

Seeking Counsel on Resolutions on Same-Sex Relationships

From the Resolutions Committee to the Constituency Leaders Council, March 2015

The members of the Resolutions Committee understand our task to review whether proposed resolutions have met the criteria for consideration by the Delegate Assembly as described in the Executive Board policy *Developing Resolutions for Mennonite Church USA*. Beyond the submission requirements, we understand our work to be framed by that which advances the Mennonite Church USA vision and purpose. Specifically, we ask three questions of all resolutions,

1. Does the proposed resolution enable us join God's activities in the world?
2. Does the proposed resolution enable us to live and act in ways that allow God's healing and hope to flow through us to the world?
3. Does the proposed resolution advance our *Vision: Healing and Hope*, our *Purpose Statement* and *Our Purposeful Plan* that guide us toward God's preferred future for us?

Building on our vision and purpose statements, *Our Purposeful Plan* attempts to name God's preferred future for our denomination in several ways. First, our understanding of God's preferred future will be grow out of our belief that:

- Jesus is the center of our faith
- community is the center of our life
- reconciliation is the center of our work.

Second, we understand that the Holy Spirit is the primary agent of witness in the world. Cultivating an awareness of the Spirit's work invites us to increase the space in our lives where the Spirit to work. As we attend to the work of the Spirit within and among us we will grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace. Third, we have identified 12 signs that we are on the right path leading to God's preferred future. These missional character traits are listed on pages 6 and 7 of *Our Purposeful Plan*. Fourth, we have also identified some choices that we will need to make in order for God's preferred future to be realized among us. We will choose:

- common vision over divisive issues,
- high expectations over low expectations of church members,
- we will choose soft boundaries over hard geographical boundaries,
- we will emphasize resources over regulations.

And finally we identify several polarities that need to be managed. Two of these include:

- being culturally relevant AND remaining rooted in our heritage,
- creating what is new AND preserving what is good of the old.

Among the proposed resolutions, we have received three church statements that meet the submission criteria for consideration by the delegate assembly (Lower Deer Creek, Chicago/Reba, and Just Church). We believe that these statements represent the range of different views present in the church. They also represent three different preferred futures for our church. We do not believe that God is leading us in three directions. We believe it would best serve the discernment of the assembly to bring only one resolution to the Delegate Assembly. What is God's preferred future?

As we discern God's preferred future for our church, what level of recommendation does your table group offer for these resolutions to be brought to the Delegate Assembly?

Lower Deer Creek Resolution

God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world. The unity of the church is threatened by those who have intentionally disregarded our common confession of faith. By calling the Constituency Leaders Council to better lead from their role as "elders," our conferences and congregations will be better able to move in sync to accomplish the denomination's Purposeful Plan.

Background:

- Mennonite Church USA bylaws make it the responsibility of the area conference to maintain ministerial credentials and to provide for discernment, mutual accountability, and consultation among (individual) congregations related to our shared covenants. When covenanted agreements of faith and practice are not maintained within conferences and congregations, it becomes the role of the "elder" body of the church (i.e., CLC) to discern and recommend denominational responses related to area conferences (Bylaws of MCUSA, Article IV, 1.b.).

Purpose:

- In order to fulfill our vision, we must be clear about how we are restored to healing and hope. It is time for the church to teach the ramifications of Sin (CFMP Article 7) and Salvation (CFMP, Article 8) and affirm the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective as our secondary teaching document to Holy Scripture.

We resolve that the Constituency Leaders Council review the actions of all conferences who have acted contrary to our Confession of Faith as it relates to performing same-sex covenant ceremonies or credentialing persons living in same-sex relationship (Confession of Faith, Articles 17 & 19, and membership guidelines), and bring the Executive Board recommendations for sanction or termination of membership for such conferences (Bylaws of MCUSA, Article IX. 1.e.) by September 1, 2016.

Implications:

- Accepting this resolution reiterates that the role of CLC is to be "elders" in leading the church. This resolution may be rejected by those who desire a strictly congregational polity where mutual accountability is not desired.
- With these implications in mind, the resolution provides a point of reference for the church. It does not introduce anything new with the exception that it amplifies the work of the CLC as it works across the church.
- Delegates, by approving this resolution, will be informing their conference leadership of their desire to maintain the current Confession and Guidelines for teaching and guidance of the church.

Sponsorship: Lower Deer Creek Mennonite Church, Kalona, Iowa (Central Plains Mennonite Conference). Endorsed by leaders from North Central Conference, leaders from Christ Community Church, Des Moines, Iowa (Central Plains Conference) and four other individuals (including two pastors).

Chicago/Reba Resolution

The ways in which we have engaged the decades-long conflict in the church over issues related to human sexuality have diverted us from our central mission, divided us from each other, and damaged the name of Christ in the world. While acknowledging different interpretations, we affirm the centrality of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture as an essential part of our collective discernment. We also affirm the goodness of marriage, singleness, celibacy, sexual intimacy within a marriage covenant, and fidelity for all people, and we acknowledge that there is currently not consensus within MC USA on whether it is appropriate to bless Christians who are in same-sex covenanted unions. Because God has called us to seek peace and unity as together we discern and seek wisdom on these matters, we call on all those in MC USA to offer grace, love, and forbearance toward conferences, congregations, and pastors in our body who, in different ways, seek to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ on matters related to same-sex covenanted unions.

Chicago Community Mennonite Church and Reba Place Church wrote the following as part of their submission:

Mennonite Church USA is at a critical point – a Kairos moment. As a national church, we are mired in conflict. Many believe a split is inevitable, given our polarization specifically on issues of human sexuality and Scriptural interpretation. Conrad Kanagy’s report on the recent survey of credentialed leaders concluded by wondering about the dismantling of our church. Might a path forward exist that can be embraced by a significant portion of the church?

The reason we are submitting our resolution is that we believe it will allow us all to move forward as MC USA and be church together in the midst of our disagreements. The intended consequence of adopting this resolution is that churches of differing convictions about same-sex covenanted unions may remain together within MC USA rather than feel they must separate or be excluded by others. Specifically, this resolution allows us to confess our mishandling of this conflict, affirm ongoing ethical boundaries, name the centrality of Jesus Christ and Scripture to our collective discernment, acknowledge that we do not have consensus on matters related to same-sex covenanted relationships, and affirm terms for moving ahead together. The watching world may see a church that cares deeply about one another and has more to bind it together than its agreement about this one issue—and would need more than disagreement on this one issue to tear us apart.

We believe that many in MC USA share our desire for the above consequences, wish to have their own congregational processes and convictions respected by the rest of the church, and would therefore support our resolution. Many of us desire to remain in fellowship with one another despite our differences, and would welcome the opportunity to repent of the ways in which we’ve failed one another in these decades of conflict. Many of us desire to be liberated from the entrenched nature of this conflict so that we may be freed to join together in mission, service, witness, and joining God’s work in the world, allowing God’s healing and hope to flow through us to all the world.

We anticipate that some may reject our resolution because they do not believe the status of same-sex covenanted unions can be considered a biblically disputable issue and that the differences in our convictions related to human sexuality are too insurmountable for ongoing fellowship. However, we believe a far greater majority is eager to embrace ongoing fellowship centered on our core Anabaptist Mennonite conviction of walking in the way of Jesus Christ.

Thank you for prayerfully considering our resolution. We are Chicago Community Mennonite Church of Central District Conference, and Reba Place Church of Illinois Mennonite Conference. Our two congregations and members thereof find ourselves along the theological spectrum present within MC USA; we are not all of one mind on these matters. And yet we have come together to share with you our hope, our counsel, and our commitment to remain together as a diverse, discerning body of Mennonite Christ-followers. We are geographical neighbors here in Chicagoland but also represent two area conferences. We are united in our hope that the Holy Spirit will be faithful in completing the good work being done within and through MC USA.

Sponsorship: Chicago (Ill.) Community Mennonite Church (Central District Conference), Reba Place Church, Evanston, Ill. (Illinois Mennonite Conference) and North Baltimore (Md.) Mennonite Church (Atlantic Coast Conference). Endorsed by 12 pastors.

Becoming a Just Church Resolution

Whereas “the Bible is the essential book of the church,”¹ the foundational document for Anabaptist/Mennonite Christians;

Whereas

1. God delights in the diversity of Divine creation and created humankind in the Divine image (Genesis 1)
2. The Hebrew prophets proclaim that God desires justice and seeks to free those who are oppressed (Micah 6:8; Amos 5:24; Isaiah 1:17)
3. Jesus, who is the “center and fulfillment”² of the whole of Scripture, offers radical hospitality to those traditionally despised by the religious institutions of his day and teaches that love is the fulfillment of the law (Matthew 22:37-40)
4. The earliest church struggled with questions regarding inclusion of Gentiles and was led by the Spirit to fully and enthusiastically include this group that had long been outsiders to the Jewish people (Acts 15);³

Whereas the current policies of MC USA do violence to the personhood of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) people by forcing them to choose between full acceptance by their denomination and living into the abundant life to which God calls them;

Whereas the current policies of MC USA communicate demeaning and destructive messages that contribute to many LGBTQ people leaving their beloved denomination and even their faith in Jesus Christ;

Whereas the current “teaching position” of MC USA falsely labels all physically intimate same-sex relationships as “sinful,” thus leading some Christians to question their worth in the eyes of God and, in some cases, to attempt/commit suicide;

Whereas the ongoing conversation and discernment around issues of sexuality is being perpetrated at the expense of LGBTQ Christians;

Whereas “justice delayed is justice denied”⁴

Whereas LGBTQ Christians are gifted by the Holy Spirit to contribute to the body of Christ as MC USA seeks to “grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world”

Whereas the exclusion of LGBTQ people and their gifts harms the life and mission of the denomination;

Whereas the oppressions of sexism, racism, and heterosexism are inextricably linked;

Therefore, be it resolved that, as members of MC USA, we will

1 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 4

2 Ibid.

3 Many of these points are gleaned from the paper "Response to IMMC Statement of Charge against Karl Shelly" by Karl Shelly.

4 Martin Luther King, Jr.

- Repent of the violence our denominational documents and policies have done to LGBTQ people and those who have sought to support them
- Amend all church documents as needed to support full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the life and ministry of the denomination at all levels of participation and service; such amendments will include but are not limited to: the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, the Membership Guidelines, and a Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership
- Welcome LGBTQ Mennonites as a recognized constituency group at Constituency Leaders Council meetings
- Provide a generous seminary scholarship fund for LGBTQ students who are called to ministry and committed to the Mennonite church; this is as a means of offering reparations for the many called and gifted people who have been refused pastoral leadership in our denomination
- Extend grace and forbearance to those individuals, congregations, and conferences that will choose to remain in fellowship with MC USA despite being at variance with the inclusive position of the denomination.

Sponsorship: Atlanta (Ga.) Mennonite Fellowship (Central District Conference), Peace Mennonite Church, Dallas, Texas (Western District Conference), St. Paul (Minn.) Mennonite Fellowship (Central District Conference), Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster (Pa.) (Atlantic Coast Conference), Columbus (Ohio) Mennonite Church (Central District Conference), Peace Mennonite Church, Lawrence, Kan. (Western District Conference), Joy Mennonite Church, Oklahoma City, Okla. (Western District Conference).