

By Joe Roos, Pastor, Hyattsville Mennonite Church

The twenty-five of us here from Hyattsville Mennonite Church and our sisters and brothers back home are deeply saddened by today's vote. And I suspect that most of you, whether you voted for or against discipline, are saddened, too. This has been a hard and painful process for all of us to go through.

The issue of church membership and gay and lesbian Christians, especially those in committed relationships, is complex and not easy to talk about. It raises fears and anxieties and passions whose strength and source we don't often comprehend. It involves understanding and balancing complex theological, biblical, ecclesial, pastoral and relational issues. With today's vote the majority of delegates have attempted to resolve this matter within Allegheny by silencing our voting voice and viewing us as unworthy to hold responsible elected positions within the conference and the denomination. We firmly disagree with that decision and leave today with heavy hearts.

Other conferences in the Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada have struggled with the same issue and have chosen a different path. While affirming the church's teaching position on human sexuality, they have also chosen to affirm diversity among their congregations and to respect different voices within the conference by not making this membership issue a measure of faithfulness or a matter of who is in and who is out, who is okay and who is not. We wish Allegheny had chosen that path as well.

Hyattsville has heard your March 5 counsel and acknowledge this action taken against us today. But we can still do no other than to stand with our gay and lesbian sisters and brothers in Christ and to continue to receive into membership anyone who confesses Jesus as their Lord and Savior, just as we have for the past nineteen years. We say that not out of a spirit of defiance but as a confession of what we feel God has led our congregation to be.

We do want to affirm the desire and considerable effort of conference leadership and delegates to make this process as fair as possible for all parties. Maybe this or that could have been done better by conference or by Hyattsville or by others, but we know that everyone involved has tried to act with fairness, love and integrity. We are most grateful for that.

But in disciplining Hyattsville this issue will nonetheless not go away for Allegheny or for the Mennonite Church USA. It will come up again. And when it does, we hope one dimension of the process will go differently next time. We hope there will be a concerted effort to make sure that some small groupings of people in congregations who have different perspectives on this issue will sit down together, as brothers and sisters in Christ, for face-to-face dialogue, not so much to convince each other of their point of view, but to listen carefully to one another, to make sure we know where we really differ as opposed to where we perceive we differ, and to discover what it is that we

do hold in common. That kind of process can build understanding and trust, even if no one changes their mind. That kind of conversation is also our understanding of the intention of the church's teaching position encouraging loving dialogue.

As we depart today, those of us at Hyattsville want to acknowledge the pain that is here for all of us and to sincerely confess our love for each and every one of you, and for this conference. We warmly invite all of you to come and worship with us so we can keep getting to know each other better and to understand each other more fully. You will be welcomed with open arms. Our love, prayers and hopes go with you.

By Cynthia Lapp, Pastor, Hyattsville Mennonite Church

The past two years have been a struggle for all of us. The journey has not been an easy one. The difficult conversations of the past few hours are almost the past two years in miniature. We have talked a lot during this time but there are some conversations that we still have not had.

There are some at Hyattsville Mennonite Church that desperately wish that we could have a conversation at conference about the difference between gay and lesbian people and homosexual people. This is not a conversation we have pushed for though it is one that we continue to be open to having with anyone who is interested.

We have not had a conversation about the spiritual abuse that gay and lesbian Christians experience when they are excluded from the body of Christ. Just yesterday I received a letter that expressed it this way:

I weep for those that would censure your congregation's witness to an inclusive membership, as I weep for those children who, as I did when I was sixteen, will turn away from religion because of the intolerance they feel is directed towards themselves and feelings they are only just beginning to understand.

We all have much to learn about being the Body of Christ. I pray that God will help us to step beyond the boundaries of our fears without judging those who still struggle with those boundaries.

I pray that the Spirit will fill us with the understanding that no two paths will be the same and that eventually we can celebrate that each person has their own distinct relationship with God.

I pray that we will be enabled to be a reflection of God's love in the world,

that the love of Jesus will transform us, and all who we come in contact with.

May the Spirit lead us as we continue to struggle to commit our own lives to a simpler, more focused life -- enveloped in and empowered by the love of God in Christ.

(The 25 Members of Hyattsville that are present sing: #72 *One is the Body in Sing the Journey.*)