



# **Executive Board's Report to the Delegate Assembly Orlando, Florida July 6-8, 2017**

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*Presented by  
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## WELCOME

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! Welcome to the convention at Orlando, and to the assembly which will gather delegates from across Mennonite Church USA. 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” (John 17:21, 23).

## 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 (EB) 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 two sections.

46  
47 Part I contains a summary report of the activities of the board over the past biennium, as well as  
48 a report on the follow-up to resolutions adopted by the delegate body in 2015. Although you will  
49 have limited time for table group discussion, we welcome comments or inquiries to the  
50 Executive Board, or you may bring a question to the entire Delegate Assembly if instructed to do  
51 so by the moderator. Part II introduces the formal business for the week, along with some  
52 background material.

53  
54 All of the decisions about the convention were guided by our commitment to the following  
55 vision:

56 *God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and,*  
57 *by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace,*  
58 *joy and peace so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.*  
59

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

- 63  
64 **Process goals:**
- 65 • To pursue all of our deliberations in light of our unity in Christ, particularly as
  - 66 expressed in the six statements of common vision and commitments named in our
  - 67 bylaws (see Article III, #2).
  - 68 • To truthfully face our differences through honest and respectful engagement.
  - 69 • To provide opportunity for every delegate to express their discernment regarding the
  - 70 most important issues at hand, whether by voice or vote.

- 71  
72 **Outcome goals:**
- 73 • That a strong majority affirm the church resolution on Israel/Palestine.
  - 74 • That all leave the Future Church Summit with clarity about the plans for a way forward
  - 75 in spite of our differences.

76  
77 We hope to avoid the racism that easily creeps into assemblies such as ours, with a majority of  
78 white persons in attendance. To demonstrate our commitment to undoing racism, we have  
79 designated an anti-racism monitoring team to serve at this delegate assembly. The team consists  
80 of David Hockman-Wert, Corvallis, Oregon, Samantha Lioi, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and Sandra  
81 Vielman, Elkhart, Indiana. They will provide a report of their work to the assembly on Saturday  
82 morning.

83  
84 To help bring order to our business, we have invited co-parliamentarians to guide us in the use of  
85 Robert's Rules of Order as deemed appropriate. Ed Diller, an attorney with the Taft group in  
86 Cincinnati and former moderator (2009-2011) of Mennonite Church USA, will serve alongside  
87 Phil Y. Bailey, head of school at Calvary Christian Academy at Hampton, Virginia.

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## I. ITEMS TO REPORT

### Purposeful Plan

*Our Purposeful Plan* reflects the heart of our work as a board. When we introduced the plan at Pittsburgh in 2011, we emphasized that it was not written in “concrete,” but rather in “plastic.” That means the document has been updated from time to time in keeping with our progress and vision. The latest version of [Our Purposeful Plan](#) may always be found in a prominent place on the Mennonite Church USA website.

The preface of *Our Purposeful Plan* (February, 2014) states: “this plan reflects our understanding that the delegates to the biennial assembly have ultimate responsibility and authority to discern God’s call for our church. The plans should be widely discerned and ‘owned’ across Mennonite Church USA at the congregational, conference and national conference levels.” The delegate assemblies in 2013 and 2015 had opportunities to give feedback on the milestones that had been reached, and the new goals that were being set. Click [here](#) to see the outcomes for the many significant goals that we pursued in this biennium.

However, at the Orlando assembly, we are not proposing a new set of goals to pursue. Rather, we are inviting the delegates and other participants in the Future Church Summit to help shape the priorities of our church. We see no better way to assure broad ownership than the process we have developed for the Future Church Summit. The formal meeting of the delegate assembly immediately following the Future Church Summit will have an opportunity to affirm or reject the outcomes of the summit. The affirmation of the delegates could specifically guide the priorities of the Executive Board and shape resolutions from the Delegate Body in future assemblies.

If affirmed by the delegates, the outcomes of the summit will be carried forward in multiple ways to give them life beyond the Orlando convention. That includes their incorporation into *Our Purposeful Plan*, which reflects the highest priorities of our church.

The Executive Board and leadership staff of Mennonite Church USA will take primary responsibility to assure that the outcomes of the summit are reflected in *Our Purposeful Plan*. We intend to assure that the hopes and aspirations of the Future Church Summit take adequate root in the soil of our churchwide organizations. We’ve already scheduled a meeting of churchwide leaders in April 2018 to assess our progress and to look forward to Kansas City 2019.

### State of the Church

**A tumultuous time** — Over the past few years, we have observed increased anxiety and polarization across our church. It is evident that the national presidential election process and outcome have deeply affected our church, elevating the chronic anxiety of the past decade to an acute level. The polarization in the national electorate is playing out in our communities in a variety of ways. We share the sentiments of Jim Wallis of Sojourners, who said: “Many pastors and spiritual leaders report more anxiety, depression, fear, anger, and division in their parishioners than they have seen before in an election season. Many of us faith leaders, on all or

137 none of the sides of our now so polarized political boundaries, are feeling that the witness of our  
138 faith is at stake. And many of us feel politically homeless.”

139 President Trump’s policy declarations on immigration and refugee resettlement (among other  
140 issues) have been extremely unsettling across our church. Persons of color have reported an  
141 increase of incidents of racial harassment or discrimination in their communities. In a February  
142 2017 gathering called Hope for the Future, persons of color called upon the national church to  
143 reaffirm its peacemaking stance in matters such as racial discrimination and violence.

144 We have also seen unprecedented changes in membership, as shown below. The presenting issue  
145 in many of these changes is strong polarization regarding our moral stance regarding same-sex  
146 marriage. But we observe that many of these differences are rooted in differing approaches to the  
147 authority and interpretation of scripture, as well as world view. Further, we observe differing  
148 approaches to theology and spirituality, which leads to differing convictions on social ethics as  
149 well as worship styles. We all believe that our Christian faith has profound implications for  
150 social life, but we differ deeply on the issues that should demand our attention as a church.

151 **Membership changes** — The membership of our church has been in flux for the last few years.  
152 Some of the changes are cause for celebration, and some are cause for lament. Shifts in  
153 membership have happened in the following ways:

- 154 • We’ve planted more than 85 new congregations since 2001. This has brought in new  
155 members, including new Racial/Ethnic groups such as the Chin.
- 156 • Some congregations report revitalization and growth in membership.
- 157 • Many congregations have reported a drop in membership, often due to demographic  
158 shifts from rural to urban areas, and because the majority of young people are less likely  
159 to seek church membership than in previous generations.
- 160 • Three area conferences have withdrawn from Mennonite Church USA since the last  
161 biennial convention: Franklin Mennonite Conference, Lancaster Mennonite Conference  
162 and North Central Mennonite Conference.
- 163 • Many individual congregations have withdrawn from their area conferences and  
164 Mennonite Church USA.
- 165 • Some congregations have left Mennonite Church USA, but have retained membership in  
166 their area conference.
- 167 • A number of congregations have moved their membership from one area conference to  
168 another.
- 169 • A number of congregations have closed their doors.

170  
171 As a result of these many changes, Mennonite Church USA now has 75,107 members, down  
172 from 113,972 members in the United States in the two predecessor denominations (Mennonite  
173 Church and General Conference Mennonite Church) at the assembly at Nashville 2001, when  
174 they made the decision to merge.

## 175 176 **Key board actions during the biennium**

177  
178 Our board engaged in much discernment and took many official actions throughout this  
179 biennium. We’ve highlighted the following as key actions which may be a special interest to this  
180 assembly. These are listed below in chronological order:

- 181 • Expressed gratitude to the Discernment Group that arranged for an investigation and  
182 public report of John Howard Yoder’s sexual abuse and planned a lament and healing  
183 service for victims of abuse at our 2015 convention
- 184 • Approved a third three-year term for Ervin Stutzman as Executive Director
- 185 • Approved a statement outlining how we will govern with the tension between the  
186 Forbearance Resolution and the Membership Guidelines Resolution
- 187 • Reviewed the work of the following churchwide agencies: Mennonite Education Agency,  
188 Mennonite Mission Network, Mennonite Health Services Alliance, *The Mennonite* and  
189 MennoMedia
- 190 • Approved a name change for the Intercultural Relations Reference Committee to the  
191 Racial Ethnic Council
- 192 • Decided to step back from regulation and move toward greater visioning and resourcing  
193 in our governing role as a board
- 194 • Approved the charter for a Large Group Process (now called the Future Church Summit)  
195 at Orlando 2017 and affirmed the role of the Governance Council in overseeing the  
196 process
- 197 • Approved the appointment of a standing Resolutions Committee
- 198 • Decided to reduce the size of our board, in view of the reduced size of our church
- 199 • Approved the final version of our binational ministerial polity statement, *A Shared*  
200 *Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*
- 201 • Laid succession plans in response to the announced retirement of our Executive Director  
202

### 203 **Key CLC discernment during the biennium**

204  
205 The Executive Board looks to the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) for wise counsel  
206 regarding major issues in the church. Therefore, we are reporting on four important matters  
207 discerned by the CLC over the past two years.  
208

209 Partly in response to a reference in the resolution on Membership Guidelines, **the CLC clarified**  
210 **its role as “elders” for our denomination.** From the beginning of Mennonite Church USA, the  
211 bylaws have indicated that the CLC shall “Serve as a council of denominational ‘elders,’  
212 discerning and advising the Executive Board, the Delegate Assembly, and the Mennonite Church  
213 USA on issues confronting each of them relative to faith and life.” With the counsel of Jack  
214 Suderman of Mennonite Church Canada, we clarified some of the biblical and practical  
215 implications of the “eldering” role.  
216

217 Further, in response to the counsel received through the Membership Guidelines Resolution, the  
218 CLC conducted a peer review of a member conference on a decision that is at variance with the  
219 denomination’s ministerial polity. The CLC received the report of that review. The review  
220 provided insight on how the CLC understands its role. This led to considerable discernment  
221 about how best to offer counsel from conference to conference. In response to this process, we  
222 sense a reluctance from the CLC to review conference decisions once they have been made if the  
223 intention is to reverse the conference’s decision.  
224

225 Although not all agree, a broad consensus is emerging at the CLC that **area conferences should**  
226 **have the final authority for granting ministerial credentials** and/or disciplining leaders/

227 congregations who do not comply with their policies. We expect that reality will lead to some  
228 congregations affiliating with a different conference. Likely, many of our conferences will  
229 become more internally uniform in practice, leading to greater differences *between* area  
230 conferences. This has significant implications for our denomination as a whole.

231  
232 In its most recent meeting, the CLC engaged in a “**trial run**” of the **Future Church Summit** to  
233 be held at Orlando 2017, with particular focus on the goals for the CLC. By all accounts, this  
234 was a successful venture, and led to the enthusiastic endorsement of the CLC to this form of  
235 planning process.

### 236 237 **Follow-up to the resolutions adopted by the delegates at Kansas City 2015**

238  
239 We considered an unusually high number of resolutions at the Kansas City 2015 delegate  
240 assembly. In the following paragraphs, we comment briefly on the follow-up to each of those  
241 resolutions. To review the resolutions, simply click on the hyperlinks in each of the headings  
242 below.

#### 243 244 [Faithful Witness Amid Endless War Resolution](#)

245  
246 On July 14, 2016, Ervin Stutzman joined a group of senior leaders from other denominations to  
247 meet with senior White House staff in the Obama administration to express our moral concerns  
248 about the extensive use of lethal drones in areas where our nation has not officially declared war,  
249 such as Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. The program is thought by many human rights groups to  
250 have been responsible for hundreds, if not thousands, of civilian deaths and has shown few signs  
251 of abating.

252  
253 More recently, we referred to this resolution when we published a statement on the tensions in  
254 North Korea. With the many tensions in the world, we believe this resolution is more relevant  
255 than ever.

#### 256 257 [Israel-Palestine Resolution](#)

258  
259 After initial delegate discussion on the resolution in 2015, there was a motion to table the  
260 resolution until 2017. See lines 340-357 below, which tell about the follow-up to that process  
261 and the preparation for the [updated version of the resolution](#). This is the statement that is  
262 proposed for adoption at Orlando.

#### 263 264 [Resolution on Forbearance in the Midst of Difference](#) and [Resolution on the Status of the](#) 265 [Membership Guidelines](#)

266  
267 We are reporting on these two resolutions together since they reflect the tension between  
268 freedom and mutual accountability that helps us live out deeply held convictions in a spirit of  
269 peace within our diverse denomination. We affirm the centrality of Jesus Christ and the authority  
270 of Scripture as an essential part of our collective ongoing discernment. Forbearance does not  
271 mean that our theological agreements are nullified, nor that we will bless everything that local  
272 congregations and conferences decide to do. As an Executive Board, we believe our church will

273 be strengthened by a humble pursuit of God’s will through ongoing study of the Scriptures and  
274 interaction with fellow believers, even those with whom we disagree. As a board, we seek to  
275 govern with a spirit of humility, guided by the theological stance as voiced in the *Confession of*  
276 *Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, and as expressed in practical terms in the Membership  
277 Guidelines and the ministerial polity, *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*.

278  
279 At the same time, the Executive Board seeks to lead from a proactive stance, with an eye toward  
280 our missional future. We intend to govern on behalf of the whole church, supporting as many  
281 congregations and area conferences as possible, even though conferences may choose different  
282 paths. While we lament the loss of congregations and area conferences, we will give our primary  
283 attention to those groups who share the vision articulated in the Purposeful Plan. Further, we will  
284 support the Constituency Leaders Council in their clarified role as denominational “elders,”  
285 seeking their counsel as needed for issues of faith and life in the church.

#### 286 287 [Churchwide Statement on Sexual Abuse](#)

288  
289 The Executive Board and its staff have given considerable attention to follow-up for this church  
290 statement. To support this work, we formed a Panel for Sexual Abuse Prevention. In addition to  
291 the Panel’s work, the staff has given significant attention to sexual abuse response and  
292 prevention across the church, and worked with an investigation by D. Stafford & Associates into  
293 abuse allegations. The follow-up to their recommendations included an updated Protocol and  
294 Procedures for Ministerial Misconduct and a denomination-sponsored “train the trainers”  
295 Healthy Boundaries Training by FaithTrust Institute.

296  
297 The panel is continuing to develop guidelines for responding to misconduct by laypersons in the  
298 church. They will offer a workshop at the Orlando convention that describes their work and  
299 offers some recommendations for our church.

#### 300 301 [Statement of Support for Palestinian and Israeli Partners in Peacemaking](#)

302  
303 The most significant support for this resolution has been the appointment of Jonathan  
304 Brenneman as a full-time Mennonite Voluntary Service worker. Jonathan is a Palestinian  
305 Mennonite Christian who has a Master’s degree from Notre Dame University in peace studies.  
306 He has devoted his time and energy to carry out the mandates in this resolution, and to help  
307 prepare our church for the [resolution](#) to be considered at the 2017 assembly. See lines 340-357  
308 below.

#### 309 310 [Resolution: Expressions of Lament and Hope](#)

311  
312 The primary follow-up to this resolution has been our ongoing sponsorship of Hope for the  
313 Future, an annual gathering planned by people of color for people of color. In 2016 and 2017, a  
314 number of church leaders and white allies were invited to attend.

315  
316 Finally, in response to feedback from delegates, the board updated the way we process  
317 resolutions. Most significantly, we made provisions for a Standing Resolutions Committee. The



318 description of the resolution-making process, along with a description of the committee’s work  
319 may be found at [this link](#).

320

321

## 322 **II. ACTION ITEMS**

323

### 324 **Adoption of rules for the meeting**

325

326 Near the beginning of our assembly, we will adopt the procedural rules of this assembly, which  
327 will be explained at the meeting. You can find a copy of these rules, along with other related  
328 matters — such as the delegate job description, the table group processes and the table group  
329 covenant — at [this link](#) on the delegate resources web page.

330

### 331 **Election of members for churchwide boards**

332

333 At our assembly, we will invite Sharon Waltner, the chair of the Leadership Discernment  
334 Committee, to present the slate of nominees to the delegates and offer any background  
335 explanation needed to accompany it. Delegates will have the opportunity to cast their vote for all  
336 of the nominees with one mark on their ballot or to vote by individual marks.

337

### 338 **Adoption of resolutions**

339

340 *Israel/Palestine* — We will consider two significant resolutions at this assembly. The first is a  
341 church statement, “Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine.” ([http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-](http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/IP-Resolution.pdf)  
342 [content/uploads/2017/01/IP-Resolution.pdf](http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/IP-Resolution.pdf)) This resolution will take up the resolution that was  
343 tabled at Kansas City 2015. Since that time, there has been significant input, extensive  
344 consultation and redrafting of the statement. The statement now takes a distinctly “restorative  
345 justice” approach. It seeks the peace, security and well-being of all people living in Israel and  
346 Palestine. The approach names ways in which we as Mennonites, as Christians and as U.S.  
347 citizens have participated in harms against both Palestinians and Jews. It attempts to address both  
348 the injustices of Israeli military occupation and the experience of anti-Semitism. It supports and  
349 encourages partners engaging in nonviolent witness and condemns violence. Finally, it names  
350 concrete, realistic and substantive steps we can take to address both of these matters, building on  
351 what we’ve been doing, and moving forward in significant ways.

352

353 The resolution has support from pastors and area conference leaders, peace building practitioners  
354 and scholars, as well as activists for social justice. It also has support from church agencies —  
355 Everence, Mennonite Mission Network, as well as MennoPIN (a grassroots Mennonite  
356 Israel/Palestine network). Delegates can find more resources related to this resolution at  
357 <http://mennoniteusa.org/what-we-do/peacebuilding/israelpalestine-initiatives/>.

358

359 *Future Church Summit* —The second resolution will invite the delegates’ response to the  
360 outcomes of the Future Church Summit. We anticipate that the delegates will welcome the  
361 opportunity to express their concerns or affirmation of the outcomes from the Future Church  
362 Summit, and then to respond with a vote. A strong vote of affirmation will serve as a mandate for

363 our Executive Board and churchwide agencies to take these outcomes seriously, and to  
364 incorporate relevant goals into our long-term plans.

365  
366

## 367 **CONCLUSION**

368

369 As a board, we offer our sincere thanks to all delegates who took time following the  
370 convention in Kansas City to deliberate and give feedback to the board's work this biennium,  
371 and particularly to those who participated in the online survey this spring. We are confident our  
372 worship, prayer walk and discernment in the upcoming delegate sessions will strengthen us as  
373 we seek God's will for the future. We ask for your prayers as we pursue the vision and purpose  
374 that we believe represents God's preferred future for Mennonite Church USA. And we hope to  
375 see you at the next convention, which has been planned for the same venue as 2015 — Kansas  
376 City, Missouri, in July 2019. We are grateful for and humbled by the opportunities and  
377 responsibilities of service on behalf of Mennonite Church USA and request your continued  
378 prayers that we may serve God and our church well.