



Report from the [Executive Board](#) of Mennonite Church USA June 30, 2014

Vision: Healing and Hope Statement:

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.

This report is a follow-up to our [February 13-15, 2014, meeting](#), when we issued an [initial statement](#) after several area conferences appealed to us to respond to the decision by Mountain States Mennonite Conference (MSMC) to grant ministry credentials to a person in a same-sex relationship. At that time, [we appointed a Task Force](#)¹ comprising two board members and three members of the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) to review MSMC's action in keeping with the bylaws of Mennonite Church USA and [MSMC's stated commitments](#) when the conference joined Mennonite Church USA in 2005². The Executive Board asked the Task Force to seek counsel from the [CLC at its March 20-22, 2014, meeting](#) and to bring the results of the task force review to the June 2014 Executive Board meeting along with specific recommendations for action.

The Task Force reported that they heard a deep desire from participants at the CLC meeting to find a way to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesian 4:3) in our current situation. The CLC also expressed a fervent hope that as congregations and area conferences we could find a way to move forward together, trusting God and one another.

The CLC affirmed [the Purposeful Plan](#) as an important guiding document for our denomination. Therefore we have relied on the framework and language of two sections of the Purposeful Plan—"alternate routes" and "polarities to manage" (lines 658–910 in the Purposeful Plan) as the rationale for several of the actions listed below. These references to the Purposeful Plan are underlined and in **boldface**.

The CLC encouraged the Task Force to pursue resolution with MSMC in a way that would be "redemptive rather than punitive," but acknowledged that this might include consequences for taking an action that is at variance with denominational commitments. Building on counsel from the CLC, the Task Force submitted a report to the Executive Board with eight recommendations for action. The board received the report of the Task Force with deep appreciation and then adapted and adopted the recommendations as actions by the board, numbered one through eight below, along with explanatory comments.

¹Task Force members were Patricia Shelly (chair), David Boshart, David Maldonado, Donna Mast and Gene Miller.

² From the Mountain States Mennonite Conference "Response to Mennonite Church USA Criteria for Admission of New Conferences" in 2005: "In the formation of Mountain States Mennonite Conference, the Future Committee has reviewed various denominational documents. These include the *Membership Guidelines*; core convictions; priority outcomes; *Organizational Strategy, Culture and Structure*; *Confession of Faith*; and *Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love*. We recognize that these documents constitute the polity and teaching positions of Mennonite Church USA and affirm and embrace them as central to our teaching ministry and as integral to our discernment of faith and life issues. Charter members of Mountain States Mennonite Conference are members in good standing of conferences who participated in adopting these documents at the Delegate Assembly in Nashville in 2001."

The Purposeful Plan affirms that we are followers of Jesus who strive to build reconciling communities. Further, it states that the missional church “... reads the Bible together in the light of Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to learn God’s good and gracious intent for all creation, the way of salvation, and the identity and purpose of life together.”

In addition to these bedrock truths on which the church stands, there are a number of foundational documents that the Executive Board holds in trust on behalf of the whole church, as they frame the Executive Board’s accountability to the delegates at the biennial assemblies. These are important documents, not because they describe rules for behavior but because they describe our highest aspirations. That is, they bear testimony to the agreements and promises (or covenants) that we have made with each other as congregations and area conferences about our relationships with each other, the vision we share, and how we will behave toward one another (**high expectation or low expectation of membership, lines 736–759**).

Our statements of faith, mission and polity strengthen us to be culturally relevant, rooted in our heritage, faithful and compassionate. Our documents also acknowledge the need for ongoing work in biblical/communal discernment when we face divisive issues (**common vision or divisive issues, lines 666–710**). Therefore:

(1) The Executive Board affirms that we are rooted in Scripture, and that our foundational documents—[the Vision: Healing and Hope statement](#), [the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective](#), [the Membership Guidelines](#), [the Bylaws](#), [Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love](#), [A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership](#), and [the current Purposeful Plan](#)—serve as the guiding documents for Mennonite Church USA.

Concerning the specific decision of Mountain States Mennonite Conference, our board clearly affirms that the leaders and members of Mountain States Mennonite Conference are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are tied to MSMC through strong bonds of faith and fellowship developed over many years. We do not question their commitment to Jesus, and we acknowledge the ways in which MSMC prayerfully tended their process of decision-making and informed Mennonite Church USA staff and other area conference leaders of their plans.

Both we as a board and the leaders of MSMC agree that their decision to license a pastor in a same-sex relationship was at variance with the documents of Mennonite Church USA, particularly the ministerial polity, which spells out the requirements for ministry in Mennonite Church USA. Further, the Executive Board does not believe that the leadership team of one area conference should have the authority to change Mennonite practice on credentialing for the whole denomination. Credentials are blessed by the whole of Mennonite Church USA, and such a significant change in the polity of the denomination should be led by the whole, not the few. Therefore, we disagree with MSMC’s decision to move forward with this action without broader approval.

(2) The Executive Board agrees that when Mountain States Mennonite Conference decided to grant credentials to an individual in a same-sex relationship in late 2013, they failed to honor the relational covenant that they made with the other area conferences when they joined Mennonite Church USA in 2005; and we call Mountain States Mennonite Conference to renew their commitment to the foundational and guiding documents of Mennonite Church USA at a Mountain States Mennonite Conference assembly.

Because we feel that this decision was not in keeping with the covenants we have made together, and because ministerial credentials are an act of both the local conference and the national body:

(3) As a national conference, we will not recognize Theda Good’s licensing unless the Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly changes the stated polity on same-sex marriage.

Because we would like to give opportunity for our congregations to enter into conversation with one another, and because the credential of ordination empowers a leader to “act in a representative way on the church’s behalf”³:

(4) We ask that Mountain States Mennonite Conference not consider a request to ordain Theda Good unless the Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly changes the stated polity on same-sex marriage.

Concerning broader questions our current reality raises for the church:

Given our experience with questions of human sexuality in the past three decades and the current trends in our society, we confess that the board could have prepared the church to meet the challenges of our disagreements in more effective ways. Recognizing that we are in a time of ferment and change, we are seeking to find new ways for all parts of our rich and diverse denomination to live faithfully according to Christ’s call in their lives. Believing that we will be stronger if we stay together than if we separate from one another, we are seeking orderly means by which our congregational leaders and denominational delegates can express their convictions and recommend any needed change to our covenantal statements in a life-giving way.

We understand that congregations call pastors and that area conferences grant ministry credentials guided by *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*. This document describes our common historical, theological and professional standards for leadership in Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. Because ministerial credentials reflect a calling from the local congregation but also represent the whole denomination; and because our denomination as a whole has not agreed to license or ordain a person in a same-sex marriage⁴:

(5) The board agrees that the denomination will not recognize licenses and/or ordinations offered by area conferences to persons living in same-sex relationships, and requests that no area conference grant credentials to persons in same-sex relationships unless the Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly changes the stated polity on same-sex marriages. Further, any such credentials will not be recorded in the national ministerial database.

While our national conference gatherings focus primarily on the vision, purpose and priorities of our missional church, as outlined in the Purposeful Plan, we recognize that the church must also find its voice in a world full of competing loyalties and moral ambiguity, including issues of human sexuality. We intend to emphasize the central role of Scripture as well as the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we discern God’s will together. We have heard the call for resources on human sexuality as well as guides for moral discernment. Therefore:

(6) We agree that the denomination will provide written resources on human sexuality for use by congregations and area conferences, as well as opportunities for engagement in biblical study and discernment on matters of healthy sexuality at our next biennial assembly.

³ *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, p. 26.

⁴ Candidates for licensed and ordained ministry are asked to answer the following questions as part of their credentialing ceremony. For those being licensed: “Do you affirm your devotion to Christ’s church and mission? Will you seek to grow in faithfulness to it, guided by the Holy Spirit and Scripture, in the company of this congregation and conference?” For those being ordained: “Will you respect and be guided by the beliefs and practices of the Mennonite Church? And, “Will you do your utmost to pattern your life [and that of your family] in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that you may be a wholesome example?” “Will you commit yourself to support the Mennonite Church and the work of the conference, maintaining an open spirit which is ready to receive and give counsel within the congregation as well as within the conference?” *Minister’s Manual*, pp. 150ff. Here we see the distinction between those being licensed—whose credential is offered for testing within the region and local congregation—and those being ordained, whose credential is bestowed with the expectation that one’s office be “representative” of the whole Church.

Our formational documents point the way toward nurturing a loving community of committed followers of Jesus relating to each other in congregations, area conferences and across the broader church. Yet our current organizational commitments do not adequately advise how to proceed when area conferences come into significant conflict with each other. The Executive Board acknowledges the need to provide leadership to determine what to do when these situations occur, while at the same time emphasizing **resources more than regulation (lines 785–805)**.

We believe that area conferences must continue to decide the membership and leadership criteria for their congregations as stated in the current bylaws. The Mennonite Church USA bylaws also state that “channels shall be maintained for consultation and communication of concerns between congregations, area conferences and churchwide agencies.” In addition, the CLC suggested needed improvements to our current structure and encouraged the board and the denomination to explore whether there would be new models for our denominational relationships that might allow us all to flourish more fully as congregations and area conferences. In this vein:

(7) The board agrees that the denomination will develop new processes, including an exploration of new structural models, in the pursuit of healthy ways to promote our unity in Christ in the midst of diverse expressions of faith and the serious differences that have arisen between and among our area conferences.

The *Confession of Faith* describes Mennonite Church USA’s theological beliefs. However, we know that there is wide diversity of belief and practice in our denomination, and we do not have adequate clarity from the delegate body as to how to faithfully handle such differences. The path we are offering here deserves additional input from our member congregations to determine how we can best practice our common commitments in ways that nurture strong communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world (**creating the new AND preserving what is good of the old [lines 894–910]**). Therefore:

(8) We agree that we will engage all member congregations, initially via a survey of all credentialed ministers, in order to discern our common commitments in Christ in preparation for a time of significant decision-making regarding future direction by the Delegate Assembly at our biennial convention in July 2015, which could include articulating a covenant that best expresses the commitment between and among the national conference and area conferences.

We grieve the pain that exists across our denomination, yet we rest in the confidence that God is calling us all to remain part of the body of Christ that encompasses all who call upon his name. As a board, we know our own humanity and fallibility. We are seeking to listen faithfully to the Holy Spirit in our midst; to the leading of Scripture, and to you, the members of Mennonite Church USA. We ask your prayers and your blessing in the name of Christ as we continue to seek the way towards God’s vision for our future.

Together we pray that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God (based on Philippians 1:9).

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