

GET YOUR PROVOCATIVE ON

Good Morning. My name is Katie Hochstedler, and I work as a full-time volunteer with Brethren Mennonite Council as the coordinator of our youth and young adults program. I'm happy for the opportunity to speak to you today.

A friend of mine recently asked me why I do what I do. Why am I signing up to serve with BMC for another year as a volunteer living on a meager stipend? Why haven't I given up on the church and shaken the dust from my sandals? I don't remember exactly what my response to her was, but here are a few thoughts I now have in answer to that question.

A couple of years ago, nearing the end of college, I felt the need to decide what my relationship with the church was going to be. I was feeling pretty negative about the church. Through coming out in college, I had begun to see a shadow side of the beloved denomination I had grown up in that had played a major role in my formation. What I was beginning to experience was the duplicitous nature of the institutional church that, on one hand, espouses values of love, acceptance, holiness, peace, justice, mercy and integrity but sometimes acts in ways that are hurtful, political, exclusionary, deceitful and moralistic. I'm afraid it took the experience of marginalization to fully come to this conclusion, but with that realization came the question, "Can I, with integrity, continue to be part of this?" Is a slow-to-change, homophobic, hierarchical, often racist and patriarchal institution relevant to me? The problem for me was that I was expecting my church to put into practice values I've learned in my 24 years of Mennonite church, Mennonite camp, Mennonite high school, Mennonite service and Mennonite College. I was listening all those years, and I believed them when they taught me those values. I expected more of the Body of Christ, but I had hope that it could be better. How could I continue to participate in a church that's soul is so damaged that it does not follow its own stated values? I concluded that if I'm not going to do what I can to make it better, I might as well leave, but I decided to stay with the church for now, to work for change and the healing of the church. While I still have hope, I will be here, a young queer Mennonite challenging my church to be better.

How can the church be better? We can begin by challenging ourselves in the queer community of LGBT people and non-gay allies to take risks and stand solidly in solidarity with those who are taking risks. It is no longer good enough to be quietly "personally supportive," to "fly below the radar," or to claim that you need to be cautious in order to "work from the inside."

I challenge all of us to consider privilege. Does our privilege give us a place to speak up with the marginalized, or does it hold us back from speaking up? Are we willing to risk our privilege? How much? What are the costs of claiming or not claiming our privilege? Those of us who are queer have a special perspective on heterosexual privilege. For the most part, we have had it and can have it when and if we choose to. Unless I am read or outed, I can usually choose when to pass or not pass. Daily, I can decide how much my perceived heterosexual privilege is worth compared to living openly and honestly as queer. When I choose to be open and honest, I take a risk that has the possibility of great cost but also of great reward – sometimes both. When I choose to pass, I am left with the feeling that I have traded in my integrity for a little privilege or peace and quiet. We queers have a special sort of freedom that comes from often having less to lose. To the extent that I hold myself accountable, I feel a freedom to challenge and hold accountable non-gay allies with heterosexual privilege to be conscious of how and when they use it.

Queer people should not be expected to take risks our non-gay allies are unwilling to take. So when an openly queer seminary graduate is denied ordination, I wonder how many non-gay pastors or candidates are willing to hand in or refuse their own ordination. When a pastor is told not to perform gay marriages, I wonder if he will continue to perform non-gay ones. When a lesbian couple cannot celebrate their union in their church, I wonder if their non-gay friends will get married in that church or find another location. When a professor at a religious college is fired for coming out as lesbian or transsexual, I wonder how many of her colleagues will hand in their resignations in protest. I challenge you to ask yourself what you are and what you are not willing to risk? What are the costs of what you risk? What are the costs for not risking it?

We are working for membership, ordination and marriage for queer and non-queer alike. But when our denominations and local congregations baptize us, ordain us, and marry us, will we just say "amen" and be satisfied? I hope not. I hope not because I hope we are not doing this work just to be allowed at the feeding trough of power and privilege. To many people right now, queer means not being able to fully participate in some of the systems of society – especially in the church. But, do we stop being queer when they tell us we are normal? Are we still queer when advertisers and politicians are tripping over themselves to march in the pride parade?

I hope that we will stay queer even after queer becomes normal because, to me, queer is the radical idea that normal is questionable. I am suspicious of Normal because it tells me that if I don't conform to the status quo, I am worthless. Normal tells me I need

to conform to the western capitalist dream of making a lot of money so I can buy a lot of stuff to be happy. I would suggest that we not just ask that the rules for membership, ordination and marriage be changed to include us, but to question the very relevance of the rules and the institutions they regulate. Our extreme focus on marriage prioritizes coupling over other forms of relating and our obsession with ordination places exclusive value in hierarchical power that often serves only those who have it.

I would hope that we aren't just trying to make room in faulty power structures for ourselves because our experience of marginalization gives us an opportunity and the responsibility to examine those structures. Our experience gives us a responsibility to not just work for our own rights, but to consider others who are marginalized by war, tyranny, poverty, the effects of environmental degradation, AIDS, racism, disability, and violence against women.

I firmly believe that this discussion can never end on the side of injustice for queer people. We have made progress, and the balance is tipping slowly in our favor, but this progress has come on the backs of generations before us. We must not believe the struggle is over or that we can wait patiently for the next generation to be different. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, reminds us, "Time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructive...human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability, it comes through tireless efforts and the persistent work of men [and women] willing to be coworkers with God, and without hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation."

Someday, when this point in history is a sad memory of the church's intolerant past, someone from a younger generation is going to look me in the eyes and ask, "What did you do to end that injustice?" I hope to answer, "Everything I could." *That* is why I do what I do. I stand here as a young, queer Mennonite asking you today: "What are you doing?"

Thank you.