

Editorial

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Most people think she was a prostitute. Luke calls her a woman of the city, a sinner. Her hair is disheveled, signaling her grief or her sexual availability or—most likely, as the story unfolds—both. Emotionally, she is a wreck. Today we might call her a stalker. She has learned where Jesus is, and she comes uninvited into the house where he is dining with Simon. She loves Jesus. Is she in love with him? What does she want or expect from him?

She behaves with perfect impropriety. Bawling without restraint, eyes and nose streaming, she bends over Jesus's feet and washes off the street dust with her tears. Even with a basin and clean water, this act is intimate, to be performed by one's personal servant, wife, or daughter. She attempts to mop up the mess with her unbound hair—one more display of immodesty. Finally, she kisses Jesus's feet and pours expensive perfume over them from a lovely alabaster jar she has brought. Where exactly would a woman of the city, a sinner, get such a thing?

As host, Simon is anxious. He is angry at the woman, and he blames Jesus for not taking umbrage. What kind of holy man would allow such inappropriate intimacies?

But Jesus, who loves both Simon and the woman extravagantly, takes a different view. He receives the woman's love as the love it is, however inappropriately expressed. To be sure, he reframes her lavish outpouring. He sees in it the hospitality in which his host is lacking—a lack rooted perhaps in the same hypercritical propriety evident in Simon's attitude toward the uninvited woman.

Jesus turns to Simon first. He engages Simon's interest and intellect with a parable and then gently assesses Simon's behavior. Finally, with consummate tenderness, he turns to the woman. To her, this woman who loves him abundantly, messily, he extends forgiveness, assurance, and peace.

If there is anything I have learned in working with this topic of sexuality and with editing this issue, it is that we are all the anointing woman, and we are all Simon, and often we are both in the same moment. Young or old, married or single, female or male, gay or straight, we all struggle with our messy, not-to-be-contained sexuality—and with a sense of propriety that can overrun its usefulness.

As always, you will find both joy and pain in the pages of this issue of *Vision*. Here you will find evidence that when it comes to

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our sexuality, the church shares the brokenness of the world. I take comfort that the purpose of this journal is not to provide answers but to contribute to a lively dialog on important aspects of church practice.

Sexuality has many dimensions, and it affects the practices of the church in multifaceted ways. You will find traditional morality and traditional sexual values well represented in these pages. Through the ages, the church

has imperfectly but persistently stood courageously against sex for sale, sex outside the sacrament of marriage, sexual violence, sex for personal gratification or power. That courage is alive and well and being reformulated and reinterpreted for a new generation.

Sexuality is also part of our search for greater integration of faith and experience. We, the body of Christ, struggle with our sexuality, sometimes in the same old ways and sometimes in new and unsettling ways. There are areas of ambiguity and ambivalence. There are areas of disagreement. There are controversies aplenty in this delicate arena of our human being. In no other area of our lives are we more vulnerable, more exposed, with fewer defenses. All who contributed articles for this issue took risks, and I am grateful for their willingness to serve the church by thinking and writing with such care and honesty.

We determined at the outset that the divisive topic of homosexual sexuality should not dominate the issue as it has dominated so many recent discussions in church and society. We also felt that our work would be incomplete without an article on the topic. Sarah MacDonald has written a gentle, heartfelt piece making the point that until by grace we can claim who we are and make

honest confession, we cannot own our vocation and move on in discipleship. It is a remarkable statement by someone who loves the church deeply and also happens to be lesbian.

As educational institutions, we struggled with whether we should print this article. Words on paper put us at greater risk than do other forms of communication. Of course, as is the case with every article we print in *Vision*, the views are those of the author and do not represent the position of either Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary or Canadian Mennonite University, where our confessions of faith provide a vital anchor for our theology and practice even as we work with a range of convictions similar to that in the church at large.

We do worry. We have vivid memories of past trauma. We fear repercussions. We do not wish to polarize the church further. We do not want to compromise our commitment to provide safe space for voices on all sides to be heard and respected in our classrooms and assemblies. We do not want to alienate those who serve the church through either the spiritual disciplines of study or the spiritual disciplines of giving. We find stories powerful but are unsure about how to evaluate them in theological and ethical work.

We considered publishing blank pages as a confession of where we are: afraid to print anything on this topic. Try as we did to present those blank pages in the spirit of lament, they did not communicate well. To some previewers they communicated a level of conflict within the institutions that does not exist. To others they communicated a protest against censorship. In the end, *Vision* is not about protest. *Vision* is about learning how to talk to one another in the church, even when we find empathy elusive.

As you read this issue, I invite you to let the anointing woman and Simon be your companions on the journey. Jesus loved them both and also called both beyond where they were. Our obsessive emotion and our hypercritical accusation, our abundant love and our thoughtful decency—all are bound up somehow in our yearning to know and be known, by the other and by God. Every article in this issue finds us, in some way, in Simon's uncomfortable living room. It is a living room we find in our hearts, in our congregations, and in our educational institutions. It is a living room in which Jesus meets us and calls us into the loving embrace of the one who created us in the image of God, male and female.