



Forbearance in the Midst of Differences: Summary of Delegate Comments

This report synthesizes responses from 74 table groups (out of 93 total tables). Although the resolution passed by 71 percent, the table group comments reflected a diversity of opinions and a clear division about the way forward together around inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in the church.

Reoccurring Themes (from most to least common)

Sin

Fifty-seven percent of the table groups that responded had individuals who expressed concern that the resolution was unbiblical. Many individuals noted a desire to love all people but expressed an understanding that LGBTQ sexuality is sinful (“My view is that the Bible sets out marriage as being between a man and a woman.”). Many felt that this resolution was not strong enough and would allow too much freedom for congregations and area conferences to “do whatever they want.” Seven table groups had individuals who expressed concern about Pink Menno’s presence and demonstrations at convention: “The Pink Menno demonstration shows that the progressives don’t have forbearance, either.”

Unity

Fifty percent of the table groups that responded expressed a desire for unity of the church “beyond positions.” Many table groups described this resolution as a compromise and a way forward that focused on relationship and unity. Phrases used included “prioritizing loving each other over debate”; “... hope that we would keep unity and peace in the church. That is what Christ would want”; and a desire to be “one in Christ.”

Affirmation for forbearance

Likewise, 50 percent of the groups that responded affirmed forbearance as a helpful model for the church. Many groups emphasized that forbearance is not new and that their congregation, area conference or the denomination has been living in forbearance for many years. Many groups described forbearance as a biblical or Christ-like principle. Some groups drew parallels between forbearance around inclusion of women in ministry, divorce and other beliefs that have shifted over time.

“Forbearance has given us a word that takes the church from denial of what’s been going on into owning the amount of diversity within ourselves. We have forbearance about pacifism, marriage (divorce), women in leadership.”

Three groups expressed gratitude for Charlotte Lehman (Reba Place), Megan Ramer (Chicago Community) and their congregations as they modeled this resolution in practice during their presentation.

Desire for inclusion

Forty-three percent of the table groups that responded had individuals who expressed a desire to include LGBTQ folks in the life and leadership of Mennonite Church USA. Some noted that the forbearance resolution does not go far enough. Many individuals described relationships with family members or friends who are LGBTQ and how these have changed their opinions and/or how the churches' debates have hurt these individuals. Many cited Jesus as a model of love for all. Four individuals expressed support for Pink Menno members staying engaged with the church: "Demonstration reflected caring enough to stay engaged despite being excluded."

Fear of churches leaving

Thirty-two percent of the table groups that responded expressed fear that the church would split and/or congregations would leave if this resolution passed: "It was acknowledged that this resolution's passage may be an impetus for more conservative/traditional members and congregations to leave their congregations or conferences." Many groups expressed concerns that people of color and their congregations would leave and that passing this resolution would make Mennonite Church USA less diverse: "How has this conversation impacted our efforts at anti-racism and intercultural transformation?" "We suspect that 'forbearance' will have the effect of making our denomination more white and less ethnic, as the ethnic groups, our newest members in the U.S., tend to be more conservative in outlook. So we anticipate that our church family will likely become less ethnically, economically and educationally diverse as the result of the resolutions passed."

Concern that the resolution/way forward are unclear

Twenty-four percent of the table groups that responded raised concerns about what this resolution meant. Many felt that the resolution itself was unclear and asked for a definition of forbearance and also for clarity about the implications of this resolution and its implementation: "What exactly does 'forbearance' or 'discernment' mean? Is this just a denominational buzzword?" Some felt that the resolution didn't change anything or articulate a clear position for Mennonite Church USA. Others wondered whether this was a way to delay making a decision: "It [the resolution] doesn't really address differences; it just pushes them down the road." Several individuals expressed concern that the forbearance and membership guidelines resolutions were not compatible: "Numerous people at our table feel like forbearance and membership guidelines pull church in opposite directions."

A desire to focus on other work together

Sixteen percent of the table groups that responded expressed a desire to cease fighting about LGBTQ inclusion and focus on other ministries and initiatives: "What might happen if we put as much effort into calling others to Christ as we are spending on this issue alone? What is our sense of evangelism? How do we make the gospel the center?" Some expressed confusion about why LGBTQ inclusion has taken so much denominational time and energy: "There are so many other things on which we agree and disagree, and we all share brokenness in our lives, so why should this be the topic that tears us apart?"

Summary compiled by Hannah Heinzekehr, August 19, 2015