

So much for unity

**I used to read Ephesians 4 and get that vague, warm glow we Mennonites feel when we see the word *peace*. Now the passage stops me cold.**

by [Joanna Harader](#) in the [December 25, 2013](#) issue



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I used to read Ephesians 4—on “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”—and get that vague, warm glow we Mennonites feel every time we see the word peace. My eyes would dance across these words as if they were barely there.

Now they stop me cold. Seven churches recently left our regional association, which Mennonites call an area conference. They did this because I'm still a pastor here.

My rational, family-systems-aware self knows that this is not really my fault. My justice-loving, Martin Luther King Jr.-reading self understands that prophetic actions are often unpopular. But the rest of me feels the unrelenting weight of failure crushing my soul every time I read these words: "Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

When two young women asked if I would officiate their wedding, I wasn't thinking about Christian unity. I was thinking about these two people who loved each other and wanted to enter a covenant together. My heart broke when they explained that they hoped for a Christian wedding but couldn't find a Christian pastor to officiate.

The congregational leaders and I sent a letter to the conference minister, letting him know of my plans. We weren't thinking about Christian unity then, either. We were thinking that rumors fly fast and that we'd prefer he hear about the wedding directly from us.

In the ensuing conversations with my conference minister, I explained my understanding of Genesis and Sodom and Paul. We talked about conference procedures and denominational statements. I prayed with him and for him. I could try to sound virtuous by saying that throughout these conversations, I was trying to maintain the unity of the Spirit. But I mostly just wanted to prove I was right. Had I succeeded in convincing him, I suppose that might have produced a certain kind of unity. But if I'm honest, unity was not my goal.

The people on my conference's leadership commission were genuinely concerned with Christian unity. They are in charge of pastoral credentials, and as soon as I pronounced the couple "wife and wife," my credentials had to be reviewed. These folks did their best. They listened well—not just to me, but also to the van-full of people who had made the trip with me. They asked thoughtful questions. As far as I could tell, they had prayerful spirits.

In the end, though, the consensus-loving Mennonites on the leadership commission could not even maintain unity within their ranks. The majority believed I should keep my credentials, which I did. Those who disagreed didn't even disagree in unity—there were two separate dissenting opinions.

After the credential review, the conference leadership made the decision public, and we brought in a professional moderator to facilitate a discussion at the next annual meeting. People had the opportunity to make one-minute statements, some of which were well prepared and some of which were off the cuff. Statements included the following:

- “Our basic sexual identity—including our sexual orientation, male or female, gay or straight—[is part of who] we are in the image of God. And it should be a fearful thing to trifle with or to demean or discriminate against another who is made in God’s very image.”
- “I stand with Menno Simons and the early church fathers in believing that scriptures teach that homosexual practice is wrong.”
- “I believe it’s time that we must repent of the sin of homophobia. I know it’s going to be a tough journey but we need to be on it.”
- “It becomes clear that we [within this conference] must decide—as Joshua put it, we must choose for ourselves this day—whom we will serve: whether the gods of our culture [in accepting homosexual practice] or the one true God.”

So much for unity, for the bond of peace. It did not feel particularly peaceful to sit in an auditorium and listen to people comment on the fact that I had been allowed to remain a pastor. Or at the following year’s annual meeting, when a resolution was brought to the floor demanding that my credentials be revoked. These conversations did not bring about that warm Mennonite glow I used to get when I read the word *peace*.

Instead, these conversations tied my stomach in knots and sent my mind racing. Certain voices, certain inflections, certain words made my heart beat so hard I could feel the pulse in my fingertips.

Then came the aftermath. With my credentials safely intact, news began to trickle out about one church and then another leaving the conference. It feels like failure: failure to maintain unity, to stay within the bond of peace.

But I’ve come to realize that the disunity so evident at our gatherings did not spring fully formed out of the wedding at which I officiated. The things people said—in public and private—were not things they came up with when they read the news

reports. People's beliefs were long held, slowly formed, deeply etched. The disunity had been there all along, hiding in the dark corners. And it seems to me that the one who turns on the light is not necessarily responsible for the mess that light reveals.

To shift metaphors, all of these different beliefs and attitudes and hopes and fears were like boulders balanced precariously against one another. At first I thought of my actions as the gust of wind that nudged the rock that started the avalanche of disunity. But I think this gives me too much credit (or responsibility). I'm just another boulder—misshapen, off balance, unsteady.

The wind of the Spirit is what blew across the rock pile, setting the avalanche in motion. I've started to wonder if the Spirit's unity and peace actually don't have much to do with the warm glow I used to feel when I read Ephesians 4. When Jesus offers his disciples peace, he warns them that it's not the same peace the world gives (John 14:27). It's a harder, rougher, deeper, truer kind of peace. Maybe the Spirit doesn't give unity the way the world gives unity. Maybe the Spirit's unity isn't about everybody smiling and nodding and politely passing the salt.

I really believe the Spirit stirred those hard conversations that took place because of the wedding. These conversations highlighted many disagreements—about theology, sexuality, biblical interpretation, church polity. But they also led people to share their stories—about family members and friends who are gay, about ministering to a wide range of people, about intellectual and emotional journeys. Some churches clearly felt pushed out by the disagreements. But others feel a closer bond because of the stories.

Yes, I had several tense conversations. But they were with people I likely would not have talked to at all if it weren't for the compulsion they felt to discuss my theology of sexuality and marriage. And really, once you talk about sex with someone, there is a bond there that sticks—even if that person leaves the conference.

I'm slowly getting to a point where I can read Ephesians 4 without feeling like I have failed the Holy Spirit. I'm gradually understanding that the Spirit's unity isn't so much about keeping everyone inside happy with each other as it is about tearing down walls so more people can get in. It's about the faithful path, not the warm and fuzzy path; about making us hear one another, not necessarily agree.

The unity of the Spirit may even reach beyond the conference and denominational affiliations we choose, tying us to each other in deep, uncomfortable, grace-filled

ways—whether we like it or not.