



## Resolution

# On the Status of the Membership Guidelines

*Passed by the Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly at Kansas City, Missouri, July 2, 2015*

## Background

The Membership Guidelines were written as part of the plan to merge the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC) with the Mennonite Church (MC) to form Mennonite Church USA in 1999. The Guidelines were developed for two purposes corresponding to Parts I and II in the document: 1) to provide a biblical foundation for church membership and 2) to explain the multi-faceted policy and practice of membership now embodied in the Mennonite Church USA bylaws (Articles III and IV).

The Membership Guidelines presented to the 1999 assembly in St. Louis were not approved by both GC and MC delegate bodies, so the merger plan was put on hold. The newly-constituted Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) was charged with responsibility to develop a recommendation to resolve the impasse. The CLC comprises up to three representatives from each area conference and two representatives of Mennonite Church USA constituency groups. In early 2001, the CLC recommended the inclusion of Part III to the Membership Guidelines, clarifying "some issues related to homosexuality and membership." At the 2001 biennial assembly in Nashville, the revised Membership Guidelines passed both GC and MC delegate bodies by a vote of nearly 90%, paving the way for the official merger of the two groups.

Since 2001, leaders across the church have interpreted and implemented the Membership Guidelines in different ways. Some interpreted the guidelines as a temporary agreement written solely for the purpose of launching the new church in 2001, while others interpreted it as a binding covenant for ongoing relationships in the church. In the face of changing societal laws and practices regarding same-sex marriage, some question whether Part III of the Guidelines is still applicable. In 2013, the Executive

Board wrote an administrative update to the Guidelines, removing outdated language about charter membership and suggesting that delegates might engage in a broader review in 2015.

After the Mountain State Mennonite Conference (MSMC) granted a ministerial license to a pastor in a same-sex marriage in late 2013, a number of area conferences appealed to the Executive Board. They believed that MSMC failed to honor the covenant they made when they joined the denomination in 2005, since the Membership Guidelines implicitly forbid the credentialing of a person in a same-sex marriage by stating that "pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony."

In its June 2014 meeting, the Executive Board relied on this statement in the Membership Guidelines as the primary rationale for its decision not to recognize the ministerial credential granted by the MSMC. Further, the board stated that the denomination would not recognize licenses and/or ordinations offered by area conferences to persons living in same-sex relationships, unless the Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly would change its stated polity. ([See the full text of the statement online.](#))

Therefore the Executive Board is testing the status of the Membership Guidelines by proposing the resolution below to the Delegate Assembly at Kansas City 2015. The board will also gather feedback on an updated version of our ministerial polity called *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership*, which incorporates a statement from the Guidelines on page 70, by request of the area conference ministers. As preparation for the Delegate Assembly, the Executive Board consulted with the Constituency Leaders Council; surveyed credentialed leaders of Mennonite Church USA and delegates to the Kansas City Mennonite

Convention; and engaged in conversations with members of our denomination from around the country.

Our interactions show that the church is divided on understandings of human sexuality and same-sex marriage. That is why we also support the resolution calling for grace, love and forbearance in the midst of our differences. We think it best to restate our commitment to the agreements made by delegates in 2001, while exercising Christian forbearance with those who differ in their understanding and application of those agreements. We hope to use the next few years in delegate assemblies to focus on the mission that draws us together rather than arguments that push us apart. At the same time, we urge engagement in honest, transparent conversation about human sexuality, focusing on ways to live faithfully as disciples of Jesus Christ.

### **Resolution**

Therefore, be it resolved:

- The Membership Guidelines, adopted by the delegates in 2001 and updated in 2013, shall continue to serve Mennonite Church USA as the guiding document for questions regarding church membership and same-sex relationships/marriages, alongside the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.
- In order to exercise forbearance on matters that divide us and to focus attention on the missional vision that unites us, the delegate assembly will not entertain changes to the Membership Guidelines for the next four years.

- We look to area conferences to interpret and implement these documents in mutual accountability with other area conferences, particularly through the CLC.
- We presume area conferences will grant ministerial credentials consistent with the guidelines in *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership*, as seems best in their context.
- We call on the CLC to take seriously its role as “elders” for the denomination, “discerning and advising the Executive Board, the Delegate Assembly, and the Mennonite Church USA on issues confronting each of them relative to faith and life,” as well as their other functions named in the bylaws (Article IX). We also call on the CLC to exercise mutual accountability by engaging in conference-to-conference peer review when area conferences make decisions that are not aligned with the documents named above, and to make recommendations to the Executive Board if necessary.
- We join hands for the work that binds us together—proclaiming Jesus’ gospel of peace, evangelizing the world and growing as missional Mennonite communities. We desire all people who are inspired by the Anabaptist vision laid out in [the Purposeful Plan of Mennonite Church USA](#) to join us in this work.