

# Affirming pacifism

## Reading the Bible as if LGBTQ+ lives depend on it

E. Annika Krause

### Biblical pacifism and LGBTQ+ affirmation

With the exception of a brief flirtation with just war theory, I have always been a pacifist. Knowing that Jesus calls us to be representatives of God's peace on Earth has been a foundational part of my Anabaptist upbringing and faith. As Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9, NRSV). Growing up, I heard countless sermons on peace and nonviolence. Still, my understanding

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of biblical pacifism and peacemaking had to overcome several limitations to become what it is today. Fundamentally, I have come to understand pacifism not only as a refusal to participate in violence, or even as active nonresistance, but also as a refusal to participate in cycles of oppression that push people to self-harm.

Unlike my identity as a pacifist, I have not always been an LGBTQ+ affirming Christian. I grew up in a fairly conservative Mennonite church in British Columbia and attended Christian elementary and secondary schools.


All of these institutions, as far as I can recall, assumed or actively taught that same-sex attraction (or at the very least, acting on same-sex attraction) is sinful, and they had the Bible verses that "proved" it.

As I have matured and reflected on my relationship with the Bible, I have realized that I read Scripture through a pacifist lens. When I read the Bible, I attempt to walk the trail of God's call for peace. This perspective has forced me to reconsider traditional usages of Scripture when talking about LGBTQ+ inclusion. What follows is not a biblical argument for an

affirming stance but rather a reflection on how Scripture has led me to be affirming.

### **The Bible—from rulebook to revealer**

When I was a teenager, at one of my first congregational annual general meetings, my church voted to decrease its yearly donations to Mennonite Church Canada (MC Canada) because people believed the denomination was too light handed in chastising an LGBTQ+ affirming group for setting up a booth at the national annual general meeting. I also remember many members of my church signing a petition to keep the legal definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman.<sup>1</sup> At school, I remember the “different” kids being social outcasts and the word “gay” being tossed around as an insult. While many of these things did



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not sit well with me, as a heterosexual, cis-gender person, I perpetuated systems of oppression through my silence (and occasionally through my words and actions as well).

Growing up, I learned to view the Bible as a static document, a list of rules and requirements I must follow exactly. My reading of Scripture lacked nuance. My vision was too narrow to see how the Bible itself contains revelations that

changed not only history but also the ways people acted out their faith. Perhaps I even lacked the faith to believe that God could still be revealing Godself in new ways to us mere mortals who inhabit the church today. My understanding of the Bible had to mature and change with me as I sought to know God more deeply and as I struggled to bring together the Bible and my current context.

I do not think the Bible is overtly affirming. I truly wish it were, as that would solve a lot of problems for many of my siblings in Christ. However, the lack of clear biblical LGBTQ+ affirmation doesn't inhibit my belief that churches should be affirming and offer safe places of worship as well as support for LGBTQ+ persons as full members.

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1 I would like to note that the person who instigated this petition has humbly become more moderate and is now an amazing example of disagreeing in love.

Rather than being a book of rules and requirements, the Bible reveals a shalom-seeking God and tells about the people to whom God has revealed Godself. It bears witness to many changes—dare I say evolutions?—throughout the time it encapsulates. We see a move from polygamy to monogamy (1 Timothy 3:2). We see changes in laws (Acts 10:9–16), forms of worship (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; Mark 2:27), roles of women (Luke 24:1–10; Philippians 4:2–3), views on hierarchy (Matthew 5:1–12; Galatians 3:27–29), and, yes, even views of violence (Matthew 5:38–39). More recently, Christians have condemned the ownership of persons as slaves from a moral standpoint growing out of the morality we see in Jesus, even

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though the Bible itself does not overtly condemn slavery. And, as science has revealed more about the natural world, we have had to carefully and prayerfully take these things into consideration. Some prime examples are evolution, birth control, and vaccines. New revelations and discoveries do not separate us from the Bible or make the Bible less holy. Rather, they show how we too are part of the story of God’s people striving for shalom, discerning together, and adapting our lives to the new ways in which God is revealing Godself to us. We seek truth in community, through the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:2; James 3:13–18).

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### **Affirming pacifism entails LGBTQ+ inclusion**

Realizing my place in God’s story—through time, study, prayer, and having a friend coming out—has convinced me that I need to be an active ally within my church community and beyond it. Through many years of study and contemplation, I have concluded that pacifism and LGBTQ+ inclusion are intrinsically intertwined. Today, as an affirming Christian and the pastor of an affirming church, I am able to say that I am whole-heartedly inclusive (but still human and prone to error and blind spots) in large part because of the pacifism I learned from Scripture and my church community. To be anything less than affirming would, in my mind, be to perpetuate systems of violence.

That is a bold statement, so let me explain. In the average church, regardless of that church’s stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion, there are LGBTQ+ persons sitting in the pews. They are present, and they are lis-

tening to every word spoken from the pulpit, during coffee hours, and in youth group meetings. Our words, no matter how we intend them, have the potential to harm or to heal. We ministers, leaders, and church members must choose our words with intentionality. Every time we open our mouths to speak about inclusion, we have to assume that someone listening could be LGBTQ+ and that our words could have an impact beyond our understanding. I have seen the consequences of poorly chosen words and watched as friends walked out of church for the last time because the church asked them or their friends to choose between their sexual orientation or gender identity and the church.

A handful of years ago, the church I grew up in struggled with MC Canada's decision to accept affirming churches. The pastors at the time



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repeatedly pushed for our congregation to leave MC Canada and preached sermons insisting that one could not be LGBTQ+ or an ally and still be a faithful Christian. They even proclaimed from the pulpit that those who are affirming or think we can agree to disagree should not take communion because they eat and drink judgment upon themselves. The church quickly splintered into factions. While the pastors did not get their way, they did a lot of damage. However, the most devastating moment was when a handful of people in the congregation

came out to a group of us allies. Knowing that these people I loved dearly, a couple of whom were quite young, were hearing these words of devaluation and belittlement still grips my heart like a vice, even years later.

Many LGBTQ+ people live in a state of anxiety due to societal pressures and fear of rejection. To use anti-affirming language, or even to remain silent around inclusivity in the church, is to perpetuate cycles of mental and spiritual distress. After all, "it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45), and people are listening to what we have to say. Flippantness or outright negativity towards LGBTQ+ inclusion contributes to a state of internal crisis for those who are trying to find their place as LGBTQ+ Christians or wondering if such a thing is even possible in their communities. Churches that exclude LGBTQ+ people are causing harm to individuals, and causing harm breaks down the

shalom God has called us to strive for, which goes against Anabaptism's core value of pacifism.

### **Because LGBTQ+ lives depend on it**

The harsh reality that every church must be aware of is that LGBTQ+ persons, especially youth, are at very high risk of self-harm and suicide. According to *The Trevor Project*, LGB youth are three times more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to contemplate suicide and five times more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to attempt suicide. Transgender persons attempt suicide at a rate of 40 percent, overwhelmingly before the age of twenty-five. These percentages increase when the scope is narrowed to unsupportive environments.<sup>2</sup>

If you have ever walked with someone who is suicidal, or have been suicidal yourself, you know what it is like to look into a darkness so painful and void of hope that the person suffering is a shell of who they were created to be. If you have ever listened to someone tell you repeatedly that they want to die, you know that nothing causing that can be the will of a loving Creator. If you have paced on the edge of Sheol while reaching

in to pull someone out, you know what true despair looks like in human form.

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As a minister, the above statistics are constantly on my mind when I talk about LGBTQ+ inclusion. Once you know the numbers, how could they not be? These numbers and the countless stories, lives, and broken families behind them should weigh heavily on the church and influence how we live out


our calling to be peacemakers in this world God has entrusted to us. God has called us to give hope to those who are hopeless. We need to be aware of the impact our words and our silence have on the children of God.

I have also seen life-saving communities that do not force people to choose between who they are (sexual orientation or gender identity) and who they are (people of faith). These affirming churches and Christian communities have shown me spaces where inclusivity founded in Christ provides spiritual, emotional, and practical support to anyone who comes

<sup>2</sup> For these statistics, see the Trevor Project's facts about suicide at <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/preventing-suicide/facts-about-suicide/>.

through their doors. These communities understand the potential consequences of being anything less than embracing. Whether they express it this way or not, they are acting out a type of pacifism that prevents self-harm and suicide. It means fewer lives lost and fewer grieving families.

As people of faith, we seek to bring God's shalom to a broken and struggling world. Hebrews 12:14-15 (NRSV) tells us, "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it may come defiled." This



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passage exemplifies how God urges us toward peace and inclusion and away from the things that distract our communities from the grace of God that is in Jesus Christ.

God is concerned with human flourishing, so much so that God became human and lived among us. When we see God's children suffering at the hands

of the church, we have to step back and discern the Spirit's guidance. The burden placed on LGBTQ+ Christians by those who refuse to accept them as full members of God's church is overwhelming. Asking people to make a choice between two fundamental parts of their identity results in internal turmoil and suffering. When lives are in the balance, we need to pare back what we think we know and humbly turn to God. Together we must seek out what makes for peace in the name of Christ.

Whether we are pastors, leaders, or simply lovers of God's people, I am convinced that being affirming and advocating for policies that recognize the full equality of LGBTQ+ persons in the church are important steps for us in the path that leads to peace. This advocacy is an essential part of my identity as an Anabaptist Christian, a pacifist, and a minister. As Ephesians 6:15 tells us, "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."

### **About the author**

E. Annika Krause has recently been called to her first pastorate at Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal. She is from Vancouver, British Columbia, and while she misses the mountains and the ocean, she is already much enamored of her new church. She is excited to deepen relationships and to get to know the city she now calls home.