



2014 Survey of Credentialed Leaders in Mennonite Church USA

Executive Summary

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This report summarizes results from a survey sent to approximately 2,000 credentialed leaders of Mennonite Church USA in August 2014 (see www.mennoniteusa.org/survey-of-credentialed-leaders). The purpose of the survey was to solicit feedback about a variety of benefits ranging from broader affiliation with Mennonite Church USA (as listed in the [Purposeful Plan](#) in lines 791–805) to denominational and agency services; beliefs about homosexuality and same-sex relations; and alternative organizational arrangements for the denomination. The response rate for the survey was 66.2 percent, with 1,323 leaders responding.

Summary of Major Findings

- As compared to a survey of Mennonite Church USA credentialed leaders in 2006, Mennonite pastors today are older, more likely to be female, more highly educated and more urban.
- In terms of denominational benefits, leaders rated most highly the importance they place on calling, training and sustaining congregational leaders, followed by outside help when facing congregational conflicts or personnel issues, and collaboration on mission and relief projects.
- Of all the services that respondents were asked to identify as benefits to their congregation over the past year, the pastoral salary guidelines were recognized most frequently (83.9 percent), followed by participation in churchwide conventions (73.5 percent). These are clearly the two most frequently cited services. Sixty-two percent identified attendance at MEA-related schools, and 51 percent noted the use of pastor calling resources provided by their conference minister. Those services least cited were website and graphic design (36.4 percent), Year of the Bible/12 Scripture Project (31.7 percent), and documents from the web-based resource center (30.8 percent).
- Among all credentialed leaders, 31.9 percent believe that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) individuals should be members of congregations without conditions. Twenty-one percent (21.3) believe that only individuals who remain celibate or are in committed monogamous relationships should be members. Thirty-nine (38.5) percent believe that of LGBTQ individuals, only those who remain celibate should be members, and 8.2 percent believe that LGBTQ members should not be members under any conditions.
- Among all credentialed leaders, 19.5 percent believe that LGBTQ individuals should have opportunities to serve in leadership roles in the church without any conditions. Twenty-six percent of all leaders believe that those in committed monogamous relationships or who are celibate may serve in leadership roles. Thirty-six percent of all leaders believe that of LGBTQ

35 individuals, only those who are celibate may be leaders, and 18.5 percent of all leaders believe
36 that LGBTQ persons should not lead.

- 37 • Among all credentialed leaders, 15.9 percent are willing to support LGBTQ inclusion even if
38 doing so results in membership losses for the denomination. Forty-three percent of all leaders
39 want to support the historic teaching position of the church on sexuality (the vision of marriage
40 expressed in the Mennonite Church USA Membership Guidelines, which prohibit same-sex
41 relationships), even if losses occur. And 41.4 percent of all leaders desire to find a way to live in
42 unity with the diversity that exists in the church.
- 43 • Responses to the question of a preferred future for the organization of Mennonite Church USA
44 among credentialed leaders were quite diverse, with few substantial differences between local
45 pastors and those with other assignments. Among all leaders, about one-fourth (24.6 percent)
46 prefer to see the strengthening of authority of area conferences, 23.4 percent are satisfied with
47 the current structure, and 25.2 percent are not sure of their preference. Few (1.5 percent) wish
48 to see the denomination dissolve, but 14.6 percent would strengthen congregational autonomy,
49 while another 10.7 percent would like to see stronger leadership at the denominational level.

50 **Exploration of Key Relationships: LGBTQ Membership and Leadership**

- 51 • Among all credentialed leaders, there is a relationship between age and attitudes about church
52 membership for LGBTQ individuals. Among 18–35-year-olds, 65.8 percent support membership
53 for LGBTQ persons, compared to 45.2 percent of 36–45-year-olds, 51.2 percent of 46–55-year-
54 olds, 55.2 percent of 56–65-year-olds, and 52.5 percent of those 66 years of age or older. The
55 major distinction is between those 35 and younger and everyone else, although interestingly,
56 the least support for LGBTQ membership is found among those between 36 and 45 years of age.
- 57 • Among all credentialed leaders, area of residence does have a relationship to attitudes about
58 LGBTQ membership and leadership opportunities. Among those in rural communities (from
59 farms to suburbs), 38.3 percent support LGBTQ membership. Among those in small to large
60 cities (more than 10,000 residents), 66.0 percent support LGBT membership. Among those in
61 rural communities, 29.4 percent believe that LGBTQ individuals should be able to be
62 congregational leaders, and among urban dwellers 59.2 percent believe the same.
- 63 • Sex of respondents is related to views of LGBTQ membership and leadership. Among leaders
64 with local congregational assignments, 50.6 percent of women and 21.0 percent of men believe
65 that LGBTQ persons should be congregational members without conditions. Around 31 percent
66 of women and 16.5 percent of men believe that only LGBTQ persons who are celibate or are in
67 committed monogamous relationships should be members. In addition, 28.1 percent of female
68 pastors and 11.8 percent of male pastors believe that LGBTQ persons should be able to hold
69 leadership positions without conditions (see Tables 18 and 19). Nearly 41 percent of women and
70 18.0 percent of men believe that only LGBTQ individuals who are celibate or in committed
71 monogamous relationships should have opportunities to lead, and 24.4 percent of women and
72 43.8 percent of men believe that only LGBTQ persons who remain celibate should be able to
73 lead.
- 74 • Among pastors with local congregational assignments, analysis of attitudes about LGBTQ
75 membership and leadership reveal deep differences by area conference—with Franklin, Gulf
76 States, Lancaster, New York, North Central, Ohio, South Central and Southeast conferences
77 having at least two-thirds of their leaders opposed to LGBTQ membership. On the other end of

78 the spectrum, Central District, Illinois, Mountain States, Pacific Northwest and Western District
79 conferences have less than one-third of leaders who oppose LGBTQ membership. The remaining
80 area conferences are somewhere in between. For nearly all area conferences, there is less
81 support for LGBTQ leadership than there is for membership.

82 **Exploration of Key Relationships: Organizational Decisions**

- 83 • Among those with local congregational assignments, there are interesting differences by age in
84 terms of perspectives on the future of the denomination. Among those 18–35, 52.3 percent
85 affirm unity in diversity, compared to 35.0 percent of 36–45-year-olds, 39.1 percent of those
86 46–55 years old, 40.6 percent of those 55–65 years old, and 44.2 percent of those 66 years of
87 age and older. But there was relatively little difference by age in terms of those who preferred
88 staying in a church that embraced LGBTQ persons even if it meant losses—the percentages
89 ranged from 13.5 to 17.5. But major differences existed by age among those who would support
90 the historic teaching position even if it meant losses to denominational membership. Among
91 18–35-year-olds, only 34.2 percent took this position as compared to 51.9 percent of 36–45-
92 year-olds, 45.2 percent of those 46–55, 41.9 percent of those 56–65, and 39.9 percent of those
93 66 years of age and older. Interestingly, this response is not linear by age (note the similarity
94 between youngest and oldest).
- 95 • Among rural dwellers who have local congregational assignments, 8.0 percent affirm a church
96 that fully includes LGBTQ persons even if such inclusion means losses to the denomination—this
97 compares with 22.5 percent of those living in small to large cities (10,000 or more residents).
98 Among those in rural communities, 56.3 percent believe the church should uphold the historic
99 teaching position, even if this leads to losses in membership, and this compares with 31.3
100 percent of those in urban areas who hold the same position. Thirty-six percent (35.7) of those in
101 the countryside are willing to live with unity in diversity, compared to 46.3 percent of those in
102 cities (10,000 or more residents).
- 103 • When faced with a question about organizational decisions for the church, responses among
104 pastors with local congregational assignments were strongly related to their perspective on
105 LGBTQ membership. Of those against LGBTQ membership, 89.2 percent support upholding the
106 historic teaching position even if this results in membership losses. Only 10.8 percent support
107 the alternative of unity in the midst of diversity on the issue of sexuality. Among those who
108 affirm LGBTQ congregational membership, 66.8 percent support unity in the midst of diversity
109 and another 27.2 percent want to be part of a church that includes LGBTQ individuals even if
110 membership losses occur.

111 **Exploration of Key Relationships: Preferred Future Alternatives**

- 112 • Among pastors with congregational assignments, substantial differences exist among area
113 conferences in their perspectives on preferred future alternatives for the denomination.
114 Conferences that are more likely to support the historic teaching position on sexuality are more
115 likely to affirm stronger denominational authority or to affirm the current arrangement. Those
116 with more progressive views of same-sex relations are more likely to support strengthening of
117 the authority of area conferences.
- 118 • Respondents were given the opportunity to choose among six organizational alternatives for the
119 denomination. Of pastors in congregational assignments, those who support membership for

120 LGBTQ persons are most likely—of all the organizational alternatives—to say that the
121 denomination should be reorganized with greater authority given to area conferences (38.1
122 percent). This compares, for this alternative, with just 9.1 percent of those who support the
123 traditional teaching position on sexuality. Among those who support the church’s teaching
124 position on sexuality, respondents are most likely to say they are not sure what to do (30.7
125 percent), followed closely by the alternative of the status quo (supporting the current
126 denominational organization), and giving greater authority to the denomination (23.3 percent).

127 In other words, of those who support the historic teaching position on sexuality, more than
128 one-half (53.1 percent) affirm the current structure or call for the denomination to have
129 increased authority. This finding compares with just 19.2 percent of those who support greater
130 inclusiveness in the denomination. In fact, among those who support membership inclusion for
131 LGBTQ persons, 58.5 percent affirm strengthening the authority of either the area conference or
132 the congregation, as compared to just 12.9 percent among those who support the historic
133 teaching position. The preferred alternatives are quite different depending on one’s perspective
134 of LGBTQ congregational membership.

135 **Perspectives of People of Color**

- 136 • Separate from this survey, additional interviews were conducted with representatives of six
137 Racial/Ethnic constituency groups on the Intercultural Relations Reference Council: African
138 American Mennonite Association; African, Belizean, Caribbean Mennonite Mission Association;
139 Asian Mennonite Ministries; *Iglesia Menonita Hispana*; Indonesian Mennonite Association and
140 Native Mennonite Ministries. The questions related to sexuality, affiliation and denominational
141 discernment.

142 In general, their responses regarding affiliation and the future of the denomination
143 paralleled the responses of Group 1 in the earlier analysis of area conferences (those area
144 conferences where less than one-third of leaders supported membership for LGBTQ members).

145 **Conclusion**

146 The current survey was intended to provide feedback for denominational leaders about benefits to
147 broader denominational affiliation, perceptions of denominational and agency services, beliefs about
148 homosexuality and same-sex relations, and views of alternative organizational arrangements for the
149 denomination. While the results reflect the tenuousness and fragility of Mennonite Church USA as well
150 as the fissures within the denomination, they also reveal congregations actively pursuing God’s
151 purposes, experiencing God’s presence, and influencing the communities around them. Despite
152 disruption and uncertainty at area conference and denominational levels, the ministry and mission of
153 the local church continue.

154 Soon after writing *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Herald Press, 2007), a
155 question emerged for me that I have been unable to shake in years since: “What if the Holy Spirit is
156 dismantling the church as we know it?” This question reflected in part the disruption and uncertainty
157 that I identified in the findings of the Church Member Profile 2006 related to Mennonite Church USA:

- 158 • Declines in denominational membership
- 159 • Decreases in evangelistic activity

- 160 • Rapidly upward socioeconomic mobility
- 161 • Increased political engagement
- 162 • Dramatic changes in definitions of morality
- 163 • A sense of marginalization within the denomination felt by people of color
- 164 • Relative lack of experience with the Holy Spirit
- 165 • Lower birth rates, exiting young people, and a rapidly aging denomination

166 But I noted in the conclusion to *Road Signs* that: “Faithful journeying toward the reign of God means
167 addressing the disruption that we feel and the chaos we fear. ... It will also mean opening ourselves to
168 the movement of God’s Spirit in anxiety-producing ways.”

169 In light of the current survey, I pray that:

- 170 • the results will give us a greater understanding of the differences that partially account for the
171 tensions within the denomination, area conferences and congregations;
- 172 • all of us as leaders and members would have the Holy Spirit’s wisdom to faithfully address the
173 changes that need to be made; and that
- 174 • we will work *with* the Spirit rather than against the Spirit in the dismantling work of this season.

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