminaries and beginning positions as new pastors and chaplains and theologians. They are navigating leadership positions in welcoming spaces, not just with half-measures, but as productive, licensed-and-ordained leaders. This indeed is good news!

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 3, we are reminded of contrasts, of dissonance, of time passing:

"A time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn, and a time to dance; . . . .  
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak."

What can we learn from Christians among us who identify as LGBTQ? When is it the right time to build up an inclusive church, where all are valued and the gifts of all are embraced? For those of us who are allies, when is "the right time" to speak?

LGBTQ Mennonite leaders are, on the whole, hopeful for future change within the church, yet many are also weary and troubled by histories of personal and collective trauma and violence. During the past two years, I've interviewed more than two dozen LGBTQ-identified Mennonite and Anabaptist leaders who are seminary trained (some of them currently engaged in the Mennonite church; others who have left). Amplifying their voices is what I want to do as an ally, and I invite you to join me in listening carefully to them.

I'll close this morning, with a glimpse into the life and witness of Anita Fast, a thoughtful, committed Christian living in Vancouver, British Columbia. She has a seminary degree and is pursuing a career as registrar at Vancouver School of Theology. She grew up in a Mennonite church in Ontario, and completed her studies at Goshen College in Indiana, leaving the church for a time. From a young age, she had identified as a lesbian. As a young adult, she moved to British Columbia, and eventually joined Christian Peacemaker Teams, where she served as a volunteer in Hebron, in the West Bank.

When that assignment had ended and she returned to British Columbia, she wanted to find a Mennonite congregation where she could be “out” from the start. She had a partner. To her great joy, a congregation within an hour’s drive of Vancouver, of just over 100 members, Langley Mennonite Fellowship, offered a mostly welcoming place for her to worship and share her speaking gifts. At the time – this was around 2007 – Anita was in her 30s, and she told the congregation: “It isn’t necessary for me that everyone here be open and affirming, but rather to know that I am walking a faithful journey with God. And that we can journey together, even though we’re not in the same place.”

Anita felt called to leadership, but when she began to preach and lead worship, individuals both within and beyond Langley Mennonite Fellowship questioned the congregation’s teachings and practices. Langley Mennonite Fellowship then embarked on a two-year discernment process. During that time, Anita’s fellow churchgoers decided that she wouldn’t be asked to lead worship or preach until the community made a decision, through a painstaking method of consensus. She recalls: “That was a very difficult process for me, and it was also a time in which I was blessed. I experienced a lot of God’s grace. ... People were being guided by ‘what is faithful for us as a community?’ rather than being driven by fear.”

In the end, the Langley congregation’s process of consensus led to one man standing aside. He said, “I don’t agree, but I’m not going to stand in the way.” And a couple of people left the church. At that point, the Langley congregation wrote a welcoming statement, explicitly saying that they would not discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity in matters of church leadership and worship. At that point, the congregation’s regional body, the Mennonite Conference of British Columbia, threatened sanctions against the congregation. Langley Mennonite Fellowship, however, stood by its discernment decisions, and in the end, the Mennonite Conference of British Columbia did not take its threatened steps to dismember the congregation from the wider conference.<sup>7</sup>

Now, a decade later, Anita is still part of the congregation. She’s raising her 11-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son there. Her journey continues, with a sense of

gratitude for spiritual sustenance in that Langley Mennonite congregation, but also a sense of challenges that lie ahead as her children approach their teenage years.

She explains, “My biggest difficulty in raising my kids in B[ritish] C[olumbia], in [Mennonite circles], is that they are likely to run into homophobia. I feel quite protective of them. My daughter is starting to think or hear about these things, so I have to tell her that a lot of Christians, and a lot who she will meet, think that it’s not OK for two women to be married, or be together. And that is very confusing for her, because the question for her is, ‘Well, then why are you involved in the church?’” Reflecting on her own decades-long journey, Anita Fast laments that the two most significant calls God gives one – a covenanted relationship and a call to leadership – are off limits to historically marginalized Christians, in many, many churches.<sup>8</sup>

All deliberate speed?

We Mennonites, with varied congregations and conferences, and our confession of faith, reflect multiple expectations and varied practices, across time and across our communities and regions. Our practices of inclusion and exclusion of LGBTQ-identified leaders are not set in stone. They’re not fixed. And so people seeking to use their gifts and talents, including those like John Rempel and Anita Fast who resonate deeply – in their bones – with Anabaptist identity and theology continue to bump up against barriers and discriminatory policies and practices.

Again, the Ecclesiastes verses lay out the turns and twists in journeys, calling people of faith to live into change:

“A time to break down, and a time to build up . . . .  
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”

As Christians, we have been “deliberating” for some time. It’s been a slow process. May God grant us the wisdom and grace to move forward with “all speed” as followers of Christ’s way, building up our communities and speaking out to embrace the gifts of all.

*Rachel Waltner Goossen is a professor of history at Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas. She gave the annual Menno Simons Lectures at Bethel College, Oct. 21-22, 2018. Before delivering the first of the three lectures that evening, she preached this sermon at Bethel College Mennonite Church the morning of Oct. 21.*

## NOTES

---

1. David P. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind* (Canton, Mich.: Read the Spirit Books, 2017), 132-33.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 14. Emphasis added.
3. On recent developments in Catholicism, see John Gehring, “Can the Catholic Church ‘Evolve’ on LGBT Rights?” *New York Times*, 5 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/opinion/pope-francis-catholic-church-lgbt.html>
4. Quoted in Charles J. Ogletree, “All Deliberate Speed,” *InProgress*, 12 April 2004, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/general/news/2004/04/12/660/all-deliberate-speed/>
5. *Ibid.*
6. John Rempel interview via Skype, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, 14 Nov. 2017, audio recording in the author’s possession.
7. Anita Fast e-mail to author, 13 Nov. 2018, in the author’s possession.
8. Anita Fast phone interview, Vancouver, B.C., 10 Aug. 2017, audio recording in the author’s possession.

---

© 2019 Mennonite Life | All Rights Reserved

Hosted by: [Bethel College](#)  
[mennonite-life@bethelks.edu](mailto:mennonite-life@bethelks.edu)