



Executive Board's Report to the Delegate Assembly Kansas City, Missouri June 30 – July 4, 2015

*Presented by
Elizabeth Soto Albrecht (moderator)
Patricia Shelly (moderator-elect)
Ervin Stutzman (executive director)*

WELCOME

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! Welcome to the convention at Kansas City, and to the assembly which will gather delegates from across Mennonite Church USA. As leaders chosen to guide the discernment processes at the assembly, we cite the pastoral letter sent to delegates in April:

We come in a spirit of confession:

- We acknowledge we may have reached the limits of our human wisdom and entered a time when we are being called to walk by faith and not by sight.
- We acknowledge we have failed to equip our church to discern Christian faithfulness in regard to same-sex relationships, which has resulted in a breakdown of trust and love.
- We ask your forgiveness for when our leadership has been insufficient and for when we have not communicated clearly enough as area conferences and congregations were making difficult decisions.
- We confess the sin of placing too much trust in organizational structures and polity to reconcile our disagreements.

We come in a spirit of faith:

- We believe we are being called to learn how to be a church that engages in biblical discernment and mutual forbearance as we work towards Spirit-led understandings when we disagree, rather than solving our disagreements by separation.
- We invite you to join us in a renewed commitment to prayer and discernment as we prepare to listen deeply to one another for what the Spirit is saying to Mennonite Church USA in our time.
- We believe that Our Purposeful Plan imagines a future for us to be a thriving evangelistic and missional church that births new congregations and ministries across the country and around the world.

We come in a spirit of commitment, love and vision:

- We have been given a holy calling: to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
- We are committed to bear witness to the abundant life God offers to all who confess faith in Jesus Christ.
- We are committed to biblical faithfulness and biblical unity as a church.
- We are committed to helping each congregation become all that God intends for their life and witness.

As we prepare our hearts and minds in anticipation of how the Holy Spirit will work among us during our convention, we ask you to join us in the longing expressed in the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." May our love for one another and our fellowship in the Holy Spirit inspire us to embody the prayer of Jesus in John's Gospel, "that all may be one ... that the world may know."

INTRODUCTION

While this report is being presented by the two moderators and the Executive Director, we attempt to speak on behalf of the Executive Board throughout the report. As a board, we take courage when we see the various ways that God is leading our church. We want nothing more than to align ourselves with God's mission in the world and to invite others to share the journey with us. This report is designed as an account of God's work among us and to serve as a primary form of accountability to you as delegates of congregations, area conferences and constituency groups. This report is divided into three sections.

Part I contains a summary report of the activities of the board over the past biennium. You are free to discuss any part of that section with your table group, send a comment or inquiry to the Executive Board, or bring a question to the entire Delegate Assembly if instructed to do so by the moderator. Part II invites feedback or discernment from the assembly on a couple of items, without recommending specific actions to the assembly. Part III introduces the formal business for the week, along with some background material.

All of the decisions about the convention were guided by our commitment to the following vision:

*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.*

We hope to create the best environment for the discernment which lies before us as a delegate body. In addition to the broad [purpose](#) for the overall convention at Kansas City, the Executive Board agreed on more specific goals for the Delegate Assembly:

Process goals:

- To pursue all of our deliberations in light of our unity in Christ, particularly as expressed in the six statements of common vision and commitments named in our bylaws (see Article III, #2).
- To truthfully face our differences through honest and respectful engagement.
- To provide opportunity for every delegate to express their discernment regarding the most important issues at hand, whether by voice or vote.

Outcome goals:

- That all consider the possibilities for biblical/communal discernment.
- That we come to clarity regarding the future status of the Membership Guidelines and the ministerial polity document.
- That a majority commit themselves to our shared mission and vision.
- That a strong majority affirm the church resolutions voicing common commitments regarding contemporary theological/social issues.
- That all leave with clarity about the plans for a way forward in spite of our differences.

Since 2011, both the Constituency Leaders Council and the Executive Board have expressed a desire to base their work more fully on processes of biblical and communal discernment, seeking God's will for the whole church. In the same way, we encourage congregations and conferences to grow in their capacity to discern God's will together. This desire is reflected in the latest guidelines for developing and recommending resolutions for adoption by the delegate body. It is also reflected in the process for doing business at the Delegate Assembly in Kansas City.

In this vein, we have engaged the services of Jane Hooper Peifer, retired pastor of Blossom Hill Mennonite Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Jane is a trained spiritual director with gifts and a calling to group discernment. Together with Ervin Stutzman, she will guide delegates to use the principles expressed in the [Guidelines for Biblical/Communal Discernment](#) as they engage the questions before our assembly.

Further, we intend to use dialogue, discernment and decision-making processes which assure that all participants have opportunity to express their views in a respectful way. To help guide these larger processes of decision-making, we have engaged the services of David Brubaker and Larry Hauder. Brubaker is a professor and an organizational development consultant at Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. Hauder is a member of the Executive Board who has served for many years as a pastor, conference minister, and organizational consultant for Common Ground Conciliation Services, Inc. They will provide guidelines for and train table leaders during the first hour of our Delegate Assembly.

We hope to avoid the racism which easily creeps into assemblies such as ours, with a majority of white persons in attendance. To demonstrate our commitment to undoing racism, we have designated an anti-racism team to serve at this convention. The team consists of Calenthia Dowdy, Ewuare Osayande, Saulo Padilla, Elaine Enns, Yvonne Diaz, and Leo Hartshorn. They will provide a report of their work to the assembly on Saturday morning.

As usual, we have invited a parliamentarian to guide us in the use of Robert's Rules of Order as deemed appropriate. Ed Diller, an attorney with the Taft group and former moderator of Mennonite Church USA (from 2009-2011), will serve in this role. He will be assisted by Richard Thomas, superintendent of Lancaster Mennonite Schools, and immediate past moderator of Mennonite Church USA.

We are pleased at the good turnout of delegates for the convention. As of June 3, 814 delegates had registered for the assembly, up from the 627 who participated at Phoenix 2013. Overall, attendance for convention in Kansas City is up from Phoenix 2013, but still below numbers at Pittsburgh 2011. We attribute much of the drop in the overall registration this year to the "competition" from the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Assembly Gathered, meeting in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in late July. Both Mennonite Church USA and MWC have provided a discount for those who register for both assemblies, but many persons needed to choose between the two conventions. After serious considerations about the possibility of combining parts of our two assemblies early in the planning process, we decided to host separate assemblies in different locations.

I. Reporting items

Statement on Immigration

Much of 2013 Delegate Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona, was devoted to church's approach to immigration. In the closing session, the delegates asked the Executive Board to update the Mennonite Church USA statement on immigration, adopted in 2003. Tina Schlabach, the onsite coordinator for the Detention Center and Borderlinks trips for Phoenix 2013, graciously agreed to write the first draft of the new statement. Tina read through all the written delegate responses and listened carefully to Danny Carroll's presentation before drafting the first statement.

On August 15, 2013 a group consisting of Gilberto Flores (*Iglesia Menonita Hispana*), Saulo Padilla (MCC U.S.), David Araujo (Pastor of *Buen Pastor* in Goshen, Indiana), André Gingerich Stoner, Joanna Shenk, Annette Bergstresser, Tina Schlabach, Tammy Alexander (by phone) and Iris de Leon-Hartshorn met to edit the first draft. This draft was tested by a Mennonite immigrant focus group and immigrant leaders representing Hispanic, African, Hmong, Indonesian and Dominican immigrants.

In its February 2014 meeting, the Executive Board affirmed the release of the revised statement, which includes a list of resources for congregations and individuals regarding immigration issues. You can see the complete statement at http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Immigration_Statement_2014Feb151.pdf Iris de León-Hartshorn, director of transformative peacemaking for Mennonite Church USA, also coordinated on the development of a six-week curriculum, *Radical Hospitality: Responding to Issues of Immigration*, for use in Sunday school and small group settings.

Corinthian Plan

The Corinthian Plan continues to provide health, life, accidental death and dismemberment, and long term disability coverages, as well as a dental and vision option for the pastors and other employees of Mennonite Church USA congregations, area conferences and agencies. This report focuses on the congregational pool. The last two years has seen some decline in number of congregations and lives covered, but participation overall remains strong. Paid premiums continue to exceed claims by a small margin, allowing for a strong reserve.

One of the goals of The Corinthian Plan is to assist congregations to provide health coverage for their pastors where that is difficult or impossible. Over 100 congregations have received more than \$2.7 million in premium assistance from the Fair Balance Fund since the Plan began in 2010. This includes at least 25 church plants. This fund is maintained by participating congregations contributing \$10 per attendee per year. The subsidy program has been able to provide generous subsidies, but the current guidelines are not sustainable. Effective June 1, 2015, new subsidy guidelines went into place addressing the issue while seeking to maintain our goal of broad assistance.

Promoting health and wellness has become a main focus of The Corinthian Plan. Participants in The Corinthian Plan and their covered spouses are able to access up to \$600 (\$300 each) per year for filling out a health assessment tool and consulting with a health coach. The goal is to increase participation.

We will continue to monitor the impact of the Affordable Care Act on our Plan, but it has been minimal to this point. The Corinthian Plan is also monitoring the Mennonite Church USA context and how it might affect participation. The Church Benefits Board agreed in September 2014 to “grandfather” congregations ending their membership with MC USA. These congregations must keep continuous coverage to remain eligible. The Executive Board is helping to discern the best approach to the complex issues that arise from such transitions.

We must note two transitions since the last delegate report. Mark Fly, the Area Representative for the East Coast died suddenly in November 2014. We will miss his dedication to his role. The other major transition was the March 2014 retirement of Keith Harder, the founding director of The Corinthian Plan. Thanks to Keith for his strong leadership in the formation and first years of The Corinthian Plan. Duncan Smith (one of the area representatives) took on the role of director in March 2014.

The Mennonite Church USA Benefits Board oversees The Corinthian Plan. It is composed of Harold Loewen (chair), Marcy Engle, Steve Garboden, Marlin Groff, Dave Weaver, Ken Hochstetler and Yvonne Sieber. Joe Christophel, Keith Harder, and James Miller serve as area representatives, and Ingrid Friesen Mosier serves as wellness coordinator.

Part of the value of The Corinthian Plan for people is participating in the pool of fellow Mennonite church workers. As long as the value of this coverage continues to be strong, The Corinthian Plan will be as well. Thanks for your participation! For more information, see <http://mennoniteusa.org/what-we-do/the-corinthian-plan/>.

Discernment Group on Sexual Abuse and the church

In the spring of 2013, the Executive Board staff heard persistent reports that sexual abuse by John Howard Yoder, former administrator and professor at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, had never been fully addressed either by the school or the broader church. In its September 2013 meeting, the board appointed a Discernment Group to work with issues of sexual abuse and prevention in the church. The group includes: Ervin Stutzman and Sara Wenger Shenk, co-conveners, and Linda Gehman Peachey, Ted Koontz, Regina Shands Stoltzfus and Chuck Neufeld. In turn, the group invited Carolyn Holderread Heggen to serve as an advisor. She is the author of *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, published by Herald Press.

The group set out to achieve five goals:

- To review the evidence to document the scope of Yoder’s abuse and the church’s response to it.
- To publicly thank the women who “tenaciously persisted over many years to bring [Yoder’s] abuse to light to prevent further victimizations and to seek healing” and also

thank “those in church leadership who worked hard to hold [Yoder] accountable with a desire for his restoration.”

- To work through area conference leaders and the Mennonite Church USA website to provide resources for victims of sexual abuse and to encourage educational experiences to prepare pastors and leaders for caring for abuse victims.
- To arrange for a public service of lament, repentance and healing at a large church gathering, most likely the 2015 convention.
- To explore the possibility of a denominational statement addressing sexual abuse.

The Discernment Group has for the most part achieved these goals. The last two will be realized at this convention, along with a new goal—to receive an offering for a Care and Prevention Fund. The new fund will provide some material compensation for victims of clergy abuse and help agencies that work to prevent future abuse.

The group engaged Dr. Rachel Waltner Goossen as an historian to document the reports about Yoder and write an account of what she discovered. Her essay entitled “Defanging the Beast: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse” was published in the January 2015 issue of “Mennonite Quarterly Review,” along with a number of other significant articles about sexual abuse and the church. Goossen’s extensive research has brought a sense of closure to the many questions being raised about the nature and extent of the abuses perpetrated by Yoder and the church’s response to it.

To demonstrate a spirit of repentance and bring some measure of healing to the hurts which have been perpetrated by abuse in the church, the Discernment Group invited Mary Lehman Yoder to lead the planning for a Service of Lament and Hope. Other members of the planning group are Chuck Neufeld, Regina Shands Stoltzfus, and Hannah Heinzekehr. The service will be held at the Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral on Friday evening, 8:30–9:45 p.m. All are welcome to attend.

Discernment surrounding participation of LGBTQ individuals in the church

Although the board attended to many other matters in this biennium, it devoted an unusual amount of time to matters of faith and polity related to sexuality. Although our church has dealt with differences on this matter for some time, an action by a local conference to credential a pastor in a committed same-sex relationship brought the issue to the fore in a new way. The unrest that developed across the church in response to this decision focused for the Executive Board the necessity of developing our own capacity, and the capacity of other parts of the church, for working at how best to address churchwide disagreements. Therefore, the remainder of the first section of this report relates to the Executive Board’s response to the action taken by the conference.

In December 2013, Mountain States Mennonite Conference (MSMC) approved a request from their ministerial leadership board to grant a ministerial license to Theda Good, a pastor in a committed same-sex relationship. (Theda was not licensed until February 2, 2014). The widespread reports of MSMC’s action generated a significant amount of correspondence to Mennonite Church USA leaders, partly in response to a call to prayer issued by Ervin Stutzman,

executive director. Many individuals appealed to the Executive Board for action, as well as a number of area conferences.

In January, representatives of the Executive Board met with leaders of MSMC to hear about the background and process for the credentialing decision. In its meeting on February 13-15, 2014, the Executive Board considered their perspective, along with a summary of the widely-varied concerns expressed in correspondence to the staff. The board reaffirmed its commitment to the Membership Guidelines and the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* as the basis for working through the conflict. At the same time, the board recognized that MSMC's actions expressed the hope of many across the church who desire full inclusion for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters.

The decision in the MSMC begs the larger question of the best ways to tend the relationships between congregations, area conferences and the denomination. In response, the board appointed a task force comprising of members of the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) and the Executive Board to review the actions of MSMC as they bear on our life together. The members of the task force were:

- Patricia Shelly (chair), EB moderator-elect, Newton, Kan. (Bethel College Mennonite Church)
- David Boshart, EB member, Wellman, Iowa; executive conference minister for Central Plains Mennonite Conference (West Union Mennonite Church)
- Donna Mast, CLC member, Scottsdale, Pa.; executive conference minister for Allegheny Mennonite Conference (Scottsdale Mennonite Church)
- Gene Miller, CLC member, Wellsville, N.Y.; executive conference minister for New York Mennonite Conference; pastor of Yorks Corners Mennonite Church, Wellsville, N.Y.

As the first part of its work, the task force brought several questions to the March 2014 CLC meeting for discussion. Patricia Shelly and David Boshart also met in person in Denver with MSMC leaders. After meeting 12 times as a group, the task force brought a report to the Executive Board at their June 2014 meeting. The task force emphasized that, should Mennonite Church USA want to change its current covenant or documents, that change must be led by the Delegate Assembly and is not one that the Executive Board or an area conference can make on its own.

The board's discussion of the task force report reflected a clear desire to find a way for all members of Mennonite Church USA to thrive, while still remaining accountable to commitments they have made. The final report approved by the board lists eight actions that were to be implemented over the course of the next year, leading up to the 2015 Mennonite Church USA convention in Kansas City, Mo. Included in these actions was an affirmation that the foundational documents—Vision: Healing and Hope statement, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, the Membership Guidelines, the Bylaws, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, the statement on Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love, and the current Purposeful Plan—serve as the guiding documents for Mennonite Church USA. The full text of the board report is available [here](#).

The Executive Board also initiated three other attempts to hear our constituency and to seek possible a way forward as a church. These projects were 1) a survey of credentialed leaders, 2) a task force on structure and 3) a survey of delegates.

Survey of credentialed leaders

Because the Executive Board works mostly with area conference and agencies, we decided it would be helpful to hear directly from Mennonite Church USA credentialed leaders on a number of questions. We engaged the services of Dr. Conrad Kanagy to help us develop a survey. The [survey](#) included questions about benefits ranging from affiliation with Mennonite Church USA to denominational, conference and agency services; beliefs about inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) individuals as members of congregations or in leadership roles; and alternative organizational arrangements for the denomination.

The survey—sent to approximately 2,000 credentialed leaders in August 2014—drew 1,323 responses, a 66.2 percent response rate. Of these respondents, 799 (60.4 percent) served in congregational assignments, 310 (23.4 percent) in other assignments, and 214 (16.2 percent) were retired. Leaders with congregational assignments were invited to complete the entire survey; those with other assignments and who were retired completed those parts of the survey most relevant to their status.

Kanagy also directed a survey of credentialed Mennonite Church USA leaders in 2006; the responses to that survey provided some historical content for the current one. Kanagy's report suggests that correlations exist between age, gender, area of residence and education level and one's attitudes about LGBTQ inclusion. He also organized the 21 area conferences into three groups depending on their views of inclusion of LGBTQ persons as congregational members. These three groups differ from one another in age, sex, area of residence and educational level, he writes.

Survey respondents also reflected on hopeful ways in which they have seen God at work across Mennonite Church USA. Many respondents expressed gratitude for the ways their church has been a supportive community; strong youth groups and young adult church involvement; and opportunities for outreach and engagement both locally and around the world.

The board believes the survey can inform us to make better decisions as we come to the biennial assembly at Kansas City 2015. Yet it is not a determining factor; decision-making power lies with the delegate body, not in the survey data. The entire report is available to the public [online](#).

Ad hoc committee on structure

After hearing preliminary reports from the survey of credentialed leaders in September 2014, the Executive Board appointed the following people to an ad hoc committee on structure:

- Joy Sutter, EB member from East Norristown, Pennsylvania (chair)
- Isaac Villegas, EB member and pastor of Chapel Hill (North Carolina) Mennonite Fellowship

- Katherine Jameson Pitts, conference minister for Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference, Portland, Oregon
- Keith Weaver, executive conference minister of Lancaster (Pennsylvania) Mennonite Conference.

The committee invited Nicole Francisco to serve, but because of unanticipated obligations at work, she was unable to participate. At its March 2014 meeting, the CLC had suggested the possibility of structural changes for the denomination.

The ad hoc committee meet eleven times, and gave their report at the January meeting of the Executive Board. Joy Sutter shared a PowerPoint presentation outlining the process and the many documents which guided their work. The committee indicated that it drew information from the survey of credentialed leaders and identified core issues for clarity. In the end, the committee agreed “that we cannot solve our current issues in the church by a significant change in our present church structure.” The committee made two recommendations, followed by specific suggestions: 1) that we keep the current Mennonite Church USA structure with some changes in representation and decision-making and 2) that the Executive Board clarifies the following “pinch points” in our polity and bylaws:

- Credentialing for leaders and final authority [for credentialing issues].
- The role of the Delegate Assembly.
- Rename and develop the role of the Constituency Leaders Council.
- Define fraternal relationships with congregations who leave Mennonite Church USA.

The board spent a significant amount of time responding to the report, discussing the role of the CLC, and receiving input from agency executive directors who were present. In the end, the board received the report with appreciation, acknowledging the energy and many hours of difficult work that the diversely representational committee completed within a short time frame. The board also acknowledged the committee’s conclusion that our current issues will not be solved by a change in structure. Finally, the board shared appreciation for the task force’s articulation of both questions and “pinch points” to guide the work of the Executive Board and other leadership groups in our denomination.

Survey of delegates

Because the survey of credentialed leaders provided very useful information, the Executive Board decided to survey delegates to the biennial assembly as well. We used several of the same survey questions in order to provide comparisons between the two groups. The board does not intend to use either survey as a substitute for the discernment that needs to happen at the assembly itself, but rather to provide a “snapshot” of the delegates’ individual opinions on a variety of questions. It also provides a valuable demographic picture of the delegate body.

The board is grateful to the 630 delegates who took the time to complete the survey. One significant finding is that for 38% of the persons completing the survey, this will be their first time to serve as a delegate for a Mennonite Church USA convention. Thus, the board intends to give particular attention to orientation of delegates for the assembly.

Dr. Conrad Kanagy, who also guided the survey of credentialed leaders, will provide a written summary of the survey results which will be available at the assembly. A larger report will be available to the delegates as well as the public at a later date.

Request for exhibit space at convention

The Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA has denied requests for exhibit space from the Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests (BCM) for many years. We learned that several years ago, the Church of the Brethren, a sister denomination, changed their policy in order to allow BMC to have exhibit space at their annual convention. After conversations with the Church of the Brethren regarding their experience with BMC at their annual convention, the Executive Board decided to grant BMC's request for exhibit space, accompanied by clear guidelines about how that space will be used.

Summary

Given the strong emotions in our church fellowship, many are wondering whether or not we can all stay together within Mennonite Church USA. The complexity and diversity of our church yields a spectrum of opinions, often expressed as matters of conscience, so that discernment for a mutually satisfactory way forward seems elusive. Yet the Executive Board prays that the missional commitments expressed in *Our Purposeful Plan* will be able to unify us all under the Lordship of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and covenants of mutual accountability. We pray that we may remain in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance. We invite the delegate body to prayerfully engage this question as well, seeking God's Spirit for the best way to live under God's reign.

II. Items for feedback

Ministerial Polity Statement

Over the past several years, the denominational ministry staff of Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada have updated the ministerial polity statement—*A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*—which we have used since 1996. Along the way, the editors received feedback and suggestions from pastors, conference ministers, seminary leaders, and others with expertise in ministerial leadership. The updated and shortened jointly-held new document is now called *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership*. In September 2014, the board reviewed the updated statement and presented it to the CLC as a working document for feedback at their upcoming meeting.

The board questioned whether the new statement should be “owned” by the denominational delegates or simply approved by the Executive Board after discussion with the CLC. We noted that Mennonite Church Canada had approved the document in one of their commissions, not their general board or their delegate body. After discussion with the CLC, the Executive Board took action to approve *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership* and to recommend it for

study by delegates, with an invitation to give feedback, knowing that any changes in the final document would need to be approved by Mennonite Church Canada. This means that in the next two years, we will likely make changes to the statement and produce a final document.

This process of adoption varies from the original recommendation of the Executive Committee of the Executive Board (stated on page 6 of the document) which called for approval by the Delegate Assembly. This original recommendation was based on the understanding that the previous polity document had been approved by delegates. That assumption has proven to be untrue; the pre-merger document was approved by the general boards—not the delegates—of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church.

It would be possible, of course, for delegates to move beyond feedback on content to take action regarding the process of the statement's adoption, with the understanding that Mennonite Church Canada would also need to approve the final statement.

Purposeful Plan

Our Purposeful Plan reflects the heart of our work as a board. When we introduced the Purposeful Plan at Pittsburgh in 2011, we emphasized that it was not written in “concrete,” but rather in “plastic.” That means the document will be updated from time to time in keeping with our progress and vision. At each biennial convention, delegates will receive reports on the progress toward the goals in the Plan during the last biennium and then have the opportunity to give feedback and suggestions for the future. We anticipate the adoption of new goals as we accomplish the ones in the current plan. The latest copy of [Our Purposeful Plan](#) may always be found in a prominent place on the Mennonite Church USA website.

In separate reports, we have reported on the progress to the goals for the 2013–2015 biennium, and the development of [new goals](#) for the 2015–2017 biennium. Paper copies of these reports will be in the delegate packets as well as on the [delegate web page](#).

III. Action items

Election of members for churchwide boards

We intend to present the work of the Leadership Discernment Committee and to vote on the slate on the second day of assembly business. The chair of the committee will present the slate and any background explanation needed to accompany it. Delegates will have the opportunity to affirm all [nominees](#) in one mark on their ballot or to indicate approval by individual marks.

Adoption of rules for the meeting

Near the beginning of our assembly, we will adopt the rules for the conduct of the meeting, along with the agenda for our gathering. You can find the rules on page three of [this document](#) which will be placed in a binder on each delegate table. We will also adopt any proposed changes in the standard percentages required to pass any specific vote.

Adoption of resolutions on church statements

The resolutions for this assembly have been received and processed by a Resolutions Committee, which includes the following members: Isaac Villegas (chair); David Boshart; Shannon Dycus, CLC member and pastor of First Mennonite Church in Indianapolis; Rev. Olufemi A. Fatunmbi, CLC member from Royal Dominion International Church in Los Angeles, Calif.; and Sonya Stauffer Kurtz, CLC member from Rochester, N.Y.

After vetting the resolutions which were submitted for consideration, the Resolutions Committee brought them to the CLC for discussion and discernment. Because the Resolutions Committee received three very different resolutions which dealt with matters of human sexuality, they invited the CLC to choose only one of them to recommend for adoption by the Delegate Assembly. In this case, the CLC chose the resolution presented by pastors in Chicago. The CLC also approved the other resolutions recommended by the Resolutions Committee, and affirmed the general direction for a resolution being drafted by the Executive Board at the time of the CLC meeting. Later, the board sent a draft of the resolution to the CLC for feedback.

The Executive Board approved all of the resolutions recommended by the Resolutions Committee and the CLC for presentation at the assembly and, as noted above, wrote an additional resolution to be considered by the assembly. It is the last of the five resolutions listed below. Each of these resolutions will be presented for formal action, and delegates will be given significant time at their tables for discernment/debate before being asked to vote on them.

- **Faithful Witness Amid Endless War**, which calls for a recommitment to the way of peace and a rejection of mechanized (drone) warfare technologies.
- **Churchwide Statement on Sexual Abuse**, which mourns the ways in which sexual violence has been present within Mennonite Church USA and offers several concrete commitments and steps to prevent future abuse.
- **Israel-Palestine resolution**, which offers support for continued Mennonite learning tours to the region as well as a commitment to the ongoing work for “just peace” in the region.
- **Forbearance in the Midst of Differences**, which calls for our church 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 inclusion of LGBTQ individuals.
- **On the Status of the Membership Guidelines**, which sums up the Executive Board’s response to the many questions over the last biennium regarding inclusion of LGBTQ individuals.

Because of the complexity of the final resolution listed above, we offer the following explanation:

In September 2012, the Executive Board revised the Membership Guidelines to remove outdated references to the 2002 merger and to add a couple of clarifications. We passed them on to the

Constituency Leaders Council for discussion and feedback. We sought the CLC's discernment regarding the nature of the changes themselves, as well as the best way to introduce the updated documents to the church. The Constituency Leaders Council generally approved the idea that it was not necessary to discuss the guidelines in the delegate session at Phoenix 2013. The suggestion from one table group captured wide consent—to share the updated version with the delegates as an “administrative update,” without calling for discussion or a vote.

For many, the Membership Guidelines are associated with a contentious issue in the merger process and they refer to documents (Saskatoon 1986 and Purdue 1987 statements) which are largely unfamiliar to today's delegates. Some have pointed out that the guidelines have more of an inward focus (How can we get along with each other in the midst of our diversity?) rather than the outward focus reflected in *Our Purposeful Plan* on lines 732-755. Note particularly lines 753-755: “Each church will provide a welcome to seekers, skeptics, doubters or explorers and invite them to become fully committed disciples of Jesus Christ, meaningfully engaged in God's mission in the world.” This is the clear desire of the Executive Board.

In spite of contentions about the Membership Guidelines, the Executive Board is not inclined to eliminate the guidelines or to drop references to human sexuality, as some have suggested. In its March 2013 meeting, the Constituency Leaders Council encouraged us to keep exploring the idea of a new covenant statement describing commitments within Mennonite Church USA, but so far, we have not found something that produces a better consensus than the Membership Guidelines, especially Parts I and II.

Therefore, the version of the Membership Guidelines we are discussing at this assembly reflects the changes made in the 2013 “administrative update.” We intend to keep these guidelines in place until we have something better to replace them. Further, the board drafted a resolution as part of its 2013 commitment to allow delegates to address the substance of the Membership Guidelines, and also to clarify the implications of the resolution on Forbearance in the Midst of Differences developed by Chicago Community Mennonite Church, North Baltimore (Maryland) Mennonite Church and Reba Place Church in Evanston, Illinois.

As part of the discussion that produced the resolution, the Executive Board considered the following five options, which they also provided as options in the delegate survey:

- a. The guidelines should be retained as written, with the Executive Board having jurisdiction for administering the guidelines for the work of area conferences.
- b. The guidelines should continue to guide the work of the national conference as currently written and reflected in the June 2014 action by the Executive Board.
- c. The guidelines should be retained as written, but under the interpretation and guidance of area conferences.
- d. The guidelines should be revised and reaffirmed to reflect changing convictions across the denomination.
- e. The guidelines should be laid to rest as a policy that has served its purpose.

After extensive discussion, the board decided to craft their resolution based on a combination of options b and c. The board is supportive of the resolution on forbearance but felt the need to describe our understanding of what forbearance means. We know we are living with different

interpretations of what it means to follow Jesus, and we have to give some latitude for that. At the same time, forbearance doesn't mean that we suspend all the agreements we've made in the past about how we will work together. The board wrote a first draft of the resolution at their April 2015 meeting in Kansas City and tested the content of the resolution with CLC members by email.

We believe that the resolution on Forbearance and the resolution on the Membership Guidelines are best considered together. Although the CLC approve the resolution on Forbearance in its March 2015 meeting, they also asked for further clarification about its implications for the policy of the church. Further, they gave general support to the direction which the Executive Board was proposing for a resolution on the Membership Guidelines.

In a way, the Executive Board resolution is a statement about polity, and the Forbearance resolution is a statement about how we treat one another in the administration of the polity. We will not be able to maintain trust in the church without grace, love, and forbearance as Christian qualities that characterize our interactions. On the other hand, we need to define some parameters regarding our theology, morality and polity. Both resolutions address the question of freedom vs. accountability. Some congregations/conferences desire greater freedom to express their differing convictions about same sex marriage while others wish for greater accountability to the church's teaching position. This is not a problem which can finally be solved but rather a polarity to be managed. That is, the two poles—freedom and accountability—work best when they are held in creative tension with each other. Both are essential to good church health, just like the tension between judgment and mercy.

In general, the Executive Board holds that social problems in the church should be worked out at the most immediate (or local) level consistent with their solution. This builds on the idea that a central authority should have a supporting, rather than a controlling, function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level. This approach is expressed in the following sentences from lines 785-789 of *Our Purposeful Plan*:

“As Anabaptist Christians, we believe that congregations are the primary expression of God's work in the world. Following the lead of other fellowships of faith, we have also organized ourselves at the level of area conferences and a national conference. We do not, however, see ourselves as a highly centralized denomination organized to regulate the life of conferences or congregations.”

The same approach is expressed in the following paragraph from Part II of the Membership Guidelines:

“Where area conferences with their congregations are committed to the vision, mission, and teaching positions of the denomination, they have the freedom to seek God's wisdom and discernment as to how to apply these principles in a life-giving way in the many chaotic, broken and/or sinful situations which present themselves to the church. This should be done in consultation with the broader church in a spirit of mutual accountability.”

We need a healthy balance between the poles—freedom and accountability—because each pole has upsides and downsides. Two obvious upsides of freedom are that it can provide the empowerment that comes from self-governance and it allows people to adapt ministry to their local context. But there are downsides: people can miss the broader perspectives that bring

valuable insights to local situations and people can easily become self-absorbed or inward-focused. Two obvious upsides of mutual accountability are that it helps people stay meaningfully connected to each other and applies a diversity of perspectives to local situations. The downsides are obvious as well: people can try to control each other in unhealthy ways or stifle the creativity which others can bring to local situations.

As members of Mennonite Church USA, we can take some comfort in knowing that God's people, whether in scripture or in past generations of Mennonite Christians, also struggled to find the best balance between freedom and accountability. Yet as we rely on the same Spirit that guided God's people in the past, we can rest assured we too will find God's way for the future.

CONCLUSION

As a board, we offer our sincere thanks to all delegates who took time following the convention in Phoenix to deliberate and give feedback to the board's work this biennium, and particularly to those who participated in the online survey this spring. We are confident our worship, prayer walk, and discernment in the upcoming delegate sessions will strengthen us as we seek God's will for the future. We ask for your prayers as we pursue the vision and purpose that we believe represents God's preferred future for Mennonite Church USA. And we hope to see you at the next convention, now being planned for Orlando, Florida in July 2017. We are grateful for and humbled by the opportunities and responsibilities of service on behalf of Mennonite Church USA and request your continued prayers that we may serve God and our church well.