

IN PART

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE BRETHREN IN CHRIST COMMUNITY IN THE U.S.

Fall/Winter 2015

HIGHER LOVE

RISING WITH HUMILITY, GRACE,
AND TRUTH IN THE PURSUIT
OF SEXUAL HOLINESS



THE VIEW FROM HERE

I was 14 when “Friends” made history with the first lesbian wedding ever shown on TV. Born right at the tail end of “the divorce generation,” my peers and I saw broken marriage as more of a norm than an exception. I’m young enough that openly gay friends, co-workers, relatives, and classmates have been part of my life since I was a teenager—they haven’t been confined to the closet. But I’m old enough to remember a time when cohabitation was frowned upon and the term “same-sex marriage” didn’t even exist. In a relatively short period of time, our culture has made a momentous shift in the way it views, experiences, and talks about sexuality.

But viewed another way, there’s nothing new under the sun. Broken expressions of sexuality have been around as long as the human race itself. And sexual immorality was no stranger to the Early Church. As Brethren in Christ, we believe that Jesus calls us to a higher standard than that of the world, and we also believe His Spirit empowers us to live a life that is holy and pleasing to God.

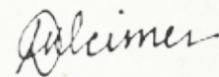
But many questions remain: What does it actually look like to pursue holiness with our sexuality? How do we honor marriage while also valuing the celibate life? How do we relate to people in our society whose sexual lifestyles differ from our own?

[A note here: In this issue, we have used a variety of terms such as “heterosexual,” “gay,” and “LGBTQ”—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer. While we may not always find

these labels helpful within the paradigm of a life transformed by God, these are the terms our culture uses. While of course we are not of this world, we certainly remain in it, and we are charged with sharing the Gospel with those who have not heard it. This requires us to be at least conversant, if not fluent, in the language of those around us—even if we speak a very different dialect amongst fellow Jesus-followers.]

This issue engages the conversation about human sexuality—a gift from God that deserves respect and careful stewardship. In keeping with our Anabaptist tradition, we have tried wherever possible to steer clear of political and legislative arguments—what our forebears would have called “the matters of the kingdom of this world.” These matters deserve our attention, to be sure, but they must not be allowed to eclipse the primary question for followers of Jesus: How does Jesus want us to live and love?

It’s not an easy question, but as we ask it together, spurring one another on, we can be confident that God will meet us, filling us with grace and truth as we seek Him.



Dulcimer Hope Brubaker,
guest editor

IN YOUR WORDS

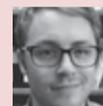
What a joy your Spring/Summer 2015 magazine has given me! Thank you for sending it! What a “WOW!” of a cover! I was not able to turn to the first page until I answered the question, “What’s your cause?”: “All of them!” Reading through the content had me laughing, crying, weeping, and just being thankful.

God bless you, with love and respect,
Betty Lou Olson
Calico Rock, Ark.

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Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. I Corinthians 13:12

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MANY ANABAPTISTS, ONE GLOBAL BODY

*MWC PA 2015 draws believers
from all over the world*

“The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12:12, NLT).

Pounding nails may be the last activity one might expect at an international church convention, but for many at the Mennonite World Conference PA 2015 (MWC), it was a perfect fit.

Every afternoon, just outside the air-conditioned halls of the Harrisburg (Pa.) Farm Show Complex, two prefabricated houses were built by participants looking for a way to use their muscles that would connect meaningfully to their faith.

Participants included people of all ages, many of them inexperienced in construction. Darwin Villacis, part of a mission church in Ecuador, contributed two afternoons to the project in order to observe how North Americans built their houses.

“I have talent in my hands; I don’t have talent with my words and my tongue,” said the 47-year-old mechanic.

Darwin joined more than 7,500 Anabaptists from 65 countries for a week of worship, fellowship, and vision at MWC in Harrisburg, Pa., in late July. The assembly convenes once every six years and encompasses a wide variety of components, including global worship, teaching, workshops, and service projects.



↑ A group of volunteers works together to build a prefabricated house for Mennonite Disaster Service during MWC 2015.



↑ A volunteer for the Youth Impact Project searches for the perfect pair of shoes for a local child in need.



↑ The roof of a local BIC church member's home in Bihar lays crumpled following a devastating cyclone in April.

A NEW NORMAL IN NEPAL

*Picking up pieces
in the aftermath
of devastating
earthquakes*

On April 25, 2015, a massive earthquake struck Nepal’s capital,

Kathmandu. The 7.8-magnitude quake set off a series of aftershocks—some as large as magnitude 7.3—that continue to this day. The destruction has taken over 8,000 lives and injured at least another 16,000. Over 500,000 homes and buildings have been destroyed, including many historical sites in Nepal. Countless people are left in the aftermath, coping with the loss of family members, houses, and their sense of stability.

The effects of these quakes have been felt by many BIC children and leaders near the SPICE hostel in Biratnagar, Nepal. Aftershocks of the major quakes have brought tens of thousands of dollars in damages to the hostel and surrounding facilities. Many BIC Church pastors and leaders are still unable to repair their homes due to a lack of available resources. Shemlal Hembron, national director of the BIC Church in Nepal, asks for support: “Please pray for SPICE children and God’s protection upon them.” To learn more and to sponsor your own child through the SPICE program, visit BIC-CHURCH.ORG/WM/SPICE.

BACKPACKS FOR ALL

*Ministry equips struggling
families for a new school year*

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40).

Two years ago, Ken Landis, pastor at Mountain Ridge Regional Church (BIC) in Dillsburg, Pa., was approached by some friends dreaming up an idea. Excitement hummed in their voices as they shared a vision of providing aid and hope for local, struggling families during back-to-school time.

“I only heard every third word,” explains Ken. “The last thing I needed was something else to do.” As the conversation continued, however, something caught his attention. “Imagine,” they said, “no one would get credit for it.” The fire was lit, and the Youth Impact Project was born.

Having completed its sophomore year, the Youth Impact Project is a community event, driven by more than 20 local churches, 20 businesses, school dis-

trict leaders, civic organizations, and over 400 volunteers. The event is open all day one Saturday at the end of summer.

In addition to a free lunch, each family in attendance receives free school supplies, books, shoes, haircuts, a bike helmet, a family portrait, a backpack, and a bag of groceries.

In 2014, the event served more than 2,300 people. This year, it provided supplies and services for over 2,800. Along with financial donations from businesses and private donors, the project received and gave away more than 2,000 backpacks, 3,000 books, and 4,000 pairs of new shoes this year.

Ken is overwhelmed at the collective response to this ministry. “For me, the most exciting part is watching all the churches working and serving together,” he says. “We are serving together to love the community as the bigger Church.”

Just two years ago, this ministry was nothing more than a vision in several friends’ minds. Today, hundreds of families have been able to experience, in a tangible way, the tremendous love and hope of Jesus Christ.

SHAKEN BUT NOT BROKEN

*Cyclone in Bihar wreaks havoc
on an impoverished area*

Three days before the first earthquake struck Nepal this past April, a strong storm swept through the state of Bihar in eastern India. The storm brought destruction to several districts in the eastern part of the state, killing at least 32 people and injuring another 80. Countless homes were destroyed, as well as farmers’ crops. Trees were uprooted, blocking roadways and damaging infrastructure.

Joel Mirandi, chairman of the Brethren in Christ Church in Bihar, was directly affected by the storm. Strong winds tore through his home in Purnea, destroying much of his roof. Fortunately, his wife and three children were uninjured. Many other BIC pastors in the area have seen their homes completely destroyed by this storm. Joel asks the BIC U.S. to partner with them by offering prayer and encouragement as they begin to rebuild.

Adapted from a 2015 MWC story by Byron Rempel-Burkholder
PA2015.MWC-CMM.ORG/DOING-SOMETHING-ABOUT-FAITH



Sarah H. Bert (front row, center) had a knack for drawing in young women in her urban Chicago neighborhood, teaching them to both sew skillfully and to follow Jesus. She was known for buying perfume—something no respectable BIC woman of her time would do—in order to get the door-to-door sales girls to come to Sunday school.

Photo: Courtesy of the Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives

HEEDING GOD'S CALL

Serving sacrificially in the big city

The bustling metropolis of Chicago—choked by unemployment, flooded with immigrants, and plagued by tenement housing, unjust working conditions, and dangerous vices—was not an easy place to live in the late 19th century.

Yet it was the city to which Sarah H. Bert—a pioneering BIC urban missionary—moved in 1894, following God's call. Born in 1860, Bert was a frail, timid Kansas farmgirl who felt the Spirit drawing her to work with the

poor and outcast. Against all odds, she made the Windy City her home, ministering there for more than 50 years and becoming the first-ever female superintendent of a BIC mission.

Bert never married—not an easy decision in an era when women had fewer legal rights and less financial security than men. And yet her single-ness enabled her to more easily connect with the young urban women to whom she ministered through sewing classes

and Bible lessons. Her legacy can be summarized in the words she herself used to describe urban ministry in 1904: "Few would ever get to God if there were no deeds of kindness scattered along their path by Christian hearts and loving hands."



Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas is a church historian who works at Messiah College, serves the BIC Historical Society, and attends the Grantham (Pa.) BIC Church with his wife, Katie, and son, Lucas. DEVINMZT.COM

KATE VOSBURG

Seventeen years of campus ministry and God's leading have positioned her to bridge the gap between the Church and the LGBTQ community. Kate will now take your questions.

As a believer with a traditional view of marriage, what led you to LGBTQ ministry?

About five years ago, one of our student leaders was hosting an event and two presidents of LGBTQ clubs happened upon it. This student was chatting with them and suddenly felt the need to ask forgiveness, recognizing that Christians had sinned against the LGBTQ community. They were really struck by that, and it led to an "ally" training [a reconciliation process that trains non-minority students to be able to advocate for a minority group]. But it was going to be hard for some of the Christians to be "allies" because that required full endorsement. So the president of the LGBTQ group said, "We need to create a new category—'friend,' someone who stands against bullying, harassment, and anything dehumanizing." It was the first time that a place had been made for me. It felt like the grace of God. Previously, when people found out I had a traditional understanding of marriage, I was an enemy. The conversation was incredible. It didn't get mired in any political, divisive issues. A lot of trust was built, and about five people started hanging around our Christian group.

How do you talk to your students about sexuality?

I start off by having them agree to four anchors—Christ at the center, God's goodness, loving our neighbors,

and Scripture's authority. Then I lay out three positions: "redeemed sexuality," which says that because of sin, all of us need our sexuality redeemed, and that God wants us to live out our sexual lives through either celibacy or lifelong marriage between one man and one woman; the gay-affirming perspective; and "I don't know." Underneath the gay-affirming perspective, often, are deeper questions about how we interpret Scripture, whether or not God is really good, and if Jesus fully satisfies. Those, to me, are even more important discipleship questions that are revealed.

What do you wish people knew about Jesus?

That Jesus is at work in the world, making this a place that reflects the goodness of God—shalom. I wish they knew that God sees us and loves us the way that parents see and love their children; that God wants to give them the fullness of life and they can trust Him with that. And of course that means change, because all of us need change so that we can grow up to be more like Jesus.

How can we better love gay people?

We will serve people well if, at the same time we are talking about this issue, we are working on ways of actively loving LGBTQ people both within and outside the Church.



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MINISTRY:
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FAMILY:
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FAVORITE MOVIE:
The Princess Bride

FAVORITE BAND:
U2

HIGHER

RISING WITH
HUMILITY, GRACE,
AND TRUTH IN
THE PURSUIT OF
SEXUAL HOLINESS

by Dulcimer
Hope Brubaker,
with Alan Robinson
and Perry Engle

LOVE

C**CULTURE WARS** are not becoming for a people of peace. So when rainbows clash with black and white, it is not our first instinct to jump into the fray. But as our society fiercely debates the morality of love, sex, and marriage, neither is it helpful for us to stay silent. It's time for us to talk—with God and each other—about our understanding of sexuality, how we've come to be where we are, and how Jesus wants us to live, love, and treat others.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Let's remember, we were sinners. But in Christ we are no longer defiled and defined by sin; it's been defeated. We have been reconciled to God and belong to Him, as well as to each other. We have a new identity—a new purpose—and as we walk in the light we experience God's transforming power to live a holy life. This is not from us or because of our strength, but from God and in our weakness. Therefore, as we talk about sexuality—or anything else, for that matter—we need to speak with a heavy accent of humility and a rich vocabulary of redemption, along with confidence that God's power is at work among us.

As Brethren in Christ, we stand against hate and dehumanization of any person. After all, every person bears the image of God. Yet, even if we feel we are personally extending grace and love to all those around us, we must come to terms with ways in which we, or the broader evangelical community, have failed to stand against the dehumanization of gay people. People who, like us, bear the image of God.

Brothers and sisters, any dehumanizing attitudes and responses must go. We might have to let go of some cultural assumptions, too. There are no guarantees that the world around us is going to accept or affirm our perspectives; in fact, we're assured that we will have trouble.¹ But we are called to depart from the patterns of the world—pride, self-centeredness, and mockery—and “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.”²

SEX IN THE KINGDOM

In the beginning, God created humans as sexual beings. Our genders—male and female—each reflect different facets of our Creator's image, and He made men and women with the capacity for a relationship that has emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual dimensions.³ In the context of the marriage relationship, sex binds two people together, expresses

love, and produces children. This, we believe, is God's intention for sex—but in a broken world, we see many expressions of sexuality that fall short of what God designed.

Sexual desire is powerful, and it is not always directed toward husband or wife. Sex is power, money, and status. It's a vehicle for dominance, marketing, entertainment, and self-realization. In short, our sexuality is warped. We may not all have the same type of brokenness, but there is a hollowness in every man's and woman's sexuality crying out for redemption.

Which makes the life of Jesus so incredibly powerful. Born with the same longings that we all inherit from our parents, Jesus relied on God alone to fill and complete Him. As we attempt to follow in His divine footsteps, we can derive a great deal of comfort from the knowledge that Jesus became human like us—finite, fragile, and hungry—and God was always enough. And He is still enough.

BUT WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT SEX?

In the Gospels, Jesus speaks about marriage, divorce, and immorality. He affirms marriage using the foundational statements of Genesis to describe gender and the sexual, spiritual union of a man and wife becoming one flesh. When speaking of sexual immorality, He used the word *porneia*—referring categorically to any sexual activity outside of male-female marriage.⁴ This would be a clear word to His audience, who shared a long-established Jewish understanding of sexual sin. Jesus also describes sexual sin, along with all forms of immorality, as coming from within the heart—evil thoughts that defile.

In His sermon on the mount, Jesus taught an even narrower understanding of God-honoring sexuality than Jewish law required:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”⁵

1 John 16:33
2 Matthew 6:33
3 Genesis 1:27
4 Matthew 15:19
5 Matthew 5:27–29

Rolling out this new code of ethics, Jesus goes beyond moral obligation, loyalty, and honor to expose our hearts and our minds. This doesn't sound like a teacher who's broadening the definition of godly sex; it's the exhortation of a teacher who's raising the bar.

THE LEGACY OF THE LAW

By modern (and ancient) standards, the bar was already pretty high. The law given to Moses, as recorded in Leviticus, states unequivocally that to have sex with a close relative, with someone else's spouse, with someone of the same sex, or with an animal is to *defile oneself*—the opposite of sexual holiness.⁶ Because Jesus has atoned for our sins, and because we do not live in the theocracy of ancient Israel, we no longer live by the judicial laws of the Old Testament—and, therefore, are not bound to carry out the severe punishments prescribed in Leviticus 20. Jesus' blood covers our sins, but it does not shift the moral boundaries God has put in place for humanity. Like any loving parent, God has set guidelines for our own protection, nurture, and well-being.

Paul knew these guidelines well and insisted that the Early Church “flee from sexual immorality,” employing the same broadly applicable word for “sexual immorality” used by Jesus and extensively by the apostles and New Testament scriptures.⁷ Some writers call for a different interpretation of Paul's letters, suggesting that Paul didn't really condemn gay sex;⁸ he was simply denouncing lust and idolatry.⁹ But Paul's letter to the Romans describes a timeless human situation:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. . . . Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. . . . Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another.¹⁰

Further, in his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul declares that “It is God's will that you are sanctified; that you should avoid sexual immorality.”¹¹

For 2,000 years, this is what Christians in many different cultures and times have believed and taught: Sex is

Jesus goes **beyond** moral obligation to expose our hearts and minds. This doesn't sound like a teacher who's broadening the definition of godly sex; it's the exhortation of a teacher who's **raising** the bar.

reserved for a man and woman in the context of marriage. Ron Sider writes,

Some believe that the track record of evangelicals is so bad that we should just remain silent on this issue. But that would mean abandoning our submission to what finally I believe is clear biblical teaching. It would mean forgetting the nearly unanimous teaching of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians over two millennia. And it would mean failing to listen to the vast majority of contemporary Christians (who now live in the global South).¹²

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The Christian Church in North America is no longer unanimous in its view of marriage. In addition to the secular celebration of same-sex marriage in our culture, some energetic voices declare that any mutual, monogamous relationship can be pleasing to God, regardless of gender: From their perspective, it's all love, and surely God is for that. And, they reason, He *is* glorified in mutual sacrifice and commitment, even in same-sex relationships. But we Brethren in Christ

believe the moral and physical boundaries established at creation still have authority; therefore, same-sex sex is outside of God's plan for humanity.

So what about followers of Jesus who experience same-sex attraction? Are they cut off from love and any prospect of family? It depends on how narrowly you define love and family, but the Brethren in Christ understanding of sexuality provides for two options—marriage between a man and woman or celibate singleness—each an invitation to submission and freedom with an orientation toward God. Let's be clear: Married love is not the pinnacle of human existence, nor is it a human right. We do not need sex, romance, or marriage in order to be fully human. To be sure, humanity is called to “be fruitful and multiply,”¹³ but we would be foolish to ignore the positive role models we have in Jesus and Paul, who submitted their sexuality to God through relational, intentional celibacy. Sider points out that the traditional view of sex within marriage “demands celibacy for vastly more people than just the relatively small number with a same-sex orientation. Widows and widowers, along with tens of millions of heterosexuals who long for marriage but cannot find a partner, are also called to celibacy.”¹⁴ In light of this, perhaps the Church ought to put as much care into preparing people for celibacy as it invests in premarital counseling.

A HIGHER CALLING

It is important that we exhibit Christ-like humility in all of this. For decades, people living as lesbian, gay, transsexual, and queer have gotten a pretty clear message from the Church: Their sexual desires are not O.K. But just because one is married or celibate doesn't mean one's heart and mind are pure. In many ways there can be a temptation to hide behind an appearance of holiness while misusing the gifts of Christian celibacy and marriage.

God calls all of us to holiness and humility, especially as we face the debate about sexuality. Christian anthropologist Jenell Paris suggests that in the debate the Brethren in Christ have a unique asset to bring to the table. “Within our tradition, we have tools for conflict transformation—processes of listening, processes of holding onto ourselves when emotions heat up, and active listening. The question for us is, ‘How can we take conflict not as a problem to do away with but as the context for our faith in this generation?’”

A NEW CONVERSATION

The debate about sexuality and marriage is fraught with pain and all kinds of complexities that many of us would rather avoid. But if we remain silent, we run the risk of being unfaithful to Scripture and dishonoring our Creator. If holiness sings out in our actions and relationships, if our speech is soaked in humility and transparency, and if the Holy Spirit guides us, we can redeem this discussion and turn the current debate about sexuality into true communication and understanding.

As we talk about these important issues, it doesn't have to be about *us* and *them* or orientation or the laws of the land. It can simply be a conversation about what it means to follow Jesus with all of our being, including our sexuality. It will take patience. It will take earnest biblical interpretation, compassionate listening, and submission to the Holy Spirit. We will experience disagreement with other believers and, possibly, enmity from nonbelievers. But we owe God our devotion in this matter, and we owe one another—as fellow disciples—the dedication it takes to search Scripture and listen to the Spirit together. As we humble ourselves, love can cause us to rise in humility, grace, and truth.



Dulcimer Hope Brubaker is a member of Dillsburg (Pa.) BIC Church and the guest editor of this issue of *In Part*. Married with three young children, she deeply appreciates the opportunities writing projects give her to study Scripture, explore theology, and search her own soul.

6 Leviticus 18

7 1 Corinthians 6:18

8 1 Corinthians 6:9

9 matthewvines.com/transcript

10 Romans 1:20–27

11 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8

12 “Tragedy, Tradition, and Opportunity in the Homosexuality Debate,” *Christianity Today*, November 18, 2014

13 Genesis 1:28

14 See 12

SAYING

IT DO

TO GOD

How seven faithful believers live out their callings in singleness and in marriage

by Susan K. Getty



Our relationships help to shape us and affect our paths and the situations of our lives. The opportunities we have in life are affected by whether we are single, married, divorced, or widowed; and our personal connections may very well change the courses of our lives.

How we interact with our friends, relatives, and significant others also has spiritual significance—our human relationships color and change the understanding we have of our relationship with God and are the means by which we are conduits of God’s grace to the world.

Exactly how God’s grace flows out from us, however, varies according to our personalities, gifts, and whether we are married or single. The many gifts and advantages of marriage are rightly celebrated in the Church, but in 1 Corinthians, Paul also reminds us that unmarried people experience joys and benefits as well—including the opportunity to devote themselves more fully to following God’s lead in their lives (7:33–34b).

Our individual stories and relationships vary greatly, and yet we can see just how creative God is in using each of our relational contexts in the unique callings He has given us.

Doug and Barb Miller

Married 32 years
Global workers for the
Brethren in Christ Malawi



Doug and Barb met when they were each serving as single missionaries in Guatemala. With a shared sense of life purpose—knowing Christ and making Him known—they have journeyed through 32 years of marriage together. They understand vocation as the means by which they pursue their lives’ purpose, and their vocations have varied from school teacher, to missionary, to homemaker, to farmer’s hired man, to pastor, to church planter, to salesman. They have raised five children on two different continents and currently live and minister among the Yawo people of Malawi.

“We definitely feel called to our current ministry through the affirmations of Scripture, personal conviction, home church, and family,” says Doug. “We

cannot think of a time where we have been more fulfilled vocationally.”

While they depend on each other for support, they also find support in life through family, close friends, their missionary community, prayer partners, and mission supporters. Barb and Doug both share their individual joys and challenges with a prayer partner.

“As a single missionary it was easier to concentrate on language learning and to be free to spend more time with local people because of not having family responsibilities,” Doug reflects. “As a married couple we can relate to a larger and more diverse group of people because of our complementary gifts, personalities, and backgrounds. As a married missionary it also helps some local people to accept you, especially where singleness is not esteemed.”

For Dorothy, life has been full of opportunity. Faith and vocation have always gone hand in hand in her understanding, leading her to diverse teaching and leadership roles with Messiah College, the BIC U.S., and around the world. The Church is important to her, and she considers each job she has had as an opportunity to “reproduce herself”—to pass along her values and gifts.

An educator at heart and a gifted administrator, she has used those skills in a variety of positions. When finding herself at a career crossroads, she looked to God for direction. Trusting God to lead, she says, “A door would open, and I would just walk through it.”

Her professional and personal life has been one of adventure. Had she been married, she believes, she would not have been able to travel the world as extensively as she has. A commitment to family would have made that impossible.

Although she never married, never had biological children, she has an extensive family network. Several of her former students prefer to call her “Mom,” and she considers the children and grandchildren of a close friend to be her family as well. Looking at the richness of her personal relationships, she says, “I very much believe that investing in other people comes back to you in your life.”

Supportive small groups have played an important part in Dorothy’s spiritual journey. Her connections include a Bible study group, two book groups, and a theological discussion group. Friendships with both men and women have been important to her, as she appreciates the perspectives of both genders.

A recent health issue temporarily made living by herself a little tricky. But friends and neighbors stepped in to help around the house, bringing food, flowers, and their company—proving that being single does not equal being alone.

Dorothy Gish

Single
Former dean of BIC Equipping for
Ministry (retired in September
2015), Mechanicsburg, Pa.



Melissa Bigbey

Single, mother of two sons
Church administrator and
ministry leader, Revolution
Church (Salina, Kans.)



It may also be said that being married does not guarantee that one will not experience loneliness. Marriages can break down, and Melissa experienced that twice—first in her family of origin and then in her own separation and divorce.

“I never thought I had to have a husband to be happy,” she says. “However, in my heart I don’t think there was anything I wanted more than a whole, healthy family.” The pain of damaged relationships, she says, “is what kept me going back to Jesus.”

“We are all going to be brought to a place where God has us alone with Him at some point in our lives,” Melissa continues. “That’s just the way life is. But for those of us who love Jesus, we are given perseverance and hope.”

In that hope, she experienced a renewed commitment to live as she

understood God wanted her to live and was blessed with a sense of calling to her position as administrator at Revolution Church. She feels she has opportunities to use her abilities and also grow in new directions there, and she’s never felt more connected vocationally with her passions and gifts than she does now.

Melissa’s experience of healing and fulfillment as a single mom has enabled her to live as a witness to other single women about having a deeply satisfying relationship with Jesus. “For me, being single means I have more freedom,” she says. “Not having to please anyone but Jesus is awesome—sometimes scary and intimidating, but awesome.”

Looking to the future, Melissa anticipates the possibility of more mission opportunities. “The sky is the limit when you’re growing in Christ!”

While some pastors feel an almost tangible pull from God over the course of many years, Hank had no such direction. But, he adds, “Just because I didn’t see it at the time doesn’t mean it wasn’t directed.”

A native of Liberia, West Africa, Hank moved to Harrisburg after graduating from Messiah College in 2004 and began attending Harrisburg BIC. It was there Hank met Shell, a Pennsylvania Mennonite farm girl. They got to know each other as they spent time together with a large group of mutual friends.

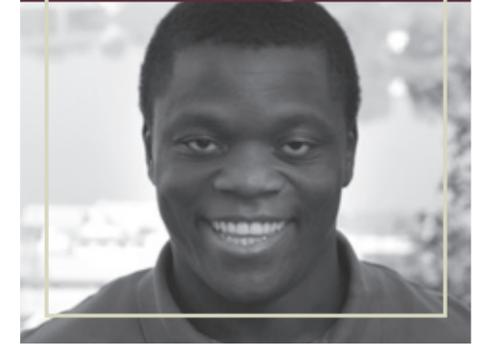
Hank says he’s always been flexible regarding vocation and thinks the questions to ask when deciding about job opportunities are “How will I be able to bring glory to God?” and “What am I doing to further God’s kingdom?” Being a pastor, he admits, “wasn’t even on my radar.” But since he loves the Church and was passionate about youth ministry, when a position on the pastoral staff at his church opened, he applied. And he was hired.

“Neither of us knew I was going to be a pastor!” Hank laughs. But Shell wasn’t fazed. Their relationship deepened, and as it did, certain abstract truths became incarnate in Hank’s experience. In what could have been awkward as he met Shell’s family for the first time, he instead experienced immediate acceptance. “It wasn’t anything I had earned; they didn’t know anything about me. It was literally because of Shell that I was made O.K. and able to enter into the family. That crystallized the idea of what Jesus did for me.” Since then, family has taken on a broader meaning for Hank, and the sense of being a part of the larger family of God has informed the way he views ministry to all people. While he cherishes and protects his time with Shell and their young daughter, Harper, he remembers that all those he ministers to are truly his family.

“The idea is that we’re supposed to bless others—whether single, married, widowed, or divorced,” Hank reflects on his years of serving God, first single and now married. “We are in this together!”

Hank Johnson

Married 6 years
Pastor of discipleship and
youth ministries at Harris-
burg (Pa.) BIC Church



Gabe had worked for 17 years in the secular workplace in a position he both excelled at and loved when he sensed God calling him into full-time Christian service. He turned to his family to confirm this direction. “When I shared with Rosemary that the Lord spoke to me and what He said, she responded by saying jokingly, ‘It’s about time,’ because that had been her prayer for me for years.”

This husband-and-wife team understood that a change to camp ministry was not just about them. “We shared with our children what the scope of the move and transition would look like and asked them to pray to discern if God’s message was any different than what He’d been saying to their mom and I. We wanted them to agree and

be aware that this was God’s desire for them as well as me.”

Time has proven that their communication with the Lord and with each other did indeed lead the family to a fulfilling life of Christian ministry. All five of their children have worked alongside Rosemary and Gabe at Mile High Pines Camp. But it hasn’t always been easy; Gabe and Rosemary have felt the challenge faced by all married people deeply involved in ministry. “Ministry can sometimes become or at least feel as though it gets the majority of your time, energy, and commitment,” Gabe warns. “This means that the marriage may take a back seat. This is, of course, unhealthy. We should never sacrifice our first ministry, our marriage, for our vocation.”

Gabe and Rosemary Valencia

Married 34 years
Co-directors of Mile High Pines
Camp (Angelus Oaks, Calif.)



Couples like the Valencias and single people like Dorothy Gish are deeply grateful for the Church—both as a place of freedom and healing to bring some of the challenges they face as married or single people, as well as a place to live out the callings God has given them.

But their stories also confirm the need to truly *know* one another; to seek understanding by asking one another about our joys and difficulties, rather than making assumptions based on relationship status. Only then can we truly share the journey of a life of faith with one another.

“Marriage has confirmed to us the goodness and love of God in bringing us together as compatible and complementary life partners,” say Doug and Barb Miller. “But we also saw our time as singles as a gift, a time to grow in our relationships with the Lord, as the One who meets our deepest needs perfectly. We think it’s important to understand that each individual, single or married, is of infinite worth and significance to God.”



Susan K. Getty is a freelance writer and artist who also works part time in the admissions office at Messiah College (Mechanicsburg, Pa.). She and her husband have been married for 28 wonderful years, and three years that were more challenging. They live in Dillsburg, Pa., and have two adult sons they love hanging out with.

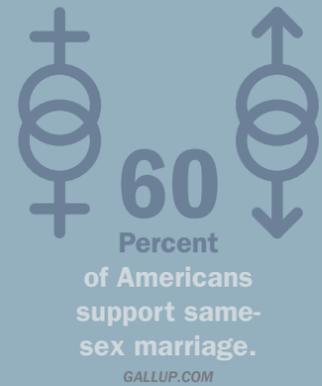
Photos for this story are courtesy of:

Paul Emberger for Dorothy Gish
Cory Keller for Melissa Bigbey
Muriel Kratz for Hank Johnson

BY THE NUMBERS

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Most of us have at least a vague sense that American values and lifestyles have shifted dramatically over the past few decades. But what does this really look like? From various national surveys, here is a glimpse into the present-day American experience of marriage and sexuality—*by the numbers*.



TO THE POINT

What challenges and opportunities do you see in leading disciples of Jesus to follow Him with their whole being, including sexuality?

▶ **Following Jesus Christ** means we choose to repent of sin as defined in God's word, turn to Christ for forgiveness and salvation, and make Jesus Lord of our life. Sometimes it's difficult to [do that] in the area of sexuality if one hasn't dealt with and healed from deeper wounds. I have to help some individuals make sense of the internal chaos before they can come to terms with the truth of God's word and how He designed sexuality.
—*Deb Wiles, Rock Island BIC Church (Herington, Kans.)*

▶ **Everyone is hungry** for life in Christ. Some are acutely aware of this; some misread or misuse their innate desire. In pursuing these opportunities, we may face a hindrance we are reticent to admit—that our spiritual parenting has resembled the confusion and coddling of our society's parenting style. Jesus both exuded spiritual health *and* effectively diagnosed and treated spiritual sickness. The fullness of His grace and truth is undiluted and radically transforming. This is reflected in the tenor of the apostles and New Testament church as we see in Scripture. If we examine and test ourselves, we should know if we pass the test. Fulfilling our privilege of witnessing to the world and discipling in the church, through the Holy Spirit's power, we have much to offer.
—*Nathan Stonge, Dillsburg (Pa.) BIC Church*

▶ **I personally think** this is an exciting time for us because we get to become leaders in grace. Practically, we have the opportunity to move from fear to grace by not participating in social media when people anxiously combat the side they disagree with. In wisdom, we look for what God is doing and for opportunities to reorient our lives to love, serve, and bless those who think differently than us. Finally, we should be sensitive to avoid tired phrases like "love the sinner, but hate the sin" that unintentionally communicate fear, not grace. We need to find helpful ways to frame our approach to this issue while remaining faithful to our historic understanding of Christian marriage and sexuality.
—*Jon Hand, BIC Canada*

▶ **A great challenge** in conversations of sexuality is that we often assume that each person has the same starting point, which isn't true. If we're actually making disciples, people with a variety of experiences and understandings will be joining us. And we must help each person ask, "How does living in God's kingdom change the way I understand everything?" If we are indeed trusting the Spirit for transformation, then the Spirit will indeed bring discernment, conviction, and direction. Then, as God's people, we are able to help one another move toward a Christ-like sexual ethic.
—*Keith Miller, LifePath Church (Newark, Del.)*

POINTS OF VIEW

SHARING PERSPECTIVES ON A CHALLENGING ISSUE

SHOULD THE CHURCH PERFORM 'LEGAL' MARRIAGES?

As same-sex marriage has become legal in many states—and now, in response to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on *Obergefell v. Hodges*—some evangelicals have begun to advocate that clergy members should stop signing marriage certificates. But does it really matter? Two pastors weigh in.

We are God's representatives, not the state's.

To begin this discussion, one needs to look at the phrase "legal marriage." The term "legal" indicates the necessity of following a law, which came about through a legislative process. This means that a definition of marriage is required—a definition that has been at the heart of the marriage debate since the beginning.

If one looks at the underlying reasons for the establishment of Christian marriage, we are confronted with the God-given purpose of the creation of children and the needed roles of father and mother in the growth and maturity of these children.

One must also consider the marriage covenant. This is an agreement between God and the man and woman who are entering into a sacred partnership with God. Oaths and promises are proclaimed before God and other witnesses, who are to hold these two individuals accountable for their declarations to God and to each other. Witnesses are required for that specific purpose.

A marriage becomes "legal" when individuals meet the criteria, per the state. The Church has agreed to be the officiant, representing the state in ensuring the requirements are met. But for Christians, this is not the point of marriage.

I believe that church should be the place where vows and commitments to one another are pledged before witnesses, regardless of the legal implications, and result in a covenant between God, a man, and a woman. This kind of marriage ceremony would be just that: a ceremony outside the legal bounds of the state's definition. Therefore, my belief is that the Church should seriously consider removing itself as the representative of the state and instead be God's representative in the establishment of the covenant of marriage.



Joe Laher is pastor of Christian Union Brethren in Christ Church in Garrett, Ind.

Let's not miss this opportunity to engage with our post-Christian culture.

When I sign a marriage license, the state makes no presumption that I operate as its agent. The actual agent of the state is the County Clerk, who must be satisfied that the legal obligations for a marriage are met. My privilege is to celebrate and solemnize the marriage with the couple through rituals ancient and postmodern.

In my home state, "clergy" of any religious background—along with judges, ship's captains, etc.—are permitted to solemnize a wedding. I always retain the option not to participate in a solemnization of marriage where I, or the Brethren in Christ Church, have fundamental questions. The effort to redefine civil marriage in the U.S. has received legal sanction, and we ought to respond by focusing on the pastoral effort of communicating more clearly the meanings of marriage within a biblical framework.

Thus, the so-called "Marriage Pledge," in which clergy vow not to sign marriage licenses, seems to me to be an artful dodge—a way to pretend the complex realities of post-Christendom do not exist in the U.S., and a way to avoid meaningful engagement with couples regarding the truth and grace of marriage in a Christian context.

Would I prefer my state to further separate the act of marriage into a contract of civil union and a separate, optional, religious solemnization? Yes. But I do not believe the Marriage Pledge helps us make such a helpful, clear separation of church and state. On the contrary, I believe it accepts the premise that in some instances, clergy ought rightfully to be agents of the state—a position for which I am unable to find biblical justification.



Jeff Wright is pastor of Madison Street Church in Riverside, Calif.

PARTING WORDS

IMAGINING A CHURCH FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH

Lessons from conversations on homosexuality, the Gospel, and the BIC Church

by PERRY ENGLE

Is it really possible to be a church modeled after Jesus, who came to us from the Father "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14)? Since May, BIC national director Alan Robinson and I have been imagining this high calling for the Church as we've facilitated the BIC Impact Seminar, "Full of Grace and Truth: Homosexuality, the Gospel, and the BIC Church."

From the beginning, I knew it would be a challenge to communicate how to hold to the truth of the Gospel while showing grace to people who struggle with same-sex attraction. Here are a few things I've learned along the way.

First, I've come to recognize that the issue of same-sex attraction touches more people than I ever realized. Over the past six months, I've had parents approach me seeking counsel for a child that has "come out" to them as gay; a mother ask me if it's O.K. for her and her husband to attend her daughter's same-sex wedding; and grandparents who have shown me pictures of a grandchild who is transitioning to the opposite gender. All have been difficult conversations fraught with pain. But every person has expressed immense gratitude for being able to talk about these issues.

I've come to feel secure advocating for a traditional view of marriage and sexuality while at the same time extending God's grace to those with same-sex attraction. I've come to

realize that it is impossible for me to separate my truth-telling from my grace-giving. Yes, the grace-and-truth balance is extremely hard to achieve, but I've found it easier as I've embraced it as a reflection of who Jesus is, and not just a part of my own agenda.

I've come to accept that it is possible for spiritually sincere people to struggle with sexual identity while still seeking to follow Jesus. Early on in this discussion, I couldn't help but think of Paul and his thorn in the flesh as an example of one who truly desired to be "healed" of his malady (whatever it was), but who was resigned to live with his condition. Although I know that through Christ we can be restored from anything that holds us back in life (physical, emotional, or spiritual), Paul's testimony shows that sometimes full healing doesn't take place, and that ultimately God's grace must be sufficient for us (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

I have also come to realize that it is perfectly acceptable for me to be a friend to someone I don't agree with. I am growing in my ability to respond to those around me as *people*, and not as *projects*. I have become more comfortable letting individuals know that I see them as much more than just a "gay person," and that I will refuse to accept their sexuality as the sum of their identity.

Finally, I believe that it is possible to be a church that is both welcoming *and*

I believe that it is possible to be a church that is **both welcoming and discipling** towards all kinds of people—even those with same-sex attraction.

discipling towards all kinds of people—even those with same-sex attraction. Redemption is a messy business, and the truth is that we have all fallen short of the glory of God and are in need of His grace and forgiveness (Rom. 3:23–24). The Church should be the place where people are introduced to a Jesus who meets them where they are, but never leaves them the same once they encounter Him.

For me, this is the wonderful good news of what it means to be a church full of grace and truth.



Perry Engle serves as bishop of the Midwest and Pacific Conferences of the BIC U.S. He and his wife, Marta, and their family live in Ontario, Calif.

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