

Why I am not part of the church

Shane Miller

I grew up in a small Mennonite community in Iowa. I no longer identify myself as Mennonite or even as Christian.

I remember learning in Sunday school about heaven and hell, and that teaching never sat right with me. To me it always felt wrong that good people who are not Christian would be punished, condemned to hell for not knowing Christ. It always felt exclusive and elitist. I wondered, where is the compassion for these people? Why am I so special that I as a Mennonite would be saved while millions of people around the world would be condemned for believing in the teachings of another religion? What makes Christianity so special and right?

For some reason I was always concerned with what happened to people of such groups after their death, and that concern made me question my church's teaching. It turns out that I was so concerned because as a gay man I am one of those people who are part of an excluded group.

There are many things I appreciate about Mennonites: strong communities, pacifism, acts of service, programs that send people to help those in need in impoverished communities. But Mennonites, while so compassionate and caring, still ostracize people. They exclude people from the church, especially those with different gender and sexual orientations.

In the twelve years since I left the church, I have interacted with countless people of a variety of religions and backgrounds. I have come to understand that for the most part we are all striving for the same things: safety, love, and hope for a better future. These hopes and longings characterize people of all groups, religious and nonreligious.

I am all for believing whatever you as an individual want to believe. I have respect for Mennonites; their hearts are in the right place. But I would rather be part of a group of people who accept others instead of building walls.

About the author

Shane Miller is a registered nurse working in the emergency department of Meridian Park hospital in Portland, Oregon. He lives in Portland with his long-term boyfriend and two dogs.