



# Young Adults Speak

Throughout Mennonite Church USA's 2015 Kansas City Assembly, young adults gathered several times to socialize, process events of the week, and express their hopes for the church. These young adults, loosely defined as "twenty-somethings", served in a variety of roles at Convention, including delegates, volunteers, youth sponsors, agency representatives, and others. The final young adult event, "For The Sake Of The Church; Sharing Our Voice And Perspective" utilized Open Space format to elicit the leadership, creativity, and synergy of the young adults present. The Open Space structure allowed participants to name topics for which they feel passion and responsibility. The five individuals who named a topic then led a conversation with participants who shared their interest. Group leaders then gave a brief report to the entire group, sharing points of agreement, variance, and proposed solutions from the small group discussion. Ervin Stutzman, Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA, was present to hear and reflect on the issues raised by young adults. The conversation was hosted by Katie Chaffinch, YA Gathering coordinator, along with Rachel S. Gerber, Denominational Minister of Youth and Young Adults.

The following document is a collection of the conversations, suggestions, and reflections of this event, submitted by individuals who led their peers in conversation and proactive responses. Young adults present for the conversation agreed that the ideas generated in this discussion require further action. We hope that sharing this writing among other young adults, church leadership, and the wider church body may be a start to such work.

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## Young Adults and Church Involvement

Submitted by Rachel Stella of La Salle, Illinois

*What motivates young adults to remain involved with the church? How can our understanding of these motivations be used to encourage young adults to be involved with the church community?*

These questions were addressed at the "For the Sake of the Church; Sharing our Voice and Perspective" gathering on Friday, July 3, 2015 at the Mennonite Church USA Convention in Kansas City, Mo., where more than 30 young adults voiced their concerns regarding their involvement in church.

We thank Mennonite Church USA for making space to hear our concerns at the denominational level. However, much of this particular conversation needs to happen at the congregational and (sometimes) conference levels. Therefore, much of our concerns are addressed to our congregations and conferences.

The overall lack of young adults involved in the church community is often a discouragement to those young adults who wish to remain involved—especially for those in smaller congregations where life-peers and potential partners are few. We hereby identify the following motivations for our involvement in church, and we include suggestions for how you, our congregations and (where appropriate) conferences, can focus some of their resources on these motivations.

### *Our primary motivation*

Christ is our foundation. A great strength of the Mennonite church is our emphasis on discipleship—that is, following Jesus throughout everyday life, with the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18) at the heart of God's good news to the world.

### *Our suggestion*

Please place careful, unending focus on loving and following Jesus Christ as our Lord as the primary motivation for any plan or program we implement. The church is the community through which Christ's kingdom advances on earth until he returns to restore. Please take care to **always** prioritize the advancement of Christ's kingdom above our desire to recruit people (or our desire to simply belong) to our organization (denomination, conference, congregation)—though of course these desires are not mutually exclusive.

Our Anabaptist "Third Way" distinctives (discipleship, community, reconciliation, etc.) are getting second looks of interest from those from other church backgrounds as shifts occur in the intersections between religion and other aspects of culture. At the same time, those of us who grew up in Mennonite church communities still value our "Third Way" beliefs and want the comfort and support from a like-minded community.

Please continue to emphasize our Anabaptist "Third Way" distinctions—not as "things we believe because we're Mennonite," but as part of the way that all followers of Christ should follow. Recognize the emerging interest in Anabaptism among Christians from other backgrounds and continually offer in-depth teaching on our Anabaptist views. Encourage

networking and fellowship with other Anabaptist-minded Christians even if they do not choose to formally affiliate with our denomination.

### *Our additional desires*

#### *Authenticity*

We want the church—particularly those in leadership—to have a genuine commitment to following Jesus and spreading the good news of his restorative kingdom. We also want people in the church be honest about their own weaknesses, limitations and shortcomings, even alongside their aforementioned noble commitment.

We value honesty, integrity and transparency. We may be temporarily impressed by a slick marketing campaign targeting us, but that's not what we really want. We want to be able to trust that our church brothers and sisters—particularly in leadership—are truly seeking the advancement of Christ's restorative kingdom and that they will welcome us as equal partners on that journey and in its associated work. We also want to feel safe to express our fears and weaknesses, and receive from you expressions of your own.

Please see us as equal brothers and sisters with you, as capable as you are of communicating, teaching, organizing, studying, serving, encouraging and leading. Please affirm us, but do not court us as a "target demographic." Please welcome our input and ideas. Please teach us and please learn from us. Please trust us and please be trustworthy.

#### *Relevance*

We want people in the church to be applying their beliefs to their lives and putting their beliefs into practice (James 2:14-26). We at times want guidance from those in leadership for how to do this. We want people in the church to value and actively nurture a social conscience (both local and global).

Overall, the Mennonite church is relatively strong in its action influenced by its beliefs. Please encourage this to continue. Please teach the Bible with application to our context. Please be familiar with current events and use them to help us better understand the Bible's messages, as well as use the Bible to help us better understand our world. Please focus resources into supporting our local community. Please cultivate a social conscience that seeks to understand and empathize with those from diverse viewpoints.

#### *Community*

We want the comfort and support from a like-minded community that shares our Anabaptist "Third Way" distinctive values. Specifically, we want relationships with like-minded life-peers and potential partners.

Many of us are in a stage of life rife with obstacles to the preservation or even formation of community. We work diverse jobs with diverse schedules. We are tired. We are unsure to what or where God is leading us. Many of us long for routine and commitment but fear them because our mobile lives are prone to change and upheaval. Many of us are figuring out what we want to prioritize in our lives.

We all want like-minded friends, and we tend to prefer those who are our peers in life. Many of us would also like to be married and/or involved in significant vocational/professional partnerships with people who share our beliefs and values. This can be particularly difficult for those of us in congregations with few or no peers.

### *Young Adult Fellowship*

We, as young adults, are often more lonely than we appear. It is important to recognize our need for peers who are also invested in the church. We would greatly appreciate each congregation's help in facilitating networking opportunities with peers. While face-to-face meetings are still preferred, there are many creative alternatives to consider.

1. Fellowship among neighboring congregations (Bible studies, book discussions, service projects, hymn sings, meals, prayer meetings, peaceful activism, educational/fun outings are all possibilities)
2. Conference-wide one- or two-day fellowship events (featuring any previously listed activities)
3. Two neighboring conferences could combine for a mini convention
4. Twitter chats, Google/Skype calls, Facebook group discussions with a scheduled topic each month

We thank all willing to hear our concerns and suggestions. Jesus is Lord! We are witnesses! The peace of Christ be with you on the way.

With input from: Jennifer Imhoff of Illinois, Anika Baumgartner of Indiana, and Caroline Hall of Pennsylvania

Questions or comments may be addressed to Rachel Stella at [redeemedrachel@live.com](mailto:redemedrachel@live.com).

## **Young Adult Leadership**

Submitted by Bobby Switzer of Goshen, Indiana

Young adults are in a unique place in life: full of energy and free to explore, we are eager to make a difference in the world. The church has a unique opportunity to foster our developing leadership potential and channel it into the community of believers. We worked to explore ways that our gifts can be utilized for the good of the church. From this, we developed this list:

### *Mentorship*

Young adults want mentors in church settings to help with gift development, life discernment, and leadership development in the church. A formalized mentor role is welcomed. Some young adults have appreciated when someone has said something along the lines of "I see this gift in you; can I mentor you in it?"

### *Constituency Leaders Council Representation*

Young adults should be a constituency group with representation on the CLC for the following reasons:

1. We carry a unique voice that is not currently being heard in MCUSA procedures
2. We will inherit the decisions made by the CLC and live with their consequences
3. We feel valued in positions of leadership and will value the church in return
4. Other young adults will be drawn to the church after seeing that they will be valued
5. We will have an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with church procedure and polity
6. The early Anabaptist leaders were young adults

For young adults to be given constituency group status, there would need to be some group from which these delegates are chosen. We would be interested in some network for young to stay connected, to receive information about the church and church polity, and to organize young adult-oriented events/materials.

We are curious what it would take to start a group that could be given constituency group status.

### *Local Young Adult Leadership*

There are many opportunities for young adults to get involved in church procedure. Young adults should be considered for involvement in church planning committees. Both churches and conferences should consider choosing young adults as delegates to convention, and conferences should consider appointing young adults as delegates to the CLC.

Questions or comments may be addressed to Bobby Switzer at [switzerbobby@gmail.com](mailto:switzerbobby@gmail.com).

# Structural and Process-Related Issues in the MC USA Delegate Assembly

Submitted by Angela Moore of Bloomington, Indiana

At "For the Sake of the Church: Sharing our Voice and Perspective," a time set aside for young adults to engage in discussion on topics of their choosing, a group of about 8–10 young adults gathered to talk about structural and process-related issues regarding the delegate sessions at the convention. In preparing this report, I have created an after-the-fact organizational scheme to better present the ideas that arose from our conversation. In other words, this is a report arranged by topic, not the minutes of a meeting presented in chronological order. Additionally, many different voices were present and heard during the course of the discussion. This report is a reflection of that conversation, and while a good deal of ideas were widely agreed upon, the statements contained in this report and the pronoun "we" used throughout should be read as reflecting the multi-voiced harmony of our discussion instead of read as presenting a unison voice of absolute, unanimous agreement.

In reviewing the notes taken at the meeting, five major themes arose, which this report will address in turn:

1. The delegate body needs to be educated and informed to perform its task;
2. Delegate time at convention should be used efficiently;
3. The resolution process as it currently exists is inflexible and heavily resistant to changes desired as a result of discernment by the delegate body;
4. MC USA documents that contain ambiguous and vague language appease in the short term but create conflict in the long term when the language is sought to be put into practice; and
5. Delegate fatigue.

Each theme identifies a problematic aspect of delegate work and proposes suggested solutions to address each issue.

## *Educating & Informing the Delegate Body*

Regarding the education and information needs of delegates, many potential solutions arose during our conversation. Some of these measures would be fitting to use in all future conventions, while others would be more fitting to use on a resolution-by-resolution basis, depending on the subject matter of the resolution.

### *A. Educating Delegates About the Process*

We suggest that a basic introductory guide to Robert's Rules of Order be given to delegates, perhaps as a handout or as part of the convention guidebook.

### *B. Informing Delegates About the Vote Being Taken*

While voting procedure improved over the course of the week at Kansas City, there was a lot of confusion. Important things to clarify before taking any vote are:

1. *What is the question?*

- *This appears straightforward, but can become confusing if various motions or amendments have been alluded to or presented.*
- 2. *What stage of voting are we at?*
  - *For example, are we voting on the question itself, or are we voting on our readiness to vote on the question?*
- 3. *What are our choices in voting, and what does each option mean?*
  - *Specifically, the middle option (whether a yellow paper or holding up two fingers) was the source of much confusion, at least partially because the explanation given for it varied between votes.*
- 4. *What would each potential outcome of the vote mean?*
  - *For example, if a majority of the delegate body indicates they generally support, but have reservations, does that mean the matter voted upon passes?*

We also wonder whether taking time to discuss with table groups whether we were ready to vote is a wise use of delegate time. Use of delegate time is a topic that will be further discussed in section II in this report.

### *C. Educating Delegates About Other Points of View*

Our solution to this education need is to allow ample table discussion time. Table groups are designed to represent, in eight or nine people, the diversity in the population of our denomination. While not every viewpoint can be represented, we should take advantage of the availability of varied perspectives sitting around each table. In the abstract, twenty minutes of discussion time may seem ample, but when split between nine people, that is barely two minutes for each person to speak, and the topics we consider resolutions on are full of nuance and need for sensitive treatment. Sharing information and listening to each other are core pieces of discernment, and two minutes per person does not provide adequate opportunity to do so.

In order to see our suggestions for making more time available for table discussion time, see our suggestions for making efficient use of delegate time under section II.

### *D. Educating Delegates About the Subject Matter*

Delegates are often charged with making decisions on complex issues. In light of this, we suggest that resources pertaining to the subject matter be presented to the delegate body, either via oral presentations or written statements. For example, regarding the resolution on Israel-Palestine, some form of statement from Pastor Alex Awad would have been welcome. For other resolutions, there would potentially be value in hearing from a theologian who speaks regarding the Biblical basis for particular resolutions, or in reading a statement from those who are directly affected by the particular resolution to be voted upon in order to educate delegates on the effect of their decisions.

If we honestly believe in a church polity where the delegate body makes the decisions of the church, the system in place must actually allow for delegates to make well-informed decisions. If

the delegate body only exists to blindly accept the resolutions presented to them, then it would be better to be honest and drop the façade of communal decision-making.

### *Efficient Use of Delegate Time*

A recurring comment at convention was the rushed nature of delegate table discussion time. Considering the importance of this time to discernment, adequate table time should be a priority in planning the allocation of delegate time. With the many hours of time set aside for delegate sessions, increased table discussion time is an attainable goal, if changes are made to use the allotted time efficiently.

One idea is to double the amount of delegates each appointing body receives, but to split the delegates into two classes. The first class would be delegates for decision-making, and this class would be responsible for passing resolutions. The second class would be delegates for receiving reports from the various MC USA agencies. Agency reports are important, but if oral reports (as opposed to written ones) are to be given, splitting delegate duties in this manner would free up significant time for table discussion during the resolution process for decision-making delegates.

Another change we suggest is to replace the extended focusing homilies and prayers given by Jane Hooper Peifer at this convention with a short focusing ritual. The specific example mentioned during our conversation was for each table to join hands and for the delegate body to collectively recite the Lord's Prayer. Ms. Hooper Peifer was well-prepared for her task, but the length of time shortened the available table discussion time. A short ritual can have the same desired effect of causing one's mind to recognize the sacred nature of the work we are engaged in, while still creating an element of active participation for each delegate in the act of focusing.

We also call on the executive board to build in more cushion time. As it is now, delegate actions can only take place after table discussion and microphone time, which takes place after sponsors and focusing time. Sponsors and focusers consume time that could be allocated to the delegate decision-making, especially when they take more time than they are allotted.

Relatedly, there should be a truth in time limits given to speakers. If the speakers were actually told they could exceed their allotted two minutes, then the real amount of time should have been communicated to the delegates. If, on the other hand, the speakers were honestly only given two minutes, then a greater effort should have been taken to limit speakers to this limit.

Our group also expressed a willingness to increase delegate time, whether that means more hours per day, more days per convention, or extending delegate involvement after convention ends, as with the immigration document after the Phoenix convention in 2013.

Although convention should be a time for discernment, discussion, and contemplation, some delegates are told by their appointing bodies precisely how to vote on each resolution with no authority to alter their votes. We recognize that this is a problem originating outside of the executive board's control, but we would encourage communication from MC USA leadership which promotes allowing delegates to make their own decisions in light of both the wishes of the appointing body and the result of the discernment process at convention.

### *Reform the Resolution Process*

In its current form, the MC USA resolution process is heavily resistant to changes or amendments to resolution texts that arise from the discernment process of the delegate body. During microphone time, there were numerous comments regarding language choice and unaddressed or insufficiently addressed issues, and the only response to the large majority of these comments was "Thank you." These delegates were nominally heard, but they were virtually powerless to elicit a responsive reply to their concerns, let alone alter the resolution text.

There are two solutions we propose to alter the process in order to incorporate delegate feedback into the resolutions. The first alters the process before convention, and the second alters duties of sponsors and the resolutions committee during convention.

First, we suggest a "notice and comment" process be adopted regarding resolutions. The general idea behind this suggestion comes from the rulemaking process of government agencies. In essence, we propose that when a resolution is cleared to go before the delegate assembly, prior to convention and alongside the notice currently provided to delegates, the resolution is also opened for a period of receiving comments. The sponsoring body processes all of these comments and responds in a written document to all of the comments and makes changes to the resolution as seen to be fitting in light of the comments. The written document explains why the comments led or did not lead to changes in the resolution.

Secondly, for all sponsors of resolutions and members of the resolution committee, there needs to be a willingness to accept the duty to work on resolutions during the week of convention. Hopefully, the notice and comment period would alleviate the need to draft entirely new sections of resolutions during convention, but by bringing a resolution, the sponsors are implicitly telling the denomination that they believe the document is important and deserving of delegate attention and time. This endorsement is severely undercut when the sponsors divest themselves of all responsibility to work on it during convention. If sponsors are not willing to work on a resolution during convention, the resolution should not be before the delegate body.

### *Ambiguous & Vague Language*

One matter which appears to lie at the core of our concern with ambiguous and vague language is the Mennonite Church–General Conference divide. The differences in polity between the two former bodies still create friction, especially when reading and interpreting church documents—especially when these documents are sought to be used them to compel action.

The current problem of ambiguous or vague language in church documents is perhaps best demonstrated in the following passage:

Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony. Such action would be grounds for review of their credentials by their area conference's ministerial credentialing body.

This language originated in the MC USA Membership Guidelines and recently was included in *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership*, the new polity manual.

The quoted language is ambiguous: there are (at least) two distinct readings. The first reading maintains that this language imposes a clear prohibition on same-sex weddings. The second reading views the second sentence as outlining the mandatory procedure if a same-sex wedding

is performed, but since the outcome of the review is not prescribed, same-sex weddings are permissible.

As young people, we were not active participants in the MC–GC merger, but we have heard accounts about how this language came to be a part of the Membership Guidelines. The first sentence persuaded one side to agree because they wanted the absolute statement, and the second sentence convinced the other side to agree because they saw it as giving discretion to the ministerial-credentialing body. In other words, the ambiguity was necessary for passage.

This ambiguity is not harmless. Churches aligning with either interpretation are in conflict with churches aligned with the other. Churches are breaking fellowship with each other because one side believes the other is breaking the covenant it made upon membership in MC USA. Ministerial-credentialing bodies are tasked with trying to put this language into practice, and some conferences are hemorrhaging member congregations that hold the view opposite to the credentialing body's conclusion. Passage of ambiguous language did not resolve the issue—it merely delayed it.

This ambiguity also remains largely—if not entirely—unaddressed by MC USA leadership. The Membership Guidelines Resolution sponsored by the executive board resolves that the Membership Guidelines "shall continue to serve . . . as the guiding document for questions regarding . . . same-sex marriage." It is hard to use a document for guidance when there is no common understanding as to what the document is saying. This is not a case where the two interpretations are generally pointing to the same conclusion—they are pointing at opposite poles.

We are concerned that declaring the Membership Guidelines the "guiding document" will be cause for further confusion. Aside from different understandings of what the guidance is contained in the Guidelines is, is a guiding document one that is used in all cases? Only if guidance is needed? Is the guidance contained within the document susceptible to disregard due to the document's age or the current context of the decision-maker? The Membership Guidelines Resolution appears to give both sides an opportunity to strengthen their commitment to and become more entrenched in their respective positions. Given the small margin of passage for this resolution, it is possible that once again the existence of ambiguous language was necessary for the resolution to pass, and by not addressing and resolving the ambiguity we are only creating problems for tomorrow for the sake of "agreement" today.

Hiding differences of opinion is not peacemaking.

We also wish to convey an appreciation with an accompanying caution: the FAQ document released regarding the Forbearance and Membership Guidelines Resolution was helpful, but we do not understand what status this document now has. If issues regarding either resolution now arise, is this document an interpretive tool, or does it no longer serve a purpose as an MC USA document, having fulfilled its purpose by informing the delegate body in preparation for the 2015 convention?

We acknowledge that complete precision of language is an unattainable goal, but continued use of known ambiguous language, such as the inclusion of the Membership Guidelines language in

the new polity handbook, is an error. We urge the executive board to cease using this language of the Membership Guidelines without acknowledging and addressing its ambiguity.

### *Delegate Fatigue*

Two specific suggestions regarding delegate fatigue came up during our conversation. The first was to "take a convention off" from delegate decision-making. Instead of getting bogged down in the political process of passing resolutions, we could take a convention and spend it solely in community, worship, education, and service. The second was to permanently free MC USA from all need to make theological determinations and instead act as a facilitator for collaborations of member congregations and conferences.

These suggestions may appear to be drastic responses to delegate fatigue, and our conversation certainly included voices affirming the presence of MC USA as a denomination. In creating this report, a further thought has come to my mind (though it was not shared in the discussion): is it possible that delegate fatigue is simply a symptom of the other structural and process-related issues? Perhaps, by addressing these issues, delegates will not feel as worn down by the proceedings. Delegates currently face a week of hours-long meetings in which they have a few scattered minutes to discuss resolutions about which they have received little education, and the text of which they have effectively no opportunity to alter, resulting in resolutions with unclear language or mandates. It is easy to feel discouraged and drained by such a week. If MC USA were to create a process that allows for more influence to be exercised by the delegate body, delegates would become empowered to much more actively engage in the work of the church and, hopefully, to feel energized by the value of their contributions.

### *Conclusion*

This report identifies several issues with the delegate process, but it also suggests solutions to these issues. As young people of the church, we hope to be involved in improving the process instead of standing on the outside, pointing out flaws. It should be encouraging that, at a meeting where young adults proposed and selected the topics of discussion, many attendees chose to discuss the delegate process instead of other hot-button issues. Young adults care about the process involved in being a denomination and making collective decisions. We hope to see the delegate process evolve into an instrument of decision-making that addresses delegate needs and feedback, actively engages participants, and creates clear, carefully discerned resolutions.

Questions or comments may be addressed to Angy Moore at [angymoore@gmail.com](mailto:angymoore@gmail.com).

## Creation Care

Submitted by Hannah Chappell-Dick of Harrisonburg, Virginia

It was a hot and sticky Missouri summer week, but inside the Kansas City Convention Center, delegates made their way toward the MCC booth to purchase scarves to warm themselves against the powerful air conditioning units blowing icy air through the delegate hall. The young adults noted that while there were a good variety of seminars dedicated to climate change and the response of the church, there was complete silence in the delegate hall.

In the delegate hall, we voted down the resolution on Israel/Palestine. We cite fears such as the possibility of a lack of respect and trust in Israel, and the economic repercussions for those American Mennonites who are already economically intertwined in businesses from which we might have had to divest in. We admit it; we live in fear.

In our church, hot-button issues surrounding feminism and LGBTQ acceptance have taken center stage. We work to convince others of our respective viewpoints, stuck in an endless discussion without much tangible change. As we sit around the table and discuss the credentialing of our gay brothers/sisters, the vast majority of our heteronormative lifestyles are not challenged. Even as the culture changes, our socioeconomic position remains intact: we acknowledge the presence of privilege and acquiesce to its comforting embrace.

Creation care is a different beast.

Being an Anabaptist has always required sacrifice in defense of our countercultural beliefs. The Mennonite church is already well equipped to be a leader in (nonviolent) resistance to the greatest challenge humanity has ever faced: climate change. The church is a body of hope, and we need hope.

It would require real sacrifice of the excesses that society has allowed into our lifestyle, but shouldn't we instead be obligated to protect our God's creation? Are we ready to take Jesus seriously when he said, "Sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21)?

We want to challenge MCUSA to recognize the scope of climate change...and begin to take seriously our responsibility to care for this Earth.

### *Why was Creation Care so Neglected at KC 2015?*

*Theological Reasons:* Thinking apocalyptically leads to complacency in regards to climate change. Is there a consensus among the Mennonites about our response to climate change? Do church members' understandings of revelations create attitudes of complacency in regards to impending threats of global climate change? What does the Confession of Faith say about creation care, especially since there is limited reference to the "end of times"?

*Time:* Is creation care seen as a distraction from issues that really matter? Is it worth the time investment when the tangible results from any potential action would be small in the short term?

*Lifestyle:* Is there a lack of education among constituent groups or leadership in the Mennonite Church in regards to the true scope of climate change? Are we concerned about the financial commitment that could come from taking steps toward sustainability?

*Opportunities for Improvement:*

1. Continued (or enhanced) focus on creation care awareness during youth worship, adult worship, delegate sessions, and in seminars.
2. Development of a Sunday school lesson series for children, youth, and adults that explores the theological implications of creation care or refers those interested to books on systematic theology. Viewing the Bible through the lens of creation care can help broaden our perspective and open our minds to new ideas, such as the Earth as the body of an incarnate God.
3. The continued updating of a statement from the delegate assembly pertaining to creation care concerns each convention.
4. Discussion of possible steps that the convention planning team could take to offset the carbon footprint of MCUSA's biennial convention. This could include reducing air conditioning, investing in a third-party carbon offset program for travel, finding environmentally conscious servant projects within walking distance of the convention center, or creating an environmental concern committee for the planning process.

Questions or comments may be addressed to Hannah Chappell-Dick at [hannah.chappell-dick@emu.edu](mailto:hannah.chappell-dick@emu.edu).

## **Human Sexuality/LGBTQ Inclusion**

Submitted by Indigo Miller of Colorado Springs, Colorado

### *Discussion of Human Sexuality in Church*

Spirituality and sexuality are inextricably linked ("two sides of the same coin") and the church as a whole has a long history of perpetuating misinformation regarding sexuality and a false dualism of body and spirit. The church has a unique opportunity, as a community bonded by Christ, to be a safe place for openness and exploration about what it means to be a healthy, whole human.

### *Christian Sexual Education*

Sexuality education within a church/faith community context needs to be more intentional, expansive and ongoing. Faith communities have a great opportunity for cultivating a healthy understanding of our spiritual and sexual selves within a safe context and for all ages/stages of life. We need to teach how to grow as healthy sexual beings within friendships and romantic relationships, as well as within singleness. This is made even more important by our culture's/society's obsession with sex (note, not sexuality) and love (note, not intimacy), and when parents are too often ill-equipped to educate their youth on healthy practices. As the average age upon marriage is increasing, the number of years youth are expected to grapple with unexpressed and undiscussed sexual energy has extended to over a decade. Let's make Christian sexual education relevant to the youth of today.

### *Abuse, Prevention, and Resolution*

We have made positive movement in our acknowledgement and lament of sexual abuse and abuse of power within the Mennonite Church, and we hope to continue the effort to address this pain and violence. There needs to be more education about sexual abuse especially among children; they must feel safe discussing, questioning, and reporting their experiences. Leaders must be aware of methods to prevent, identify, and address sexual violence.

There also must be positive sexual health teachings, so children and adults can more thoroughly understand and be able to identify healthy and unhealthy practices and interactions. As a church we need to continue moving forward by learning how to openly address and provide justice for victims and perpetrators of sexual violence, as well as learning how to prevent and reduce the occurrence of sexual violence within our communities.

### *Including the LGBTQ Community*

Would Jesus stand on the side of justice for those marginalized and misunderstood or stand on the side of unity? Is a church that does not take a stance of loving expectancy on the issues of our day relevant? There are a variety of views on sexuality among young adults; however, there is a desire for community and relationship that holds dear the differences among us and seeks to gain understanding of perspectives and experiences outside our own. It may be assumed that the young generations are all liberal and progressive in their understanding of homosexuality. But in the experiences expressed, there is a range of beliefs at every age. We may see that today's young

adults are more accustomed to change than older generations and more willing to integrate diverse relationships into communities despite differences of belief.

### *Making Inclusion Accessible*

The Ted & Co. performance of "Listening for Grace" is a meaningful example of how we can communicate, learn, and express difficult issues in a manner that is accessible, powerful and beautiful. Other forms of communication and media like music, theatre and art are great ways of building community and conversation while addressing conflict and differences. We saw the importance of seeing Ted Swartz, who is a straight, white male of prominence, set an example in the church by speaking to inequalities and conflict of LGBTQ inclusion and standing in solidarity with those who are marginalized.

### *Building Deep Relationships*

Individuals shared stories of their interactions growing up with diverse perspectives among their friends, family, neighborhoods, church and school relationships and communities.

We expressed the benefit of interacting with and building deep relationship with a wide variety of people who hold diverse beliefs and experiences, and how church can be a source of that diversity while still providing unity in purpose: faith, community, trust, and Christ.

### *Queer Representation in MCUSA*

Finally, we expressed a desire for LGBTQ representation in MCUSA structure. There are currently voices that are not being heard as a part of the Mennonite Church. In structures of power, those with that power must take extra effort to hear the voices of those that are directly affected by their power and polity. It is not a matter of whether or not we let LGBTQ members into our churches. They are here with us as brothers, sisters, parents, family, friends and talented Christ-driven leaders. Yet we deny their presence, deny their voices, and deny their calls to follow Christ alongside us in fellowship and teaching.

### *The Future of the Church*

Throughout our discussion of the church's future, we recognize that we must continue to pay attention to the upcoming generation's perspectives surrounding the intersection of faith and sexuality. These young people are still hopeful that the church can be a meaningful place of discernment as they develop into adults. We must ensure that our churches are spaces of community and love.

Questions or comments may be addressed to Indigo Miller at [indyrey@gmail.com](mailto:indyrey@gmail.com).

## **Continuing the Conversation**

Rachel Gerber has agreed to work at continuing to keep the conversation going through virtual calls/email/social media. She is grateful for the interest, passion, and vision the young adults shared at Kansas City, which is reflected in this report.

If you are a young adult who is hoping to get involved, please email one of the contributors to this project or join our facebook group entitled, “Mennonite Church USA Young Adults”.

We want to thank Ervin Stutzman for his presence at our discussion. In addition, we want to send a hearty “thank you” to each person who has taken the time to read through our suggestions. We, as the young adults of the Mennonite Church, are excited to continue the conversation.

May Christ continue to surprise and sustain us in our work as we seek to follow wherever he leads.