Mission as Reconciliation Embodied in Worship

One Congregation's Journey toward Reconciliation

Tim Schmucker

"We welcome people of all sexual orientations," proclaims the worship leader of Toronto United Mennonite Church (TUMC) in opening worship each Sunday.

Fifteen years ago, these words of inclusion were not part of the congregation's worship welcome statement. Now numerous congregants in the congregation identify as LGBTQ.[1] Many are in various leadership positions, including pastoral ministry.

Becoming an LGBTQ-affirming congregation was a lengthy and arduous journey. At times, it was deeply painful for many congregants. Relationships were strained and broken. Division increased. The journey toward reconciliation "required the work of the Spirit and many acts of grace."[2] It was marked and expressed in worship at many steps along the way. Reconciliation grew between members who had wounded each other, between the congregation and its LGBTQ congregants, and then with the larger LGBTQ community. As the Apostle Paul proclaimed, "God, who reconciled us to [God] through Christ . . . has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18, NRSV).

Tim Schmucker graduated from Goshen (Indiana) College and Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (Elkhart, Indiana) in the 1980s and served for twenty-five years with several Mennonite organizations. Currently finishing a ThM program at Toronto School of Theology, he explores (de)colonialism in congregational contexts. He and his spouse, Jacqueline Barreto, are members of Toronto United Mennonite Church. They also own and operate an organic grocery store.

1 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer.

2 Toronto United Mennonite Church, "TUMC and Human Sexuality: A Timeline" (Unpublished paper, 2018; commissioned by the TUMC Board, researched and written by TUMC leadership "in consultation with remembered experiences, documents, and the LGBTQ people referred to in this document"), introduction.

In this article, I investigate the writings of various leading ecumenical and Mennonite missiologists for four reasons:

1. to understand where the missiologists locate reconciliation in the mission and witness of the church;
2. to listen for whether the missiologists frame reconciliation as the healing of relationships between groups of people—the oppressor and the oppressed—and whether that healing emerges out of liberation for the dominated and inclusion for the marginalized;
3. to look for what role the missiologists posit for the local worshipping congregation on journeys of missional reconciliation;
4. to explore how these theological themes are expressed and nuanced in Toronto United Mennonite Church's journey from division and broken relationships toward reconciliation in welcoming all who identify as LGBTQ.

I. A Postcolonial Mission Paradigm: Mission as Reconciliation, Embodied in Worship

During the second half of the twentieth century, a new postcolonial missiological paradigm emerged, supplanting the theory and practice that had arguably been part of European Christianity's imperial partnership with Europe in their overseas colonization project in which they imposed their culture and religion. Five leading ecumenical twenty-first-century mission theologians contribute significant and compelling emphases to this new paradigm.

South African missiologist David Bosch's 2011 magnum opus, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, both describes and exemplifies this postcolonial missiology.[3] While the church's "ministry of reconciliation" is not a major focus for Bosch—surprising, given his location in post-apartheid South Africa—he concludes with soaring theological soundbites that encapsulate the new paradigm: "Mission means serving, healing, and reconciling a divided, wounded humanity," and "Mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus. . . . It is the good news of God's love, incarnation in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world."[4]

United Church of Canada theologian Marilyn Legge locates reconciliation firmly in mission's core and offers an unambiguous nexus of mission as justice and reconciliation. Mission, she insists, must give focused attention to the pervasive suffering that exists throughout the world, as well as to the longing for justice, healing, and mutual relationships. Mission, moreover, must name

3 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 377–532.

4 Bosch, 505, 532.

the sources of pain and oppression, and show how "healing, transformation and reconciliation are connected."[5] She asserts that reconciliation must also involve listening to those who have suffered and show evidence that victims have been heard through acknowledgment of wrongdoing and concrete steps of repentance and reparation. Legge has a robust focus on mission as healing and reconciliation, although for her, like Bosch, the church is primarily the national denomination.[6]

Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi, evangelical professor of World Christianity, attempts to expand the emerging paradigm by developing his missiology from a Latin American perspective of being missionized, a frame of reference that merits attention. Reconciliation between groups of people is core to mission, he declares; it must seek to "heal the wounds of those involved in ethnic wars, racial oppression, gender exploitation, and any kind of injustice and violence that harm human communities." He insists that reconciliation cannot happen without justice. At the same time, his discussion of how mission practices "take flesh" in local congregations focuses primarily on short-term cross-cultural mission trips. Moreover, his integration of mission in congregational worship is limited to the Lord's Table as a symbol and practical expression of God's welcome of all peoples. He turns the task of integrating mission and worship over to academic disciplines to develop ways that create missiological expressions in worship that lead to reconciliation and liberation.[7]

Catholic missiologists Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder augment this article's focus with extensive treatments of mission as reconciliation along with robust integrations of mission in worship. They declare that in a world of increasing violence the church must witness to and proclaim the possibility of reconciliation.[8] Expressing poignant concern for oppressed and marginalized peoples who have suffered violence and pain, they call the church to be "God's minister of reconciliation."[9] Rather than focusing on strategies, they ground the journey in a spirituality that embodies the truth that "reconciliation is the work of God . . . and is offered first and foremost by the victims of injustice and

5 Marilyn J. Legge, "Negotiating Mission: A Canadian Stance," *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 368 (January 2004), 121.

6 Legge, 119–30. Jeremy Bergen expands on the theology and practice of church repentance and apologies in his 2008 PhD dissertation, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Past* (New York: T & T Clark, 2011).

7 Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, *Mission: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 85–86, 93–99, 104–5.

8 Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2011), 70.

9 Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Orbis, 2004), 390–91.

violence." They define this spirituality as missional dialogue in "deep encounter" with others, starting with "the poor . . . and any marginalized people." Such dialogue must be rooted in vulnerability and humility, as it shapes "the way the church . . . engages in its ministry of reconciliation."[10] Bevans and Schroeder also challenge local faith communities to develop new ways of "ritualizing God's reconciling action," where the Eucharist is "the result of, a preparation for, and an act of mission." The church thus engages in acts of reconciliation in the same way it worships and prays.[11]

Mennonite missiologists and worship scholars have also integrated these themes in various degrees in their writings on mission, reconciliation, worship, and witness. Given Anabaptists' missionary zeal in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, along with Mennonite congregational ecclesiology, it is instructive to explore several influential twenty-first-century Mennonite theological voices.

II. Twenty-First-Century Anabaptist Integration of Mission as Reconciliation and as Embodied in Worship

John D. Roth, Mennonite church leader and Anabaptist history professor at Goshen (Ind.) College, solidly roots Christian mission in the life and worship of local congregations, declaring that mission is "simply worship made visible in the world" and that "worship and witness are inseparable." He also weaves together mission as reconciliation, shaped and embodied in congregational worship: "Worship spills over into the world around—worship becomes missional—when Christians actively participate with God in ministries of healing and reconciliation."[12] He asserts that mission—a witness to the world of Christ's way of love and compassion, healing and generosity—begins with worship practices that become embodied in Christians' daily lives. In traditional Mennonite *die Stillen im Lande* form, he suggests that the most relevant missional witness consists in the Christian community's life together, in its "beauty of holiness." This living witness "helps the world to recognize its own alienation from God" and thus invites the entire world to repentance and transformation.[13]

Irma Fast Dueck, professor of practical theology at Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg, Manitoba), also interweaves mission, reconciliation, and congregational worship. With Bevans and Schroeder, she adds a strong focus on worship as the formative activity that shapes congregations to be vibrant expressions of missional reconciliation. She argues persuasively that worship

10 Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 19–39, 70–71.

11 Bevans and Schroeder, 17, 27, 65–67, 71.

12 John D. Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness* (Herald, 2009), 81–82, 96–97.

13 Roth, 157–67, 218–19.

empowers God's people to live out an "alternative vision that leads to both a disruptive and a transformative involvement with the world." Echoing Roth's "practices," she elaborates that worship "shapes God's people to incarnate the character of Jesus Christ" and inculcates the "perspectives of God's actions" toward the world.[14] She recognizes the liminal space of worship that forms congregants into embodied expressions of missional reconciliation; Christians gathered in worship "stand in the threshold" of the social structures of society on the one hand and life within the Christian community on the other. The latter embodies a quite different set of norms shaped by Jesus's way of peace and justice, reconciliation and forgiveness. Thus, for Dueck, "acts of confession and reconciliation bind worship and ethics together" and remind congregants that God's liberating forgiveness in worship is paradigmatic of practicing forgiving love and reconciliation in the world.[15]

Two additional Mennonite voices to consider are Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, who build on Roth and Dueck by extending worship to witness in practical terms. As missiologists, liturgists, and missionaries, Kreider and Kreider give comprehensive attention to the varied components of missional worship. Shaped by worship, Christians as both individuals and congregations embody the gospel and their faith within the world. Active reconciliation, then, is core to worship-infused lives that "creatively address painful, divisive issues in our societies."[16] Exemplifying missional reconciliation through inspiring stories of missional reconciliation between individuals and groups, of forgiving and embracing enemies, and of justice-making and relationship-building with socioeconomically marginalized people, they conclude that "people whom God forms in worship to make peace and pray can dismantle walls and reconcile enemies."[17]

In summary, these four Mennonite missiologists' vigorous congregational ecclesiology engenders their centering of God's mission and ministry of reconciliation in the worship of local faith communities. For their part, Legge, Bevans, and Schroeder contribute a robust understanding of the implications of mission as reconciliation in situations between groups of people where injustice, harm, and marginalization have been inflicted and suffered.

I now turn to the journey of Toronto United Mennonite Church (TUMC) from division, marginalization, and broken relationships toward reconciliation

---

14 Irma Fast Dueck, "A Critical Examination of Mennonite Worship and Ethics" (ThD diss., University of Toronto, 2006), 8–10, 84.

15 Dueck, 151, 198–99.

16 Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom* (Herald, 2011), 184.

17 Kreider and Kreider, 170, 184–88.

in embracing all LGBTQ people—a case study that both illustrates the missiology we have explored and suggests important nuances within it.

III. Case Study: Mission as Reconciliation in Toronto United Mennonite Church's Congregational Worship

I begin with several preliminary comments. First, TUMC has been my congregation for over twenty-five years. During this case study's time frame, I served in various leadership capacities, including as a member of the Preaching Team and as Board Chair. I am thus neither a dispassionate observer nor an unfamiliar researcher. At times I use first-person plural pronouns to refer to the congregation in order to avoid frequent repetition of nouns. I am also a straight, white, cisgendered male, and, while I attempt to represent the experiences of LGBTQ congregants on this journey, my descriptions are, at best, incomplete.[18]

Second, the Christian church has ostracized and marginalized the LGBTQ community and its members for centuries. The Mennonite church has been no exception. As historian Rachel Waltner Goossen declares, people identifying as LGBTQ "have long faced stigmatization and discrimination in many North American Mennonite churches and institutions."[19] Pieter Niemeyer, a former Mennonite pastor, now ministers to LGBTQ Anabaptists "suffering from the church's ostracism, marginalization, and emotional abuse."[20]

Third, congregational worship is commonly understood as the space and time—often Sunday morning—when the church gathers for hymn singing and prayer, scripture reading and teaching, fellowship and support. In this case study, I expand the definition of worship to include meetings of task forces, committees, and the congregation. Leaders and congregants described these meetings as worshipful, Spirit-infused spaces. Indeed, meeting facilitators directed these as worship, opening them with hymns and prayers and asking for the Spirit's presence and guidance. These meetings thus were also significant components of the congregation's reconciliation journey and its embodiment in worship.

---

18 This case study is limited to TUMC and to congregants there at the time of my research. I did not communicate with former members, straight or LGBTQ, who left the congregation, with one exception (see note 29).

19 Rachel Waltner Goossen, "The Rise of LGBTQ Mennonite Leaders," *Anabaptist Historians: Bringing the Anabaptist Past into a Digital Century*, February 21, 2021, https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2021/02/02/the-rise-of-lgbtq-mennonite-leaders/.

20 Pieter Niemeyer, personal conversations. Niemeyer was commissioned in 2019 by several Toronto-area Mennonite congregations to a ministry of walking with LGBTQ Anabaptists.

Fourth, the TUMC journey toward reconciliation is complex, as four distinct sets of fractured relationships were interwoven in both rupture and healing:

1. Straight congregants experienced brokenness among themselves, both between individuals who disagreed and between the two groups in opposition to each other.
2. LGBTQ congregant relationships with TUMC were wounded; many experienced deep pain at various times along the journey.
3. LGBTQ congregants experienced rejection from some straight individuals who took positions limiting inclusion.
4. The broader Mennonite LGBTQ community along with the local LGBTQ Christian community watched TUMC's discernment process from afar and close by. They experienced rejection by and alienation from the church.

This case study's primary focus is on the first two sets of relationships.

Lastly, I ground the following narrative and analysis in my own lived experience; personal conversations and correspondence with both straight and LGBTQ congregants;[21] written reflections by senior pastor Dr. Gary Harder[22] and by theologian Dr. Lydia Neufeld Harder, who is married to Gary;[23] and on a TUMC human sexuality timeline[24] commissioned by the Board. The timeline was written by key leaders in consultation with the LGBTQ people whose stories it narrates. Although I attempted to hear the experiences of all LBGTQ congregants who were part of this journey, not all were able to share their voice. This narrative is not comprehensive but rather recounts the journey's primary themes and steps in order to explore the role of mission as reconciliation embodied in worship.[25]

* * *

In the mid-1940s, Mennonites from Ontario's Niagara Peninsula began TUMC, having relocated to Toronto to pursue university studies and employment. Currently a diverse congregation of around 175 adults and children, TUMC opens Sunday worship by welcoming people of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities, generations and abili-

21 Those whose stories I narrate here have given me permission to share them in this article.

22 Gary Harder, *The Pastor–Congregation Duet* (Friesen, 2018).

23 Lydia Neufeld Harder, "Wrestling with God through the 'Messy' Process of Discernment: A Case Study" (unpublished manuscript, 2016).

24 "TUMC and Human Sexuality."

25 For the parallel journey in Mennonite churches in Canada, see Harder, *The Pastor–Congregation Duet*, 228–48.

ties.[26] The congregation aspires to be a family of faith that worships together and supports one another while following Jesus's example of working for peace and justice. Including an unequivocal public welcome to those of all sexual orientations was the result of a long journey fraught with disagreement, pain, and fractured relationships. The marginalization and pain of LGBTQ congregants often extended to the larger LGBTQ Mennonite community.[27] The congregation's reconciliation journey required prayer, humility, commitment, and forbearance that grounded steps of conversion and forgiveness. Marking and embodying these steps in worship was a crucial part of the journey.

During the 1980s, at least two young people from TUMC families shared about their same-sex orientation and eventually left the congregation. In 1993 an adult education class dedicated three months to human sexuality, during which one of the young people who had left returned to share her experience as both a Christian and "homosexual." She later became a United Church of Canada minister, fulfilling a call that had not been open to her in the Mennonite church. During this time, congregants became increasingly aware of discontent among themselves regarding the gap between the Mennonite church's ethical teaching—sexual intimacy for married heterosexual couples only—and members' ethical conduct. Additionally, within TUMC a range of opinions existed regarding what needed to change—church teachings or congregants' behavior.

Nevertheless, by the turn of the millennium, TUMC was a growing and thriving congregation, professional and progressive with dynamic leadership in programs and worship, a church that enjoyed being church together. Then, in April 2002, through a statement prepared with leadership support, TUMC's associate pastor revealed at a Sunday morning worship service that she was in a same-sex dating relationship. Thus, the congregation embarked on a congregation-designed and -led discernment process, confident in its abilities to work through any challenge with specially formed teams and committees.

Despite these new processes put in place, fourteen months later, in June 2003, after three sequential "seasons" of listening, education, and discernment, the process imploded in mistrust, suspicion and anger, pain and recrimination. While the congregation did agree, albeit not unanimously, at a congregational meeting that all people, regardless of sexual orientation, were welcome as members who offered all their gifts to the church, TUMC could not reach agreement on renewing our pastoral ministry covenant with the newly out pastor, and so she was fired. Nor could we agree on blessing same-sex marriages or calling an LGBTQ person to pastoral ministry.

The congregation's carefully crafted process had failed, leaving the TUMC community deflated, distressed, and broken. LGBTQ congregants had once

26 The exact wording is not prescribed, so the welcome can vary.

27 Niemeyer, personal conversations.

again experienced rejection and marginalization from their faith community. Senior pastor Gary Harder's "heart was broken," and he was so immobilized that he was unable to pray to close the congregational meeting.[28]

Shortly after this, the congregation formed a Healing and Reconciliation Team, composed of people with diverse perspectives on LGBTQ inclusion. Chairing this team was the TUMC woman who had returned in 1993 to share her experience as an LGBTQ Christian; in 2003 she had become a congregant once again. This points to the profound courage of LGBTQ congregants who stayed engaged during this journey, accepting a level of vulnerability that involved substantial emotional cost as "their identities, their very personhood, their belonging in the community, and their faithfulness [would be] challenged, while straight people only [had] to have their ideas and understandings of faith challenged."[29] Straight congregants did not, and still cannot, fully understand the courage required to have one's personal identity and worthiness before God discussed for years on end.

At this point, TUMC leadership prepared a statement—"Towards a Statement of Beliefs on Human Sexuality"—that delineated what the congregation had agreed on and where we still disagreed. It ended with a congregational covenant to remain in community in spite of disagreements, with a commitment to continued dialogue and discernment.[30]

Further steps led to expressions in worship with mixed results. The Healing and Reconciliation Team spoke individually with eighty congregants and then wove together a psalm of lament composed solely of words from these pain-filled conversations. This litany was read in four voices in Sunday morning worship, "express[ing] to God and to each other our deepest concerns" and acknowledging the congregation's pain, anger, confusion, and despair.[31] After the service, one congregant blurted out to pastor Harder, "That was the worst worship service I have ever attended."[32]

A month later, TUMC said a formal goodbye to the associate pastor in Sunday worship. The congregation attempted to apologize and affirm her gifts. In the midst of what some remember as incongruence, we prayed for her and her future ministry. A significant part of this attempt at apology and the affirmation of her gifts was providing funds for her to pursue an MDiv degree, although it came from a group of congregants rather than the congregation as a body.[33]

---

28 Harder, 252.

29 Svinda Heinrichs, personal correspondence and conversations, February 2012.

30 TUMC archives.

31 "Litany of Acknowledgment," Introduction, TUMC archives.

32 Harder, 241.

33 Gary Harder, personal correspondence with author, November 12, 2018; Lydia and Gary Harder, personal conversation with author, December 9, 2018; personal conver-

The Healing and Reconciliation Team, led by an LGBTQ congregant, continued its work through additional conversations with approximately 150 members. Making worship and prayer a significant part of their meetings,[34] the team prepared eight recommendations to (1) address TUMC's commitment to improve and ensure respectful and loving dialogue when in disagreement, and (2) to further the congregation's agreement to continue dialogue on steps toward LGBTQ inclusion. An Implementation Team was formed to develop and put into effect these recommendations. This led to a printed welcome statement that included LGBTQ persons via the weekly church bulletin and the TUMC website. With a phrase that recognized "we do not always agree with each other," the statement affirmed our commitment to "Christ and a desire to be his followers."

In the fall of 2007 during a Sunday morning adult education series, participants discussed the congregation's welcome of LGBTQ individuals. LGBTQ congregants and allies then formed the Welcoming Committee Working Group that advocated for LGBTQ inclusion during the significant processes of congregational visioning and pastoral search. Some Preaching Team members offered sermons with biblical and theological foundations for full inclusion. In 2009 TUMC formed an Inclusion Team, giving the group a mandate to work on various situations of inclusion and welcome, including those of LGBTQ people.

The activities of these two groups received significant visibility in the three yearly congregational meetings and occasionally in worship services. During this time, the TUMC journey toward full inclusion of LGBTQ people was becoming more overt in worship. In 2010 an openly gay person became a member; she referred to her wife during the membership ritual in the worship service. Congregants also began to acknowledge Pride Sunday in worship services by wearing rainbow bracelets, pins, and flags. In addition, worship leaders started mentioning Toronto's Pride Sunday and Pride Week in their comments.

Momentous steps on the journey continued. In 2011 the former associate pastor whom TUMC had fired in 2003 returned with her partner and their children to worship with the TUMC community. Although they did not quickly become involved in leadership, many congregants experienced their return as a significant step in the journey toward healing and reconciliation. Then, about a year later, two women members asked TUMC's pastor to participate in their marriage service. The Board could not grant full consent because the congregation had not yet given pastors permission to marry same-sex couples. Instead, it granted a restricted ministerial role that excluded signing a marriage document or pronouncing the couple as spouses. LGBTQ congregants once again experi-

---

sation with the former associate pastor, February 16, 2021.

34 Gary Harder, personal correspondence with author.

enced TUMC's welcome as limited—a painful reminder that the congregation's embrace of them came with restrictions.

After that difficult experience, the Board proposed at the 2013 Annual General Meeting that the congregation revisit the possibility of allowing pastors to marry same-sex couples. After worshipful prayer, the congregation agreed, forming a task force to lead the discernment process. Two years later, the congregation agreed by consensus that while "we are not fully of one mind, we trust our pastors to discern carefully and make the appropriate decision" regarding marrying same-sex couples.[35] Equally important, the congregation assured the pastors of their support in whatever decision they made.

Subsequently, the TUMC welcome statement printed in the weekly Sunday bulletin started being read at the beginning of many Sunday worship services: "We welcome people of all . . . gender identities and sexual orientations." This full welcome was expressed dramatically during two Sunday morning worship services: (1) the congregation blessed the marriage covenant of an LGBTQ congregant and his partner, who had been married in a civil ceremony; and (2) we blessed the marriage of the two women who had earlier been married in a ceremony in which TUMC's past had a limited role. During this latter worship service, the pastor stated that the congregation needed to right a wrong we had committed, and then TUMC formalized that same-sex union through the pastor signing their marriage certificate. Both worship services were joyous and celebratory events, with applause and cheers of praise to God bursting out around the gathered community.

The matter of whether TUMC would hire a pastor who identified as LGBTQ still remained, however. This question took on charged immediacy in mid-2016 when our lead pastor revealed her newfound realization of her LGBTQ identity and the dissolution of her heterosexual marriage—a union that had been celebrated in TUMC Sunday worship four years earlier. An intense discernment journey ensued.[36] Once again, LGBTQ congregants showed profound courage and vulnerability by "opening themselves up again and again to having their identities, lives and choices examined, critiqued, discussed and wrestled with in a way that few who are not queer ever experience."[37]

Five months later, the congregation agreed by consensus that "just as TUMC welcomes people of all races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, faith backgrounds, physical capacities and gifts to be members of our

35 Some congregants' hesitation grew out of respect for Mennonite Church Canada and its discernment process on LGBTQ inclusion. They advocated proceeding in step with the denomination while continuing to press for LGBTQ marriage.

36 I was chairperson of the TUMC Board during this time.

37 Marilyn Zehr, personal correspondence and conversation, February 17, 2021.

community, we extend the same level of inclusion to the calling of pastors."[38] This step, however, was not without struggle and pain. Some harsh words were exchanged between straight congregants and between straight and non-straight people, resulting in damaged relationships and wounded people. In these and other contentious conversations, while some straight congregants received direct challenges to their ideas and attitudes, LGBTQ congregants experienced challenges to their identity, their personhood, their worthiness before God. The pain experienced by LGBTQ people receiving harsh words was exceedingly more harmful.

Moreover, the lead pastor eventually resigned as a result of the emotional, mental, and physical cost of her vulnerability. In her words, "Coming out and reorienting my life so publicly was the hardest thing I have ever done."[39] Her departure evoked sadness and lament among the congregation; some recognized the heavy toll the process had exacted. Also, one straight couple who had been pillars of the congregation for decades eventually disassociated themselves with TUMC.

Still, TUMC continued the journey toward inclusion and reconciliation. In a November 2017 congregational meeting, the congregation agreed to join the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests' Supportive Communities Network, a move that LGBTQ congregants and allies had encouraged for many years. Then in mid-2018, TUMC attached rainbow identifiers to outdoor signage, and the congregation openly and wholeheartedly celebrated Pride Sunday in a moving worship service led by LGBTQ congregants. Tears of sorrow and repentance flowed as we recognized in litany the rejection, pain, and hurt LGBTQ persons had suffered in society, in the church, and even at TUMC. Tears also flowed as we celebrated liturgically the righting of wrongs and the reconciliation that can follow repentance.

The journey toward healing and reconciliation then reached another high point in worship in a November 2018 membership rite. Three long-term congregants, now assured that TUMC's LGBTQ welcome and inclusion held no limitations, formally became members. The former associate pastor and her spouse officially joined the congregation; they also participated in a parent-child dedication service for themselves and their children. The third person, together with her spouse and children, had been a fully engaged congregant for over two decades but had been unable to formalize membership until the congregation extended full and unequivocal inclusion.

One year later, TUMC hired a pastor who identified as LGBTQ.

---

38 TUMC Bylaw No. 1 (as revised November 11, 2013); provides details regarding Article V "Organization and Administration of the TUMC Constitution."

39 Marilyn Zehr, personal correspondence and conversation, February 17, 2021.

* * *

Throughout the journey toward reconciliation, TUMC echoed, adapted, and extended the theological voices described in Section I above. While the congregation was not following a written missiological framework, its theologically trained leadership, both ordained and not ordained, were rooted in an Anabaptist-Mennonite congregational ecclesiology and in a biblical understanding of gospel as good news of peace and reconciliation. These foundations informed the congregation on its journey. Paraphrasing Paul, TUMC, having been reconciled to God through Christ, took seriously the ministry of reconciliation they had received. Mission as reconciliation and embodied in worship resounded throughout the congregation's journey.

When TUMC's discernment process failed in 2003 and fractured relationships resulted, the congregation did not shunt the pain and brokenness off to be managed administratively. Rather, they fully expressed and embodied the hurt, brokenness, and despair in congregational worship. During the months after the discernment process implosion, compassionate listening to congregants' anger and pain shaped two worship services that formed the congregation's reconciliation trajectory in momentous ways.

The first of these two services included a litany that named congregants' pain and fear, distrust and disagreement. While at least one person experienced it as the "worst service ever," in former pastor Harder's words, "That lament Sunday marked the beginning of a remarkable healing journey." Without having named our "pain and brokenness as a congregation . . . we would have floundered much longer." Neufeld Harder adds that the service brought both "the whole process and us as a broken people before God so that our fears were no longer hidden." Many congregants experienced the worship service as a holy moment as we presented our pain to God for forgiveness and healing.[40] In this worship service, TUMC offered a poignant application of Bevans and Schroeder's spirituality for the journey—one of vulnerability and humility, listening and prayer.

These are the worship practices that Roth says become embodied in Christians' daily lives and engender mission. Bevans and Schroeder elaborate how worship enacts reconciliation; every worship service is an act of reconciliation, they declare, as the worship restores the gathered assembly to right relationship with God and with one another. TUMC's experience, however, shows that each worship service is not a completed act of reconciliation and restoration. Rather, during a journey toward reconciliation, each service is part of the whole and but one step on the journey. Thus, many worship services together over time

40 Harder, 241; Gary Harder, personal correspondence with author; Neufeld Harder, 4.

become intertwined acts of restoration and reconciliation. As Dueck elaborates, worship forms God's people to incarnate Jesus's character.[41]

Legge adds that lamentation is part of the journey toward reconciliation. While she writes about processes of reconciliation between groups where one has wronged the other, TUMC's service of lament was a diverse expression of pain and grief that encompassed varied perspectives of the broken relationships. Legge also insists that listening to the experiences of oppressed and marginalized people and then naming the harm done are part of the journey toward reconciliation, along with acknowledging wrongdoing and showing concrete steps of repentance and redress. TUMC's second momentous worship service after the discernment process implosion demonstrated some of these. This worship contained the associate pastor's farewell, where the congregation honored her ministry among us. This was especially significant for the youth she had pastored. Although painful, the service gave congregants the opportunity to express directly and in worship their gratitude to and appreciation of her. The funds from a group of congregants to help finance her MDiv pastoral ministry training formed a significant part of the congregation's attempted apology along with their affirmation and reparation, although the apology was more implied than explicit.[42]

TUMC's Sunday worship services were, of course, public; anyone could attend. And they did, even joining in the "worst service ever." TUMC was unaware of how the beginning of a painful journey of reconciliation would also become one of missional witness in worship; two people visiting from the neighborhood that Sunday morning decided to become congregants, saying, "If a church can be this honest about their failures and pain, then we can be a part of it."[43]

As Dueck describes, along with Bevans and Schroeder, worship is formative acts that shape congregations to be vibrant outward-looking expressions of missional reconciliation. Kreider and Kreider agree, declaring that Christians, both as individuals and as congregations, embody the gospel and their faith to and in the world. Worship is, these missiologists concur, the primary locus of God's mission, where congregations celebrate, enact, and participate in God's reconciling love for the world. This occurs even when the congregation is not aware of worship's witness.

During the years that followed, TUMC primarily expressed apology and repentance for the exclusion and rejection of LGBTQ persons through changed

41 Dueck, "Mennonite Worship and Ethics."

42 Gary Harder, personal correspondence with author; Lydia and Gary Harder, personal conversation with author; Neufeld Harder, 10; personal conversation with former associate pastor, who does not remember an explicit apology, February 16, 2021.

43 Neufeld Harder, 10–11, 18.

behavior rather than verbal statements.[44] These behavioral changes were embodied in worship. For example, the presence of LGBTQ people among the congregation, both in leadership and as part of worship, slowly became normalized. One LGBTQ congregant remembers that "openness to the leadership gifts and acknowledged presence of LGBTQ people" were significant parts of our journey toward healing and reconciliation.[45] Another member remembered how in his quiet coming out to the congregation as a gay man he was warmly affirmed and later discerned to be part of the preaching team. He also reflected that these worship occasions indeed moved TUMC toward healing and reconciliation. Additionally, the joyous celebrations in worship of babies born to LGBTQ couples, of the subsequent parent-child dedication rites, and of the announcement of a same-sex couple's engagement and marriage were also vital to the congregation's healing and reconciliation process. TUMC embodied Kreider and Kreider's vision that engaging societies' painful and divisive issues in worship is core to being a reconciling community of God. Those whom God forms in worship, they proclaim, are a reconciling and reconciled people who dismantle walls.

Bevans and Schroeder extend Kreider and Kreider's vision by adding that to be God's reconciling community and to facilitate God's grace-filled action in the midst of widespread violence and tragedy, congregations must become communities of acceptance, honesty, and compassion. TUMC exemplified this in forbearance. Undergirding the growing embrace of LGBTQ people were the respect and forbearance that sustained discernment processes along the journey, which then gave rise to specific symbolic and concrete actions of inclusion and reconciliation. Some congregants, impatient for TUMC to be more overtly affirming and inclusive, advocated at congregational meetings for further concrete actions. While these proposals were not immediately approved, neither were they dismissed entirely; the congregation gave the proposals to a committee or study group for further discernment and action. One lifelong member who is straight reflected that we "have been willing to forbear different positions on LGBTQ welcome because we respect each other."[46] This forbearance also played a significant role in the journey toward reconciliation between straight congregants whose relationships had fractured in the 2003 discernment process.

Forbearance, however, meant a longer drawn-out process. I saw the heaviness, dejection, and pain in the faces of LGBTQ members when a decision was delayed or needed further discernment; I heard their pain and resignation—

44 Two exceptions, when TUMC used words, were 1) blessing the marriage of two congregants whose earlier ceremony had limited role for TUMC pastor and 2) Pride Sunday litany.

45 Peter Haresnape, personal correspondence with author, November 15, 2018.

46 Tobi Thiessen, personal correspondence with author, November 13, 2018.

and, at times, determination—in their voices. While forbearance was a positive force among straight congregants, it was not positive for LGBTQ siblings.

During these years, the various committees and task forces carried out their mandates with seriousness and comprehensiveness. They presented recommendations not with a sense of urgency or deadlines but "in a studied, loving way, and encouraged us to move along together."[47] Former pastor Marilyn Zehr, who came out as LGBTQ in 2016, remembers the crucial importance of "listening, listening and more listening . . . to every single voice . . . honouring resistance as well as affirmation" as the congregation moved carefully toward supporting our pastors to marry same-sex couples.[48] That was the lasting impact of the 2003 sexuality statement that ended with a congregational covenant to remain in community in spite of hurts and disagreements, with a commitment to continued dialogue and discernment.

Zehr identifies how TUMC's practice echoed Bevans and Schroeder's focus on Spirit-led listening and dialogue infused with humility. Congregational listening circles were crucial during the 2016 journey when the lead pastor revealed her LGBTQ identity. The former associate pastor attended one such circle where she experienced worship and heard an apology: "Near the beginning of the circle someone said, 'We did it wrong 13 years ago, and I don't want to make that mistake again' looking right at me. That felt like an apology." Almost all in the circle referenced wanting to right past wrongs.[49]

TUMC's welcome statement—"We welcome people of all sexual orientations"—is another example of the respect and forbearance that sustained discernment processes. Gradually becoming prominent in worship services, the welcome signaled the move toward fuller LGBTQ inclusion, while at the same time confessing that the congregation was still on the journey. Its framing—"although we don't always agree with one another, we share a belief in Christ and a desire to be his followers"—turned out to be very valuable. One congregant reflected that it allowed some to "hold a minority view but still feel part of the community."[50] At the same time, Neufeld Harder suggests, the statement did not "encourage us as a congregation to become a strong advocate for LGBTQ persons by joining a more activist movement."[51] This again required forbearance by those who desired such a level of inclusion and welcome. Eventually the congregation dropped the caveat that we don't always agree with one another.

---

47 Thiessen.

48 Marilyn Zehr, personal correspondence with author, November 19, 2018; Thiessen, personal correspondence.

49 Personal communication with the former associate pastor, February 16, 2021.

50 Tobi Thiessen, personal correspondence.

51 Neufeld Harder, 8.

Solid forbearance and trust along the reconciliation journey resulted in the later conflict-free decision to allow TUMC pastors to marry LGBTQ couples. The Board led careful dialogue with both individuals and the congregation in formal meetings as they developed the proposal. When the Board finally presented it to the congregation for a decision, a microphone was passed along all the rows of chairs for everyone to give their response individually. Neufeld Harder recalls: "As I heard person after person say: 'I agree,' my eyes filled with tears. Some of these persons had been very opposed 13 years ago. I also heard a few say that though they personally did not agree, they would not stand in the way of the decision. There was a holy moment when consensus was reached."[52] Numerous LBGTQ congregants and allies wept with a mix of relief, sadness, and joy.

A holy moment, indeed, and it was remembered as such by many congregants.[53] And worship was central to every step on this holy journey toward healing and reconciliation. As former pastor Harder reflected, "In the end, we all (people on both sides of the issue) came to the realization that our worship of God through Jesus, was more basic and more important than were our differences and disagreements . . . no matter how upset we were with each other." He suggests, "Our worship held us together when our theology and our reading of the Bible didn't."

The missional witness implications of this realization are not to be minimized. As Cardoza-Orlandi, Roth, Dueck, and Kreider and Kreider correctly proclaim, worship is the core of all mission and witness. Moreover, Harder suggests that the congregation's brokenness and pain laid and confessed before God has made TUMC "a much stronger congregation now than we were then." He concludes, "Our worship is a key part of that strength."[54]

Another holy worship-filled moment was hiring a pastor who is LGBTQ, whose same-sex marriage TUMC had celebrated. This step on the journey was heard across the North American Mennonite LGBTQ community and in the LGBTQ Christian community in Toronto[55] as it echoed Bevans and Schroeder's passion for justice and reconciliation between oppressed and marginalized peoples and those who for centuries have oppressed and marginalized them. In contrast, the Mennonite missiologists explored in this article focus primarily on individual reconciliation—with God and with others—and thus are less helpful in framing theologically how missional worship extends the ministry of recon-

52 Neufeld Harder, 11.

53 "On the Way Café (adult Christian education class), November 25, 2018, author's notes.

54 Gary Harder, personal correspondence with author.

55 Pieter Niemeyer, personal conversation.

ciliation to broken relationships between groups where historic injustice and harm have been inflicted and suffered.

While the hiring of a pastor who identified as LGBTQ declared loudly that the congregation's inclusion was full and unfettered, TUMC would do well to remember Bevans and Schroeder's witness that reconciliation is "offered first and foremost by the victims of injustice and violence."[56] Embracing this truth could require, for example, that TUMC ask LGBTQ congregants what else is needed on the journey toward reconciliation. Have we listened deeply enough to their pain of rejection, their courage amid profound vulnerability when we straight congregants examined, discussed, and critiqued their identities and lives? While we as a congregation have shown numerous concrete steps of repentance, I wonder if we have fully heard our LGBTQ siblings' experiences of rejection and marginalization by the church. We expressed our repentance and apology primarily in changed behavior; perhaps a comprehensive repentance and apology along with a request for forgiveness expressed explicitly in worship would be another step on our journey of reconciliation with our LGBTQ siblings. Whatever the next steps are, we as the church are called to, in Bevans and Schroeder's words, "witness in its life and proclaim in fearless hope that God's grace *does* heal."[57]

IV. Mission: Reconciliation as a Journey

Reconciliation has been a journey for TUMC rather than a well-defined process. The work of the theologians explored in this article—other than Legge, and Bevans and Schroeder—portray reconciliation as restored relationships that happen as a matter of course. TUMC's journey shows the need for significant missiological nuance. In addition, the congregation's journey involved several sets of broken relationships, as delineated in the case study introduction. This presents complexity that the missiological voices did not address in their treatment of reconciliation in worship.

TUMC took numerous solid steps along the journey while omitting or not completing other necessary ones. Legge is alone among the theological writers in noting the various crucial components in moving toward right relationships: truth telling, lamentation, repentance, and reparation are some of them.[58] TUMC could have benefited from a comprehensive framework of a reconciliation journey, especially on the importance of deep listening to the wounded, and of explicit apology.

---

56 Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 70–71.

57 Bevans and Schroeder, 70–71.

58 See also Bergen, footnote 8.

Along the journey, the congregation embodied steps of reconciliation in worship. Bevans and Schroeder, along with Dueck, best articulate TUMC's lived experience with the symbiotic relationship of worship and reconciliation. TUMC's journey also exemplifies Bevans and Schroeder's counsel that the path toward reconciliation requires a spirituality rather than a strategy. TUMC lived our spirituality out in worship in Sunday morning services and in many leadership meetings during the week.

Observing TUMC as a case study, in the context of a more expansive definition of worship, we can see these steps and leaps toward reconciliation as central to the church's mission and witness as Paul first articulated in 2 Corinthians 5:18–19: "All this is from God, who reconciled us through Christ—and made us ministers of that reconciliation. This means that through Christ, the world was fully reconciled again to God, who didn't hold our transgressions against us, but instead entrusted us with this message of reconciliation."[59]

59 *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), slightly adapted by the author.