Back to Basics

Homecoming is traditionally a time for much self-congratulation within the EMU community. Parents, alumni, and administrators have a full schedule this weekend, telling each other that this is one heck of a university. Is the picture as rosy as the Homecoming Weekend brochures would have us think? Yes and no.

Whatever regular readers of the *Weather Vane* Opinion pages might have come to think, there are lots of things that EMU does well. Our cross-cultural program, which boldly goes where other study-abroad programs fear to tread, is easily the highlight of anyone’s college experience. Our faculty are consistently competent, helpful, and concerned with students’ goals. And who can complain about going to school within a few hours’ drive of both the Smithsonian and George Washington National Forest?

This said, there is plenty of room for improvement. Any criticism of EMU that I might make boils down to one thing: its core mission. Behind all the committees, vision statements, and university hymns, EMU doesn’t seem to know what it wants to be. It is plagued symptomatically by the larger Mennonite Church’s identity crisis in an age where we are no longer set apart by such obvious lifestyle choices as plain dress. Nevertheless, EMU needs to get its act together. What’s the point of even having a Mennonite university – any Mennonite university – if one really knows what difference being Mennonite makes?

No matter how much fun we’ve all had at EMU, no matter how good the academic programs might be for a school this size, no matter how worthwhile our spiritual growth here might be, all that matters about this university comes to nothing if we lose sight of our one truly unique feature: being Mennonite. There are plenty of small private liberal arts colleges out there, and probably quite a few that measure up to or surpass EMU’s academic reputation in one area or another. But if EMU can embrace its heritage, and be unashamedly Mennonite – to the point of actually explaining what “Mennonite” means in our recruiting brochures – then we’d be accepting that we’re one of only a few colleges that can do so. I can’t speak for the rest of Mennonite academia, but maybe we’d even be the only one.

Being Mennonite can make a difference: it means being able to present the world with a vision of living beyond the standards of the world, of living by the example of Christ rather than the rules of power or money. It means that EMU will need to commit to its identity no matter what the cost, to cling to it despite concerns about public relations and recruitment. It means putting our faith into practice.

~ jby

What “Homosexual Agenda?”

By Johan Grimsrud
Columnist

Like many others connected to the EMU community, I have been following the discussion around campus of issues related to homosexuality, from faculty dismissals to student-initiated forums and petitions to published rants about the "Homosexual Lobby." This is, overall, a good conversation to see happening around EMU (we’re at least near the point when a Mennonite can say "gay" without getting embarrassed and squeaky, which seems like a positive thing). Something still bothers me, however, about the nature of much of our conversation. Many of us still speak and write as if gay and lesbian people don’t actually exist. Or If They do, at least They’re outside, in the secular world, perhaps waiting in the shadows to corrupt Our children or even some of Our weaker-minded college students. Some of Us imagine a menacing "homosexual agenda," fighting at every turn to make moral depravity and fornication parts of the average American household. This is not true!

What’s more, there are actually homosexual people on this campus. In fact, They go everywhere, and I (the straight ones) go, talking to Us in stores and restaurants, asking questions in Our classes; some may even be writing articles about the dangers of the Homosexual Agenda! They seem to remind Us of Communists and witches (or aliens from those old movies with Sigourney Weaver, or Matrix villains), subversively seeking to tread on Our purity and family values. Still worse, the boundaries aren’t always clear: sometimes people are bisexual; sometimes a person’s understanding of their sexuality can change; sometimes I even think another guy is attractive! Scary, huh?

But I would like to make a point that goes deeper than a bit of sarcasm. People that speak out in favor of rights, openness, and equality to and about persons of differing sexual orientation do not constitute a "lobby" or have an "agenda." There is no far-flung, cigar-smoking, feather boa-wearing, back-room syndicate of gay subversives planning this stuff out.

Sexuality issues and conversations do sometimes have divisive and intense moments (and please, take my sarcasm in the good humor in which it’s given), but we shouldn’t let this cloud our understanding that there are real people at the core of this, as both participants and subjects of discussion. If someone complains when EMU fires, terminates, lets go, or doesn’t sign-the-contract-of-an-employee... after-a-quick-meeting-in-the-president’s-office (or whatever we want to call this “process” that seems to be well within the administrative options of our campus leadership), they are doing so from a sense of pain, compassion, and even fear and outrage, not from any gay-party agenda.

Our society, on both Mennonite and American levels, is actually a very, very inhospi-titable place to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. In fact, we still have a long way to go with women, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, young men and women in the military, and so on.

We live in a culture where many people go through their lives in long periods of fear, secrecy, perceived inadequacy, rejection, and all kinds of other trials because of our culture of prejudice. Why do so many gay teens and adults commit suicide every year? Why is a romantic relationship between two people of the same gender infinitely less likely to last or even take root than a nice, clean heterosexual marriage? G.L.B.T. people are up against a lot in our culture; we’re helping them by turning our moralistic statements about Them, as if They were no closer to Us, Our Community, and Our God than a ship full of Martians.

The Weather Vane

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