

Does Canadian culture form healthier men?

“Be a man.” This is what many males hear. But what does this mean? It’s often meant to tell boys and men to not cry or feel, but to be tough and in control.

Believing that healthy masculinity means something much more and better than this, about twenty men met at Hidden Acres Mennonite Camp in June for the retreat *Healthy Masculinity: On Being a Man*.

Focusing on healthy masculinity, we discussed...

- how we are formed by significant people, various events and experiences of love and pain,
- our human needs for meaning, connectedness, security, recognition and action,
- our fundamental identity as beloved sons of God who are called to follow Jesus as our model, and
- the important parts we all play to extend God’s love and justice in the world.

We had meaningful conversation around these points as we shared our life experiences. Then we turned to the social construction of masculinity—recognizing that while being a male (our sex) is given at birth, being a man (our gender) is largely shaped by culture. In an exercise to identify social factors that shape masculinity, I noticed something surprising. Sports, coaches and competition were not listed by these Canadian men like I’ve noticed with men in the States where I’ve led this retreat.

This observation led to an interesting conversation about differences between Canadian and U.S. cultures and how these shape our lives. One participant summed up the differences of our national core values. He said that while Canadians value peace, order, and cooperation, Americans value life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness... and competition.

Certainly it’s more complicated than this and our observation is based on a small sample of men, but the question remains: To what extent does Canadian culture support and shape healthy masculinity more than what’s practiced in the States? In other words, are Canadians providing a better answer to the question on what it means to be a man? Something to consider.

--Steve Thomas, U.S. Coordinator of Mennonite Men

