

“Repent of the Sins of Homophobia”

The Rise of Queer Mennonite Leaders

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ABSTRACT: Across North America, Mennonites are widely regarded to be among the most conservative of Christian groups. But in recent decades, Mennonite understandings of LGBTQ+ identity have transformed faith communities, as the engagement of social media-conscious activists such as Pink Menno have contributed to evolving practices regarding sexual minorities in Mennonite churches. Recent ordinations and the growing visibility of queer ministers, chaplains, and theologians have led to recent schism in Mennonite Church USA, with traditionalists departing the denomination in record numbers. The decentralized nature of Mennonitism has contributed to more inclusive policies in the past two decades, although decentralization also allows exclusionary practices to persist in some churches and institutions. This article draws from oral history interviews with thirty Mennonite theologically trained LGBTQ+ leaders from across the United States and Canada. These narratives demonstrate how—in some sectors of the Mennonite community—queer and non-queer people are accelerating changes in historically homophobic spaces.

KEYWORDS: Mennonite, LGBTQ+, Queer, Schism, Shunning, Homophobia, Anabaptism, Denomination, Leadership, Ordination

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The Mennonite preacher Randall Spaulding has a long resumé as a musician, songwriter, and compiler of hymnals used by congregations throughout the United States and Canada. In the early 2000s, he came out as gay in mid-career. Although the congregation that he led—Covenant Mennonite in Sarasota, Florida—stood by him, his denomination, Mennonite Church USA, forced Spaulding off the binational hymnbook committee he was chairing. Meanwhile, area Mennonite conference leaders in the southeast revoked his ministerial credentials: a painful ousting that Spaulding regarded as excommunication. Over the next several years, he received a Master of Divinity degree at Yale University, became affiliated with the Unitarian Universalists, and served as an oncology chaplain. Yet, in a surprising coda to his career path and religious calling, he accepted a position as pastor of Boulder Mennonite Church in Colorado in 2017. He has retained his credentials with the Unitarian Universalists, even as Mountain States Mennonite Conference, a regional Mennonite body, arranged for a celebrative service in 2019 to ordain him to ministry.¹

Spaulding's narrative, with unanticipated twists and turns spanning the 1980s to the present, illuminates recent developments in a progressive branch of the Mennonite church. Over the past two decades, ministers and others identifying as LGBTQ+, together with their allies, have brought about enormous changes in Mennonite Church USA, the largest body of Mennonites in the country. Since Mennonite Church USA's founding in 2002 as a merger of two historic Mennonite bodies, the stance of leaders on LGBTQ+ identity has emerged as the single most important criteria for how lines are drawn among Mennonites in North America.²

In recent decades, the ways in which Mennonites engage with LGBTQ+ identity have shifted as a result of leadership by people who publicly describe themselves as gay, lesbian, or queer. Membership of LGBTQ+ individuals is accepted in many Mennonite congregations, and some pastors have officiated marriage ceremonies for queer couples, although local and regional controversies have been intense over same-sex marriage and the licensing and ordination of openly queer ministerial candidates. Veteran pastor Joanna Harader, who identifies as an ally and is known across Mennonite Church USA for officiating at same-sex marriage ceremonies, muses: "In my ideal world, [non-queer] Mennonites will repent of the sins of homophobia."³ Many Mennonites who identify as queer remain hopeful for future change, yet are weary from histories of personal and collective trauma. The contours of their experiences are shared by faith practitioners far beyond Mennonitism. Struggles for LGBTQ+ leadership in North American Mennonite contexts resemble battles within other denominations. Historically, the excommunication of queer people—including pastors and pastoral candidates—is not limited to Mennonites. Nor are stories of celebration and

inclusivity, also a significant part of this recent history, limited to Mennonites. To the contrary, the chronicling of enmeshed religious and sexual identities carries wide relevance.

Just as earlier twentieth century debates among Mennonite groups focused on salaried versus lay ministerial positions, divorce, and women in leadership, attitudes toward people who identify as queer have come to signify what it means to be a Mennonite “leader” in the twenty-first century. For some, including anti-queer members who have left Mennonite Church USA, longstanding debates about inclusion of queer people have devolved into an in-or-out game, with heteronormativity a crucial component of defining what it means to be Mennonite. Yet, as queer Mennonite leaders’ narratives attest, this dichotomy has fallen away. There are other ways of defining Mennonite identity. Among my interviewees are theologians, ethicists, and other scholars whose generative research in queer theory, conflict transformation, and related fields is poised to shape Mennonites’ and others’ religious practices in the years ahead. Their oral histories illuminate patterns and strategies by which Mennonites are stretching theological understandings and denominational structures in new directions.

As a historian and member of Mennonite Church USA, my response to the long-dominant dynamics of excluding queer leaders and to the gradual, uneven shift away from marginalizing people who identify as queer has been to gather oral histories of queer Mennonite leaders.⁴ My work as a United States social historian has long centered on the intersections of religious pacifism with feminist scholarship. I do not identify as queer, but I gravitate toward strategies that counter the exclusion of individuals by documenting the perspectives of queer people. Moving into this scholarship has opened a new chapter for me as a historian, as I have sought to apply my research and writing as one mode of working toward allyship.

While a new generation of queer individuals and their allies seek the transformation of Mennonite tenets and institutions toward an approach embracing the full range of sexual identities, their efforts have been complicated by both the foundationally decentralized character of Mennonite church structures and the deep fissures between groups of Mennonites in contemporary practice. The decentralized character of the church—a legacy of Anabaptist tradition—has meant that the work of changing practices and policies must be engaged at a local, congregation-by-congregation level. That change is often accompanied by schism: the breaking away of members to form new groups or to unite with adjacent believers. At the same time, the divisions among Mennonite congregations reflect historical processes occurring over more than three centuries of faith and practice across North America.

Traditionally, Mennonite groups and related Anabaptist sects have been largely rural communities whose commitment to nonresistance

and related religious tenets, including refusal to swear allegiance to the state and to participate in military service, led to widespread social conservatism reinforced by close boundary maintenance (for example, encouraging young adults to marry within the Mennonite faith tradition). Still, the gradual development of more urban Mennonite congregations, as well as many North American Mennonites' embrace of higher education and a range of progressive and social justice causes, complicates the picture. In the contemporary world, a deep divide exists between socially conservative, still largely agrarian Mennonite communities that remain resistant to change and to acceptance of queer members and leaders, and a more urban, progressive range of congregations that have, albeit slowly, come to embrace such change.

While the broader Anabaptist/Mennonite milieu encompasses a spectrum of disparate groups, from ultraconservative horse-and-buggy folk to highly educated congregations in most major North American cities, my project focuses largely on progressives.⁵ The oral histories I have collected reveal how complex the negotiations have been inside and outside the church, as queer leaders seek to shift Mennonite understandings of issues of sexual identity, and, in some cases, to find alternative, less heteronormative sites to practice their faith. Some of these leaders left the church temporarily, even for decades, to explore not only their queerness, but also their Christian faith before returning with broadened perspectives to Mennonite settings. The wider cultural movement for LGBTQ+ rights from the 1970s through the early 2000s and beyond was highly influential, as Mennonite individuals interacted with non-Mennonite activists to conceptualize alliances for social struggle within the church.⁶

Over the past four years, I have conducted interviews with thirty Mennonite leaders in Canada and the United States—ranging in age from 24 to 80—who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer.⁷ Many of them hold positions as pastors, chaplains, theologians, and church administrators in Mennonite-affiliated institutions, or did so previously.⁸ In studying the recent past, scholars of religious movements may lament the absence of hindsight, but the trade-off is a welcome analytic tool of another sort. Research into new movements welling up from within established ecclesiastical traditions incorporates conversation partners with deep investments in this scholarship.⁹ Carol Wise, director of the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests, an advocacy network based in Minneapolis, notes that only very recently have scholars engaged the histories of queer Mennonites and others who identify as Anabaptist. Oral histories and other efforts to document these lives, she argues, are "very exciting; it means we've moved into a whole different kind of era."¹⁰

The interviews make clear that in the twenty-first century, the marginalization of queer leaders is no longer the standard, uncontested

response of Mennonite laity. Erica Lea-Simka, an ordained American Baptist and Mennonite pastor in Albuquerque and one of the first openly queer clergy to lead a Mennonite Church USA congregation, offers a candid rationale for wanting to go on record with her narrative: “There is comfort in being un-silenced.”¹¹ In these oral histories are stories of marginalization that, over time, have prompted individuals to act in a variety of ways. Some departed Mennonite congregations and institutions. Others, like Lea-Simka, have arrived from related Protestant traditions, drawn by a mix of factors, including affinity for Anabaptist theology and congregationally-based decision-making.¹²

Progressive Mennonites in North America—along with mainline Christian faith communities, Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative Judaism, and other religious groups—have created some welcoming spaces for LGBTQ+-identifying adherents who, in earlier eras, experienced hostility and stigmatization.¹³ My work builds on the scholarship of Gillian Frank and others in investigating how particular faith communities have invigorated cultural expressions of sexual liberalism, often drawing from political organization strategies expanding gay rights in urban communities and beyond.¹⁴ In North American Mennonite contexts, this phenomenon represents a new development in a centuries-old Christian tradition. Yet Mennonites rarely appear in scholarship addressing religious expressions that challenge heterosexism and homophobia. Far more common is what one literary critic terms “the usual Mennonite trope of leaving the community because of its restrictions.”¹⁵ Interviews with LGBTQ+ Mennonite leaders reveal a story of many Mennonites leaving, but in some instances coming back and reformulating what it means to be part of the church in the first place.

HISTORIES OF SCHISM AND DENOMINATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The practice of shunning—the act of persistently avoiding, ignoring, or rejecting someone—has resonance for queer Mennonites, both in the context of contemporary churchwide struggles around sexual identity, and centuries-old antecedents to Anabaptist expression. Shunning is usually associated with premodern eras, not with contemporary Mennonite life. But we can trace historic linkages. The Mennonites and their coreligionists, the Amish, are among the historic peace churches, along with the Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Church of the Brethren. Rooted in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, the earliest Anabaptists (or, “re-Baptizers”) broke from Roman Catholicism for many of the same theological rationales articulated by Martin Luther and contemporaries who sought to reform Christendom. But the Anabaptists’ insistence on believers’—or,

adult—baptism, and their refusal to use the sword, based on their readings of Jesus' nonviolence, branded them as radical heretics even among Lutheran and Reformed church leaders as well as by Catholic authorities.¹⁶ Over the next five centuries, trans-Atlantic migration of hundreds of thousands of Anabaptist Christians led to the formation of denominations that split, and split again, over issues of biblical authority, accommodation to technological innovation, and leadership disputes, yielding a dizzying array of Mennonite and related groups that kept mainline Protestantism at arm's length, despite historic relationships and theological congruence.¹⁷ A 2019 census of Anabaptist groups in the United States lists sixty-seven distinct Mennonite, Brethren, and Amish groups, with constituent congregations ranging from more than 800, on the one hand (in the largest body, Mennonite Church USA), to just a single congregation (Mennonite Evangelical Church), on the other.¹⁸ In the twenty-first century, schism remains a common response to sociological developments and conflicts over authority in the more conservative branches of Mennonitism. And yet despite their schism-prone past and relatively small numbers, Mennonites' historic insistence on the separation of church and state, and their push for legal recourse to conscientious objection during times of military conscription, have influenced both broader North American religious culture and the wider public sphere.¹⁹

In addition to schism, impulse for mission has historically characterized North American Mennonite churches. From the nineteenth century onward, many more groups have come into the fold, bringing different racial and ethnic identities, ideas, and cultural contexts: African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans across geographic locales, as well as immigrant-focused churches serving Vietnamese, Chinese, Indonesians, and others. By the last two decades of the twentieth century, the diverse spectrum of Mennonite groups across North America encompassed congregations supportive of openly gay and lesbian members, as well as churches intensely critical of sexual liberalism.²⁰

Notably, the Germantown church in Philadelphia, the oldest Mennonite congregation in North America, developed a reputation for embracing sexual minorities. Beginning in the 1980s, the Germantown Mennonite Church offered membership to lesbian and gay individuals, a move that eventually led to its ouster from the two regional Mennonite conference bodies with which it had affiliated. Through the 1990s, Germantown leaders insisted on transparency in communicating their inclusive membership policies to denominational officials, including the regional Franconia Mennonite Conference, a district of the binational Mennonite Church denomination. As tensions intensified and Franconia Mennonite Conference expelled the Germantown congregation in 1997, Germantown congregants came to regard the broader

denominational expectation of “don’t ask, don’t tell” as “deeply flawed and spiritually vacuous.”²¹ Accordingly, the Germantown Mennonites repudiated the regional conference body by insisting on congregational policies welcoming queer membership and leadership.

At the time, Germantown Mennonites were still affiliated with another regional body, the Eastern District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church, which was regarded as the most progressive Mennonite denomination in North America. But by 2001, the Germantown Mennonites also faced expulsion from the Eastern District Conference for welcoming lesbian and gay members. Undeterred, the Germantown Mennonite congregation took steps to become part of the newly forming Mennonite Church USA in 2002, at the time of the denomination’s incorporation. However, Germantown was disallowed from joining the new denomination, as historian Richard Lichty argues, “for being the kind of welcoming faith community the Germantown congregation feels called to be.”²² The Germantown congregation’s response to this broader denominational stigmatization led it to a new, emergent expression of a long-established tradition: Mennonite faith and practice with congregants openly identifying as queer, free from denominational oversight and censure. In this regard, the Germantown congregation served as a bellwether: a Mennonite church kicked out of area conferences over LGBTQ+ inclusion, establishing a pattern that had not existed before, but that in the twenty-first century came to dominate the denominational news cycle.

In the past decade, discord and splintering over LGBTQ+ marriage and the ordination of queer pastors within Mennonite Church USA has prompted disapproving factions to vote with their feet and depart the denomination.²³ Rhetorician Bradley G. Siebert, a close observer of this schism, suggests that some conservative conferences and congregations “have now inverted the Mennonite tradition of shunning and chosen to withdraw from the denomination rather than bear its internal tension.”²⁴ Since 2002, when Mennonite Church USA formed, membership has fallen sharply, from more than 120,000 members to just over 69,000, a loss of more than forty percent. In 2015, for example, Lancaster, its largest area conference with 163 congregations, voted to exit the denomination.²⁵

On this schism-in-the-making, Ervin Stutzman, who served as executive director of Mennonite Church USA from 2010 to 2018, laments: “It’s a polarizing thing. The way I see it now is that the current practice is a compromise, from both sides. Any time you have a compromise, you have an unstable situation. And it will likely shift. Because [advocacy groups] and others will press to the point where you have to have full inclusion in every way, and I think if that happens, our overall denomination will indeed shrink to the size of the people who are willing to live

with that, which would be smaller than we are right now. That's what I think will happen, if the present trend continues."²⁶ Stutzman's characterization of queer activists and their allies pushing hard and gaining ground is a remarkable acknowledgment of the defining struggle of his tenure, in which LGBTQ+ critics derided his management as obstructionist. As the denomination's lead administrator for nearly a decade, Stutzman developed a reputation for trying to appease the church's theologically conservative wing, with which he had been closely identified prior to the denomination's birth in 2002.

During the late twentieth century, Stutzman's status in the Lancaster Mennonite Conference had brought him into conflict with congregants seeking credentialing for women in ministry, a controversy that presaged the struggle for LGBTQ+ ministerial recognition. In 1998, for example, a young Pennsylvanian named Theda Good, who had grown up on a Lancaster-area farm, was one of four female applicants for ministerial licensing, each of whom had the support of local Mennonite bishops for becoming credentialed in their ministry with Mennonite churches. In her interview, Good recalls: "The bishop board of Lancaster Conference decided on all our requests at once and denied them all. Ervin Stutzman was moderator of Lancaster Conference at that time and the leader of that bishop group, and they decided to put a five-year moratorium on credentialing women for ministerial leadership."²⁷ More than a decade later, after she had come out as a lesbian, attained a graduate degree in theology, and moved to Denver, Good became the first openly queer pastor in Mennonite Church USA to celebrate ordination to ministry. In her interview, she recounted: "Initially, I just wanted the job. I didn't care about credentials; I was thrilled to be hired at the church in Denver. It was a lifelong dream I thought would never happen, because when [my wife] Dawn and I got together, I thought that was the nail in the coffin for me ever being in ministry. I assumed Mennonite Church USA would never take me; I wasn't clinging to that."²⁸

Encouraged by her congregation and allies, however, in 2013 Good embarked on a discernment process toward licensure in the Mountain States Mennonite Conference. As a result, she became the first openly LGBTQ+ Mennonite in the country to be licensed for ministry. Outcry across the denomination was palpable, less because of her gender than because she was queer.²⁹ Thrust into the limelight, Good turned down interview requests from *Time* and *Huffington Post*, avoiding publicity because she doubted that speaking to the press would move the denomination forward for LGBTQ+ rights. Additionally, she was sensitive about causing embarrassment for members of her extended family.³⁰ After the controversy surrounding her licensing to ministry subsided, other queer Mennonites' credentialing for leadership occasioned less churchwide uproar, as well as less attention in the press. A few years later, in her interview with me, she commented wryly, "I've been eager for



Figure 1. *Theda Good (in rainbow stole) at her ordination in Denver, December 2016. Courtesy Theda Good*

company.”³¹ Finding humor amid the turmoil, she added, is vital. She had not forgotten Ervin Stutzman’s antifeminist response to her and other women’s petitions for ministerial credentials nearly two decades earlier, a repetitive pattern of white male privilege that she associated with his later administration’s obfuscating policies toward LGBTQ+ pastoral candidates seeking employment across Mennonite Church USA. “Our joke among queer pastors,” she told me, “is that [our job applications] are in Ervin’s sock drawer, because we have to be in a different place!”³²

EMBLEMS OF ADVOCACY: BRETHERN MENNONITE COUNCIL AND PINK MENNO

More than forty years ago, practices validating queer religious leadership among Mennonites began with the founding of the advocacy group Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests. In the late 1970s, Martin Rock, a ten-year employee of the international relief and development agency Mennonite Central Committee, was fired after an anonymous coworker reported his sexual identity to agency administrators. After his ouster, Rock—a gay man—established the Council as an organization intended to “provide support for . . . gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and their parents, spouses, relatives, and friends; to foster dialogue between gay and nongay people in the churches; and to

provide accurate information about homosexuality from the social sciences, biblical studies, and theology."³³ As a result of Rock's advocacy, supportive ministers and laity began meeting to share spiritual resources and emotional sustenance. In 1978, for example, a workshop led by two local activists at the Rainbow Mennonite Church in Kansas City drew lesbian and gay Mennonites from across the country who spoke of their experiences as sexual minorities within broader congregational life.³⁴

The newly forming Brethren Mennonite Council was part of an upsurge of gay organizations—religious and secular—established in the last decades of the twentieth century. Some advocacy groups arose specifically to respond to the AIDS epidemic. Across the spectrum of faith-based institutions, the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ launched significant ministries to people with AIDS, and many Catholic hospitals offered compassionate care to AIDS patients.³⁵ Through the 1980s and beyond, the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests disseminated AIDS hotline information and educational resources through its newsletter to Mennonite individuals and groups. Some Mennonite pastors thoughtfully addressed AIDS, especially when the experiences of grieving parents and other family members in their congregations brought the matter close to home. A few bereaved mothers published memoirs on their sons' battles with the disease, chronicling compassionate Mennonite responses in some communities.³⁶

But for many in the North American Mennonite world, AIDS was closely intertwined with sin. In many rural and small-town Mennonite churches where awareness of AIDS came as unwelcome news about young men living far away, the crisis represented an evil, regrettable thing happening to people outside the church. Many Mennonite institutions were relatively silent on the challenges of AIDS. Doug Basinger, a lay leader who cared for friends with AIDS through his local congregation, First Mennonite Church of San Francisco, later recalled: "When I think of the men who got ill and died, they were no longer in the [broader Mennonite] church. Some had already been kicked out. Others had drifted away because they couldn't take [the homophobic culture]."³⁷

Some urban Mennonite congregations, strongly supported by Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests and progressive Mennonite church administrators, prioritized social services related to HIV/AIDS. These efforts were often ad hoc, driven by one or two Mennonites in a given community who were passionate about responding to the epidemic. Small Mennonite congregations in San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and New York lacked the capital to launch hospice programs, but they helped connect interested members and Mennonite Voluntary Service unit members (often post-college young adults) with partner agencies to assist people with HIV/



Figure 2. *Altar display for a worship service in Indiana: Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests. Courtesy Carol Wise*

AIDS. Russ Schmidt, a theologically trained Mennonite nurse, recalled that his congregation supported people with HIV/AIDS through occupational and advocacy networks: “Our members volunteered with agencies providing direct and indirect care, and others were involved in fundraising efforts (AIDS Lifecycle, AIDS WALK, Gay Men’s Chorus). We had several members who are/were living with HIV/AIDS through the years, so their stories became part of all of us.”³⁸

Since the early 2000s, the Brethren Mennonite Council’s longstanding challenges to structural exclusion and to homophobia have been augmented by a newer organization, Pink Menno, a moniker attributed to hot-pink T-shirts signifying the conspicuous presence of activists. Pink Menno’s tactics have ranged from silent vigils to film screenings and hymn-sings outside the entrances of biennial Mennonite conventions: acts of resistance to exclusionary practices. Stephanie Krehbiel, a humanities scholar who has written extensively about Mennonites and sexuality, has championed Pink Menno’s approach, telling an assembly of Mennonite college students in 2015: “If you [identify] as LGBTQ and as a Christian, or would identify as LGBTQ if it were safe for you to do so . . . know that legions of your lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender elders have already been patient and steadfast for many years so that you might have a more livable life. You do not owe any church your patience.”³⁹ Part of the Pride movement that prioritizes visibility and allyship, Pink Menno uses social media to connect queer Mennonites and supporters for direct action. The group’s website features a roster of more than seventy Mennonite churches in the United States that publicly welcome anyone regardless of gender identity or sexual expression, proclaiming: “Mennonite Church USA congregations are turning pink!”⁴⁰

Throughout its existence, Pink Menno has pressed the denomination to recognize queer individuals in ordination and fellowship, as well

as to celebrate same-sex marriage. The United States' Supreme Court ruling for marriage equality in 2015, ten years after Canadian law recognized same-sex marriage as legal across all provinces, made it easier for queer Mennonite pastors and other leaders to marry their partners. Approximately half of my interviewees, for example, indicated that they had taken advantage of public policy reversals and had legally married, in many cases following commitment ceremonies conducted years, even decades, earlier.⁴¹ The cultural shifts associated with these court rulings for marriage equality have hastened support for LGBTQ+ rights among Mennonite laity. The phenomenon of Mennonite congregations on both sides of the border publicly extending welcome to all, without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity, has accelerated over the past half-decade, with more than a hundred congregations and communities—the majority of which are affiliated with Mennonite Church USA—in a networked alliance.⁴² The national body Mennonite Church Canada, with some 31,000 members in more than two hundred congregations, recently completed a review of its policies, resulting in agreements not to expel congregations "testing the spirit" of LGBTQ+ inclusion.⁴³ With progressive Canadian Mennonites addressing institutional homophobia in ways roughly parallel to Mennonite Church USA's efforts, it becomes clear that queer leaders' experiences in the United States and Canada are similar.⁴⁴ Yet, on a global scale, Mennonite leaders who identify as queer are prominent in Europe, but LGBTQ+ membership and leadership remain controversial among adherents in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Beyond Pink Menno's origins and activism in North America, the organization has begun resisting church-sanctioned silencing on a transnational scale. At a global gathering of Mennonites in 2015, Pink Menno participants—primarily teens and young adults—exchanged information about African, European, and American settings where many Christians maintain cultural patterns of harassment and violence toward people perceived as queer. To their elders who had rejected workshop proposals acknowledging and addressing queer presence in Mennonite churches, institutions, and international agencies, these young activists asked: "How can Mennonites not bear witness to this pain of LGBTQ+ Mennonites around the world?"⁴⁵

The sustained challenges by individuals and congregations affiliated with the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests and Pink Menno have resulted in broader embrace of queer lives and queer theology in Mennonite contexts. Michelle Burkholder, a Mennonite pastor in Hyattsville, Maryland, who leads her congregation's Sunday morning services with her wife and their young son in attendance, noted in her interview: "I recall, a few years ago, discouraging someone who wondered if a queer couple should come into the Mennonite church—they were seeking a place to do ministry, and I said, no—unless you want



Figure 3. *Pink Menno demonstrators at Mennonite World Conference, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 2015. Courtesy Lisa Schirch*

to deal with all the politics, this is not a good place to come. I think I would answer differently now. It's not easy or settled, but it's changing."⁴⁶ Her reflections acknowledge that churchwide responses to activists' challenges to structural exclusion are ongoing. Spasmodic improvements in the lives of queer Mennonites and their families have come with denominational teeth-pulling. Yet over time, activists have brought about categorical changes across Mennonite Church USA, reconfiguring sanctuaries and meetinghouses as welcoming and inclusive spaces. Increasingly, for example, all-gender bathrooms are provided for members and guests in churches and other Mennonite buildings.⁴⁷ Reimagining Mennonite gathering places in this way has prompted backlash from some within the denomination, but the shifts seem irreversible.

BOUNDARY CROSSINGS, COLLECTIVELY AND INDIVIDUALLY

The licensing of Theda Good and the outcry it occasioned from Mennonite conservatives who withdrew from the denomination in protest, as well as the historic Germantown case—in which an urban twenty-first century Mennonite congregation turned to a new ecclesiastical form, unaffiliated with any hierarchical authority—raises the question: Why

have many queer Mennonites and their allies retained their religious membership even though, historically, churches have been less than affirming? While some LGBTQ+ leaders remain closeted, the clear trend is toward openness.⁴⁸ Although my research on queer Mennonitism began as an investigation of denominational loss of LGBTQ+ ministerial leaders to other faith traditions through out-migration, the oral histories reveal a more complicated and interesting story.

Yes, there are leaders who have left, some of whom who were pushed out by Mennonite conservatives who defined membership against queer identities. And in the 1980s and 1990s, at the height of the AIDS crisis, some closeted Mennonite clergy were among the loudest voices arguing against acceptance and inclusion of sexual minorities in the church.⁴⁹ But the contours of Mennonite denominations have shifted and continue to shift over time. Mennonites identifying as LGBTQ+ have long framed their experiences in and out of the church around notions of boundary crossings. In navigating church contexts, they have experienced hostility and discrimination: many within the straight majority have regarded queer presences within Mennonite communities as dispensable, indeed, as incompatible with the faith community. The harms have been personal, sometimes rupturing families and disrupting careers. One of my interviewees, a Chicago Theological Seminary student, notes: "There are generations of people who have been lost to the Mennonite church. It's hard to wrap my mind around that. How do we do that justice? How do we honor that?" She added: "[We're in what] seems like a remarkable, amazing time of so much change over the past decade—so it can be tempting to think about the 'progress' without thinking about who has been harmed, and about who did the harming."⁵⁰

In many respects, queer Mennonites resemble other queer Protestants. In *Reforming Sodom*, a 2015 survey of twentieth-century religious communities' responses to homosexuality, historian Heather White noted that "the early 1970s saw the flourishing of a series of new gay-welcoming religious organizations," which, she argued, "intersected with every sector of the gay and lesbian social movement and also crossed every major American faith tradition."⁵¹ Many lesbian and gay Protestants remained invested in their churches, mobilizing with allies in support of pastors and candidates for ordination who were being "outed" or were choosing to come out publicly. But others left. Progressive allies, along with queer family members and friends, "when asked to choose between social justice ideals and institutional loyalty . . . walked their convictions out of the churches."⁵²

When queer Mennonite leaders and their allies "walked out," where, denominationally speaking, did they go? Most of the individuals in my study who moved away from Mennonite affiliations turned to the Disciples of Christ, the United Church of Christ (UCC), and the



Figure 4. *Chaplain Carole Hull (in red plaid) at Wichita Pride, 2018. Hull, formerly a Mennonite ally of LGBTQ individuals, is now affiliated with College Hill Methodist Church in Kansas. Courtesy Brian Sutton and Carole Hull*

Unitarian Universalists. Others joined the Society of Friends or the United Methodists. Some left decades ago and have never looked back.⁵³ Others have circled again into Mennonite congregations that have, in the interim, shed exclusionary practices. Randall Spaulding, the Colorado pastor who had worked as an oncology chaplain in New Haven, Connecticut, before moving to Boulder, argues that his recent decision to lead a Mennonite congregation, following his ouster from the denomination a decade ago, is indicative of a hybrid religious identity, both Unitarian Universalist and Mennonite. His path began years ago, he recalls, when he was a young Mennonite drawn to ministry: “Back in the late 1980s, I got married because I thought ‘this is how God will heal me.’ A year into marriage, I had a kind of breakdown and talked with my wife about things that had happened, what I was dealing with—then found a counselor doing reparative therapy. That was a total disaster. [My former wife] is straight, she’s an advocate for queer rights. We divorced in 2006 after eighteen years of marriage. And my mother has been a supporter. I waited to age forty to come out. [But] I have one conservative brother who will step out of family group photos if my husband gets in the group picture.”⁵⁴ Now, as a newly ordained Mennonite minister, Spaulding says, “People have

said to me recently, in coming to Boulder, 'Glad you're back.' But I have responded that I am still part of the Unitarian Universalist faith, while serving a Mennonite congregation. I am fully both—I'm moving forward, not back."⁵⁵

These dynamics of in-and-out affiliation and religious identification are both personal and structural, as one of my respondents, Jason Frey, indicated in his interview. A young gay Mennonite drawn to religious studies since his college years in the early 2000s, he recalls: "I was feeling called to a place that didn't exist yet. Doors were opening, I was having a lot of intense experiences, and there was a feeling that I would keep moving on." Now, more than a decade later and anticipating ordination in the UCC, he describes himself as "an ecumenical Mennonite who engages other faith traditions." He adds: "The Mennonites are becoming more welcoming, but those changes are coming too late for me."⁵⁶

Following these routes of denomination-crossing, how do queer Mennonite leaders construct narratives of struggling, surviving, and thriving? What have their absences—and their critiques—meant for the North American Mennonite world, a faith tradition that has staked its identity to radical Christian nonviolence and has formed value-driven institutions—colleges, hospitals, charitable foundations, victim-offender programs, and the like—that emphasize peaceable communities? Considering individuals' experiences from cross-denominational perspectives, the oral history interviews make clear that "staying Mennonite" is not necessarily the most desirable outcome for pastoral leaders who have moved on to other faith traditions. Most who leave continue to identify culturally and theologically as Anabaptist Mennonites, even while serving in other faith communities. Some layer denominational loyalties together, choosing two faith traditions and living them as complementary, Mennonite and UCC, for example.⁵⁷

This pattern, which appears again and again in these oral histories, throws into question assumptions about what it means to be Anabaptist or Mennonite in the first place. In past centuries, these labels were synonymous with *church membership*: that is, a Mennonite was someone who belonged to a Mennonite church, just as in other Christian denominations that prioritized maintaining faith traditions over other forms of spiritual expression. And yet, this assumption runs counter to the lived experiences of individuals who embrace Mennonite identity and theological tenets.

NEGOTIATING A PLACE IN DECENTRALIZED RELIGIOUS SPACES

In my study of thirty theologically trained church leaders who identify as queer, more than one-third left the Mennonite church at some

point, due to expulsion and loss of credentials, or more commonly, in a quest for less heterocentric settings in which to pursue their personal and professional (including ministerial) lives. Their departures were a concrete, embodied response to the question posed by non-religious friends: “Why stay?” Or, as religious studies scholar Monique Moultrie puts it: “Why not just leave a community that will not accept your sexual reality?”⁵⁸ The answers vary from individual to individual. The validation that comes with belongingness to Mennonite community and religious ideals, often dating to childhood, is not easily cast aside.⁵⁹

In the intervening years, some have reconciled with Mennonite congregations and are again providing church leadership, albeit in different forms.⁶⁰ In the varieties in experience of young and old, of cradle Mennonites and just-joining Mennonites, of ministers and laity and students, legacies of LGBTQ+ exclusion over time come into focus. At age eighty, Keith Schrag, the oldest respondent in my study, lives in Ames, Iowa. His father and grandfather were Mennonite ministers in Ontario, Canada, and he had a strong sense, after college, of being called to ministry. Schrag recalls knowing then that Mennonite leadership “is my place, this is my essence, my being. Yet I had this strong, innate drive to connect in very intimate ways with men. In my sense of sexuality, I was quite alone. I did talk briefly, in about 1958, with a counselor or dean at Goshen College in Indiana. That man did not judge me; he still seemed to respect me. I got married and went to seminary. And I got affirmation as a pastor, in spite of this ‘thorn in the flesh’ that continued for decades.” By the mid-1960s, Schrag was struggling, he recalled, with how to get “victory over my sin.” Much later, after twenty-five years of marriage, he and his wife divorced; both she and their children supported him in his ministerial career and as a gay man.⁶¹

During the 1980s, Schrag’s quest for a spiritual home led to engagement for a time with the American Friends Service Committee—where he found people embracing a peace church ethos *and* accepting individuals’ queer identities. “There was no conflict between the two, and I found that immeasurably helpful,” he recalls. He also found his way to the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests and joined their board. But while pursuing ministry at Ames Mennonite Fellowship in 1987, he ran into conflict with the regional Mennonite body Central District Conference, which held responsibility for his credential. Asked whether he believed that sexual contact between men was wrong, Schrag replied that he could no longer consider this a sin, and his credential was not renewed. Central District Conference officials then informed him that he could not serve on a district-wide peace committee. At the time, he recalls thinking that for queer Mennonites like himself “there would no longer be dialogue [within the church]. That became very clear.”⁶² In the years that followed, he says: “I was connected with many gay men, many in professions, and also blue-collar, and I was part of the Gay Men’s

Coalition of Des Moines. It was as difficult to identify as a Christian, as to identify as LGBT—because so many of my male friends in those groups had also experienced pain and trauma. They couldn't understand why I would want to identify as a Christian."⁶³

Reconciliation between Schrag and the Central District Conference took place more than a quarter-century later, beginning with conversations at a celebratory event in 2015 in Chicago for LGBTQ+ persons and allies sponsored by the Brethren Mennonite Council. There, he recalls, sympathetic Mennonite pastors "became interested in my story and in arranging for reconciliation with Central District Conference. I had not been involved with [the conference] for years. But now there came warm connections. It was powerful to me. It was a homecoming."⁶⁴ Regarding his own ministry and long-ago lapsed credentials, he recalled:

I am in leadership with [the Ames Mennonite Fellowship]. Yet I am not ready to be recognized as a pastor in the denomination. I'm no longer ready to fit into boxes. I don't need to hassle with the formality of being a respected minister. I worked hard to get that label for decades; I don't want that anymore. My basic orientation of Christian faith comes from the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew. Not judging; loving enemies; this really resonated with me. I never expected to live to see the day where we are now. I know we're not perfect in Mennonite Church USA, but I think we can do better, and I want to be part of that. I think we are making some good strides. In the midst of trauma, there's grace. The older I get, I see that.⁶⁵

Another respondent, a pastor in her late twenties, entered a Mennonite seminary after growing up homeschooled and independently minded, with parents who encouraged her to find a local church that supported her interests in environmental and economic justice. As one who began affiliating with an urban Mennonite congregation as a teen, she says: "My experience is really different from the other queer Mennonites I know. I tend to be optimistic, because the church has never really hurt me. I never know if I'm naïve or simply persistent—this is the church that took me in. I like Anabaptist theology a lot. I like the crazy economic ideas at the origins of Anabaptism. The church is the locus of my theory of change." Asked about the future of Mennonite Church USA, she responded: "It really matters where you are. The Mennonites I know are a diverse group of people, and dynamics that are usually shoved under the rug are getting talked about: colonialism, heterosexism, feminism, masculinity."⁶⁶

Her experiences highlight the ways in which theologically trained leaders navigating Mennonite communities tend to find decentralized structures where possibilities for challenging institutional barriers are on the rise. In 2021, policies regarding queer leaders seeking ministerial positions are no longer as restrictive as they once were. Anabaptist

Mennonite Biblical Seminary, a leading theological institution, no longer denies Master of Divinity degrees to qualified candidates who are openly queer. And over the past decade, the institution has welcomed students who are transgender.⁶⁷ Nor does Mennonite Church USA still refuse to process Ministerial Leadership Information forms of queer candidates as a way of diverting them from the denominational hiring system.⁶⁸ But these and other policy changes are very recent, signifying markers in a denomination that retains substantial barriers to leadership. In 2019, when Laura Brenneman, a chaplain in Illinois, married her wife, her credentials for ministry were reaffirmed by a regional Mennonite conference. Yet another regional Mennonite conference that had earlier credentialed Brenneman put her licensure status “on pause.” Responding to the second conference’s deliberations, Brenneman declared: “I am Mennonite all the way down to my bone marrow. This is who I am. I’m going to claim it. I’m going to live into it absolutely.”⁶⁹

One interviewee in her thirties, pastoring a midwestern Mennonite congregation, recounted how as a college student she began to sense a strong call to ministry. From an early age she had felt attracted to both men and women, but had tamped down thoughts of being bisexual. Coming from an evangelical background, she had arrived at a Mennonite college where her new pastor, a progressive Mennonite, helped her to move away from a “love the sinner, hate the sin” mentality.⁷⁰ She began to internalize the message that “if you include and accept people, you also accept their gifts [in leadership], right?” Gradually, she has concluded that queer people inclined to leadership *should* press forward, and she pursued a path to ministry. In addition to her bisexual identity, this pastor has a Latinx surname. She says that navigating identities within her congregation can be challenging. People are generally supportive, but she has noticed that they are more likely to articulate their welcome because of her ancestry than to acknowledge her queer identity.⁷¹

INTERROGATING POWER STRUCTURES: PRESENT AND FUTURE

The oral history narratives make clear that changes have accelerated in the past decade for LGBTQ+ individuals seeking to practice faith in Mennonite settings, following broader trends in North American society. But these changes have come with significant backlash from individuals, congregations, and regional conferences determined to preserve denominational membership guidelines upholding Christian perspectives on marriage as between one man and one woman, and opposing LGBTQ+ interests in church polity and decision-making. Some within

Mennonite Church USA have called on the denomination to maintain traditional teachings on sexuality while also extending greater welcome to same-sex couples. For example, in 2018 a group of male Mennonite pastors issued a statement urging adherence to the marriage-is-between-a-man-and-a-woman mantra, noting that "we want to keep the focus on 'What do pastors teach and call persons toward?' A congregation is most defined by the stance of its leaders, not the lives of persons who are in it."⁷² Across the denomination, congregational guidance has become indelibly linked with leaders' stances on questions of inclusion and representation which span a wide range of perspectives.

Within the decentralized North American Mennonite context, some leaders—including many of the individuals interviewed for this study—look forward with hope and aspiration to a denomination that marks itself fully inclusive of sexual minorities. Others interviewed for this study find the notion of "inclusivity" to be oppressive; they express instead a vision of radically restructured Mennonite churches and institutions in the wake of toppled heterosexist norms. One of my interviewees, Annabeth Roeschley, signals a not-ever-settled sensibility in Mennonite religious life: "I'm glad that ordination is becoming more accessible for queer people, but that's not the be-all and end-all. Queer justice would revolutionize our church, it would revolutionize society. And yet, where are we? Have we ultimately restructured the kinds of systems and have we dismantled the kinds of power structures that allowed queer people to disappear quietly, and that still undermine the work of people of color?" She added: "That's what I want to keep my eye on. That's central for me, to live into this call for our church."⁷³ With the recent shift in LGBTQ+ representation and authority among progressive North American Mennonites, this sense of call widens. As the Canadian writer Alicia Dueck-Read notes, only relatively recently have Mennonites attached themselves openly to LGBTQ+ identities, and yet, "there have always been a diversity of bodies, genders, desires, and sexual practices in the history of Mennonites."⁷⁴

Such perspectives inform and alter faith communities that are seeking, in fits and starts, to come to terms with homophobic religious culture reaching back many decades. And yet, there are limits to the claims that can be made about these developments. Historians and other scholars of religion envision only dimly what legacies might emerge from denominational schism now unfolding among American Mennonites, or, for that matter, among the United Methodist Church's seven million members in the United States, where the fault lines and sites of contestation over the lives of LGBTQ+ adherents are still being drawn. Among the United Methodists, formal separation by conservatives intending to establish a new denomination is an anticipated likely outcome in 2021.⁷⁵

In the North American Mennonite context, LGBTQ+ leaders who have been expelled from Mennonite institutions or have departed in

response to discriminatory policies have accessed new church homes. Many of them have developed layered theological identities, bringing Anabaptist Mennonite tenets with them into more hospitable religious communities. In past decades, they may have been ostracized by institutional and administrative policies, but they nevertheless have carried along strains of Anabaptism with them, even after they left the Mennonite fold. And as some of these individuals choose to reconnect with Mennonite structures, the result is a convergence of once break-away leaders with Mennonite bodies, coming back to nudge denominational structures in more inclusive directions.⁷⁶

In the popular imagination, Mennonites are perhaps still regarded as among the most conservative of Protestant Christian groups. The accelerating pace of LGBTQ+ leaders arriving into and heading out from Mennonite churches and institutional life, however, has blurred the lines of denominational identification, as openly queer pastors and theologians move into positions of influence in and beyond the Mennonite church. While many sectors within the broader Anabaptist Mennonite landscape remain deeply suspicious of LGBTQ+ claims, the largest group of Mennonites in the United States is dismantling discrimination against queer members and leaders, as these narratives attest. Queer people are making history in the present, offering evidence of the tradition's transformative possibilities. The Mennonite faithful are writing the stories, and pastors are preaching the sermons, of how queer and straight lives transform schism into something new.

ENDNOTES

¹ Randall Spaulding interview with author via Skype, Boulder, CO, 8 December 2017, audio recording; "Randy Spaulding Ordination—Boulder Mennonite," Mountain States Mennonite Conference, 2 March 2019, <https://mountainstatesmc.org/andy-spaulding-ordination-boulder-mennonite/>.

² The 2002 merger brought together the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. Rich Preheim, "Mennonite Church USA," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, July 2018, https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Church_USA&oldid=161110.

³ Joanna Harader interview with author, Lawrence, KS, 27 November 2017, audio recording.

⁴ I wish to thank Clayton Koppes, Monique Moultrie, Tom Prasch, Madeline Williams, Ben Goossen, Elsa Goossen, and three anonymous readers for comments on earlier versions of this article. Additionally, audience members of the Crossing the Line Conference at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, in June 2017; the Menno Simons Lectures at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, in October 2018; and the Queer History Conference at San Francisco State University in June 2019 provided insightful suggestions and critique. Mennonite Church USA's membership is slightly more than 69,000;

"Broad Census Counts More Anabaptists," *Mennonite World Review*, 27 May 2019, pp. 1, 12.

⁵ Recently, scholars have begun to document the histories of sexually diverse Mennonite, Hutterite, and Amish individuals and those who formerly identified with these traditions; cf. Alicia Dueck-Read, "Breaking the Binary: Queering Mennonite Identity," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 33 (2015): 115–133, and Lars Stoltzfus-Brown, "LGBTQ+ Research Study," Pennsylvania State University, 2019, <https://twitter.com/lstoltzfusbrown>.

⁶ My project builds on Stephanie Krehbiel, "Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA," Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2015; Alicia Dueck, *Negotiating Sexual Identities: Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Perspectives on Being Mennonite* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2012); Roberta Showalter Kreider, *From Wounded Hearts: Faith Stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered People and Those Who Love Them* (Gaithersburg, MD: Chi Rho Press, 1998); *Together in Love: Faith Stories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Couples* (Kulpsville, PA: Strategic Press, 2002); *The Cost of Truth: Faith Stories of Mennonite and Brethren Leaders and Those Who Might Have Been* (Kulpsville, PA: Strategic Press, 2004); Irma Fast Dueck and Darryl Neustaedter Barg, *The Listening Church*, documentary, 2016, http://listeningchurch.ca/?page_id=16; and records provided by Amy Short of the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests' Oral History Project.

⁷ These oral history interviews predominantly reflect perspectives of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer. While I contacted two theologically trained Mennonite individuals who are transgender and solicited additional contacts, only one transgender person agreed to be interviewed. Further research is needed on transgender leadership and experience in Mennonite settings, as well as on LGBTQ Mennonites who are not theologically trained; this study may spur such scholarship.

⁸ Oral history interviews took place in Minnesota, Kansas, Missouri, and via Skype, Zoom, and phone from July 2016 to August 2019. The Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas provided a Visiting Regional Humanities Faculty Fellowship, and Washburn University provided a Small Research Grant. I interviewed individuals whose names I had obtained through inquiries to Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests' staff and board members. Snowball sampling yielded forty-four names of seminary-trained LGBTQ+ individuals identifying as Mennonite (or formerly Mennonite) in the United States and Canada. Snowball sampling methodology, reliant on social networks, is frequently employed for researching populations in which membership involves stigmatized behavior; see Douglas D. Heckathorn, "Respondent-Driven Sampling: A New Approach to the Study of Hidden Populations," *Social Problems* 44 (May 1997): 174–199. Of the forty I contacted, thirty consented to interviews, with the option of being identified by name, by pseudonym, or not being identified in any way. Interviews were supplanted with archival documents, sermons, and letters. Additionally, five hetero-identified Mennonite and former Mennonite pastors and chaplains, allied with LGBTQ individuals, consented to interviews during the same period, as did Mennonite Church USA officials Ervin Stutzman and Nancy Kauffmann, prior to their retirement in 2018 as Executive Director and Denominational Minister, respectively. Many of these interviews

are available at Mennonite Church USA Archives, Elkhart, Ind., <http://mennoniteusa.org/what-we-do/archives/>.

⁹ Claire Bond Potter, “When Radical Feminism Talks Back: Taking an Ethnographic Turn in the Living Past,” in *Doing Recent History*, Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano, eds. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 178.

¹⁰ Wise interview with author, Minneapolis, 29 October 2016, audio recording; see also Dueck, *Negotiating Sexual Identities*, 168.

¹¹ Erica Lea email to author, 1 August 2016. On her historic appointment in the Mennonite context, see Betsy Shirley, “Erica Lea to Become First Openly LGBTQ Lead Pastor of Mennonite Church USA,” *Sojourners*, 18 September 2017. Previously, from 2003 to 2011, Michael Schaadt, an openly gay man, served a Mennonite Church USA congregation in Alpha, New Jersey, departing after his ministerial credentials were revoked by the regional Franconia Conference. Kevin Lechiski, “Alpha Mennonite Church Faces Removal from Membership,” *Warren Reporter*, 18 April 2009.

¹² On contemporary polity, see *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership: A Polity Manual for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA* (Harrisonburg, VA: Menno Media, 2017).

¹³ On the broader history of LGBTQ coalition-building in the 1970s, see Heather R. White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 164–65. 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>. Rebecca T. Alpert and Jacob J. Straub’s scholarship on rabbinical training in progressive Judaism demonstrates the gradualism of shifts in policy and practice; see “The Making of Gay and Lesbian Rabbis in Reconstructionist Judaism, 1979–1992,” in *Devotions and Desires: Histories of Sexuality and Religion in the Twentieth-Century United States*, eds. Gillian Frank, Bethany Moreton, and Heather R. White (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 218; 230.

¹⁴ Frank, et al., “Introduction,” *Devotions and Desires*, 7; see also Timothy Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Daniel Shank Cruz, *Queering Mennonite Literature: Archives, Activism, and the Search for Community* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 136.

¹⁶ Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 15–131.

¹⁷ Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, and Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683–1790* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985); Theron F. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988).

¹⁸ “Broad Census Counts More Anabaptists,” *Mennonite World Review*, 27 May 2019, p. 12.

¹⁹ Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930–1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996). On related Anabaptist groups, see Donald B. Kraybill, Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, and Steven M. Nolt, *The Amish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), and Rod Janzen and Max Stanton, *The Hutterites in North America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

²⁰ Histories of twentieth-century Mennonites in North America include Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2012); Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), and Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

²¹ Richard Lichty, *An Increase in Time: Story Lines of Germantown Mennonite Church and Its Historic Trust, 1683–2005* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2015), 199, n. 24.

²² Lichty, *An Increase in Time*, 35–36.

²³ Regina Shands Stoltzfus, "The Unexpected and Complicated Presence of African American Women in Mennonite Churches," Ph.D. diss., Chicago Theological Seminary, 2017, 145–46.

²⁴ Siebert, "Constituted for Conflict: A Burkean Critique of the Textual Motives for Mennonite Church USA's Post-2015 Schism," 2019, draft provided by the author.

²⁵ Tim Huber, "Lancaster Conference to Leave Mennonite Church USA," *Mennonite World Review*, 20 November 2015, <http://mennonworld.org/2015/11/20/news/lancaster-conference-to-leave-mennonite-church-usa/>.

²⁶ Stutzman interview with author via phone, Harrisonburg, VA, 5 February 2018, audio recording.

²⁷ Theda Good interview with author via Skype, Denver, 6 December 2017. Appeals for ministerial credentials by Nadine Smith-Bulford of Philadelphia and Mercedes Gonzalez and Ruth Wenger of North Bronx were simultaneously denied. Louise Stoltzfus, *Quiet Shouts: Stories of Lancaster Mennonite Women Leaders* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 14–15.

²⁸ Good interview.

²⁹ Hannah Heinzekehr and Gordon Houser, "Theda Good Ordained at First Mennonite Church of Denver," *The Mennonite*, 12 December 2016, <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/theda-good-ordained-first-mennonite-church-denver/>.

³⁰ Additional recently licensed leaders within Mennonite Church USA who are openly queer include Mark Rupp, Caitlin Desjardins, Laura Brenneman and others in Central District Conference, Michelle Burkholder in Allegheny Mennonite Conference, Randall Spaulding and Erica Lea-Simka in Mountain States Mennonite Conference, and Sharon Andre, formerly of Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference.

³¹ Good interview.

³² Good interview.

³³ Brethren Historical Library and Archives Facebook post, 28 June 2018, https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Brethren%20Mennonite%20Council%20Martin%20Rock&epa=SEARCH_BOX; see also “BMC Oral History Project: Martin Rock,” 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uf781EHgrVw&t=9s&fbclid=IwAR1LtsOr7rBtI2g4aWsM7CUULviQqmXZyONXor3M_xQBAL3qbZgJN5LMnT4.

³⁴ Frank G. Ward, “A Brief History of the Rainbow Mennonite Church and Its Acceptance of Persons Regardless of Sexual Orientation,” typescript, 1997, rev. 2017, in the author’s possession. Rainbow Mennonite Church takes its name from the boulevard where it is located in Kansas City, KS.

³⁵ Clayton Koppes email to author, 11 October 2019.

³⁶ Helen M. Hostetler, *A Time to Love* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988); Frances Bontrager Greaser, *And a Time to Die: The Pain and Love of a Journey Home with AIDS* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995).

³⁷ Doug Basinger interview via phone, Seattle, 8 July 2020.

³⁸ Russ Schmidt email to author, 30 June 2020; “Back Issues of *Dialogue*,” Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests, <https://www.bmclgbt.org/dialogue>, accessed 17 June 2020; Corinna Siebert Ruth, “First Mennonite Church of San Francisco,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=First_Mennonite_Church_of_San_Francisco_\(San_Francisco,_California,_USA\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=First_Mennonite_Church_of_San_Francisco_(San_Francisco,_California,_USA)), last modified 11 October 2013.

³⁹ Stephanie Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds,” *Outspoken*, 29 December 2015, <https://www.bmclgbt.org/single-post/2015/12/29/Pacifist-Battlegrounds-The-Struggle-for-Queer-Inclusion-in-a-Peace-Church>.

⁴⁰ Pink Churches, <http://www.pinkmenno.org/pink-churches/>, accessed 18 October 2019. On antecedents for Pink Menno’s approach, see Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 430–441.

⁴¹ Examples include Michelle Burkholder, interview with author via Skype, Hyattsville, MD, 11 January 2018, audio recording, and Russ Schmidt, interview with author via Skype, San Francisco, 9 April 2018, audio recording.

⁴² Current Members of Supportive Communities Network (SCN), <https://www.bmclgbt.org/currentscn>, accessed 18 October 2019. SCN connects Mennonite and Church of the Brethren communities that are publicly affirming of LGBTQIA+ members.

⁴³ Anita Fast interview via phone, Vancouver, 10 August 2017, audio recording; John Rempel interview via Skype, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., 14 November 2017, audio recording.

⁴⁴ In 2020, an advisory group within Mennonite Church USA formulated a series of nondiscriminatory practices regarding LGBTQ individuals; formal action is expected in 2021. See “Report from the Advisory Group on Mennonite Church USA Guidelines, 27 January 2020, <http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/REPORT-MGAdvisoryGroup-Final-2.pdf>; “Panel Recommends Retiring Membership Guidelines,” *Mennonite World Review*, 10 February 2020, pp. 1, 13.

⁴⁵ Lisa Schirch and Jacob Mack-Boll, "Pink Reflections on MWC," 3 September 2015, *The Mennonite*, <https://themennonite.org/opinion/pink-reflections-on-mwc/>; see also Schirch and Mack-Boll, "No Pink in MWC's Rainbow," *Mennonite World Review*, 14 September 2015, <http://mennoworld.org/2015/09/14/opinion/opinion-no-pink-in-mwcs-rainbow/>.

⁴⁶ Burkholder interview. On queer theologians incorporating personal experience, see Stephanie Chandler Burns, "Queering Anabaptist Theology: An Endeavor in Breaking Binaries as Hermeneutical Community," in *Recovering from the Anabaptist Vision: New Essays in Anabaptist Identity and Theological Method*, eds. Laura Schmidt Roberts, Paul Martens, and Myron A. Penner (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 77–92, and Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury, 2011), 19–20.

⁴⁷ See "Visiting Hyattsville Mennonite Church—What to Expect," <https://hyattsvillemennonite.org/about/visiting-hmc-what-to-expect/>, accessed 19 October 2019.

⁴⁸ Of the thirty Mennonite leaders I interviewed who identify as LGBTQ, five reported that they do not openly acknowledge their sexual identities in a variety of contexts. Additional respondents told me of Mennonite pastors who identify as LGBTQ but, at present, remain circumspect about revealing their sexual identities. For critiques of "the closet" metaphor, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁴⁹ Basinger interview.

⁵⁰ Annabeth Roeschley interview with author via Skype, Washington, D.C., 5 Sept. 2017, audio recording.

⁵¹ White, *Reforming Sodom*, 140–41.

⁵² White, *Reforming Sodom*, 147.

⁵³ Sarah Klassen interview with author, Columbia, MO, 16 November 2016, audio recording; Kirsten Peachey interview with author via Zoom, Downers Grove, IL, 25 January 2019, audio recording.

⁵⁴ Spaulding interview.

⁵⁵ Spaulding interview.

⁵⁶ Jason Frey interview with author via Skype, Chicago, 13 November 2018, audio recording.

⁵⁷ Paula Northwood interview, Minneapolis, 29 October 2016, audio recording.

⁵⁸ Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 90. In her ethnography of black churchwomen's sexuality, Moultrie notes the fluidity of her subjects' sexual identities and the reality that "black lesbians in black churches have become experts at hiding in plain sight" (*Passionate and Pious*, 89), an observation that until recently would have applied equally to LGBTQ-identifying Mennonites of all races and ethnicities in Mennonite church pews.

⁵⁹ Northwood interview; Peachey interview; Krista Taves interview with author via Skype, St. Louis, 13 July 2017, audio recording; Marilyn Zehr interview with author via Skype, Minooth, Ont., 6 July 2019, audio recording.

⁶⁰ Keith Schrag interview with author via phone, Ames, IA, 17 November 2017, audio recording; Shannon Neufeldt interview with author via phone, Toronto, 11 December 2017, audio recording.

⁶¹ Schrag interview.

⁶² Schrag interview.

⁶³ Schrag interview.

⁶⁴ Schrag interview. See also Anna Groff, “130 Gather for LGBTQ Event in Chicago,” *The Mennonite*, 3 December 2014, <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/130-gather-lgbtq-event-chicago%E2%80%A8/>, and Keith Schrag, “Hear the Conservative Voice: Those Who Fought for Inclusion Often Fail to Practice it Themselves,” *Mennonite World Review*, 10 November 2015.

⁶⁵ Schrag interview.

⁶⁶ Haley Smith (pseudonym) interview with author via Zoom, 11 July 2017, audio recording.

⁶⁷ Laura Jarrett (pseudonym) interview with author via phone, 2 November 2017. For an account of a gay student being denied admission to the Master of Divinity program at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in the early 1990s, see Dorothy Nickel Friesen, *The Pastor Wears a Skirt: Stories of Gender and Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2018), pp. 27–28.

⁶⁸ Hannah Heinzekehr, “Denominational Calling Processes Shift,” 8 May 2017, *The Mennonite*, <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/denominational-calling-processes-shift/>.

⁶⁹ Tim Huber, “Illinois Pastors Allowed to Officiate Same-Sex Marriages,” *Mennonite World Review*, 2 March 2020, <http://mennoworld.org/2020/03/02/news/illinois-pastors-allowed-to-officiate-same-sex-marriages/>.

⁷⁰ On the late twentieth-century formulation of this antigay notion, see White, *Reforming Sodom*, 134–35.

⁷¹ Joanne Gallardo interview with author via Skype, Elkhart, IN, 8 November 2017, audio recording.

⁷² Rachel Stella, “Statement Calls for Wider Welcome While Affirming Traditional Teaching on Sexuality,” *Mennonite World Review*, 1 October 2018, <http://mennoworld.org/2018/10/01/news/statement-calls-for-wider-welcome-while-affirming-traditional-teaching-on-sexuality/>. See also Emma Green, “Gay and Mennonite,” *The Atlantic*, 18 March 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/03/gay-and-mennonite/388060/>.

⁷³ Roeschley interview.

⁷⁴ *Negotiating Sexual Identities*, 174. On marital practices and conceptions of gender among early Anabaptists, for example, see Christina Entz Moss, “‘Your Sons and Daughters Shall Prophecy’: Prophecy, Visions, Apocalypticism and Gender in Strasbourg, 1522–1539,” Ph.D. diss., University of Waterloo, 2019, pp. 210–225.

⁷⁵ A significant distinction between Mennonites and United Methodists is organizational polity; the latter group has a more hierarchical structure. Yonat Shimron, “Methodist University Presidents Call on Denomination to Amend LGBTQ Policies,” *Religion News Service*, 10 January 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/01/10/methodist-university-presidents-call-on->

denomination-to-amend-lgbtq-policies/; Cameron Overton, "Why Liberation Can't Wait," *UM Forward*, 29 May 2019, <https://um-forward.org/our-stories/2019/5/27/liberation-cant-wait>; David Crary, "With Split Delayed Methodists Face a Year in Limbo," *PBS News Hour*, 4 May 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/with-split-delayed-united-methodists-face-a-year-in-limbo>.

⁷⁶ Fast interview; Neufeldt interview.