



GRACE AT THE TABLE

A Resource for Understanding the Polity of
Mennonite Church USA

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Introduction

My first experience in a peace church was with a Quaker fellowship in urban Kansas City, Missouri. While I admired their reverence for recognizing “the light of God” in all worshipers and their desire for peace and justice in the community, I began to miss musical worship during our extended services of silent listening for the still small voice. Shortly thereafter I found myself a part of a Mennonite congregation in urban Kansas City, Kansas who held the same intense yearning for peace at their center and worshiped God through the poetry of hymnody, swells from organ pipes warm and round, and occasional *a Capella* harmony—I was home.

It was only a year before I inserted myself deeply into church life as a member of multiple committees, a voter at congregational meetings, a contributor to potlucks, and a church delegate at area conference gatherings. The last of these is where a seed of institutional questioning was planted that eventually grew into this project. In the summer of 2014, I was sent as a congregational delegate to the annual gathering of Western District Conference of Mennonite Church USA in Waxahachie, Texas. This annual gathering took place during a particularly tense time in our relationship as an area conference when many were debating whether or not to offer the opportunity for ministerial credentialing to LGBTQIA+¹ individuals, as well as whether or not to allow clergy who are credentialed by Mennonite Church USA to perform marriage/covenant ceremonies for couples in same-sex relationships. In 2014 the governing documents of both the national denomination and our area conference did, and still do not, allow for clergy to officiate for these wedding/covenant ceremonies. Additionally, just days before our conference’s annual gathering, the Executive Board had released a report in which they refused to recognize the credentialing of a Mennonite minister in a neighboring area conference because she was in a committed same-sex relationship².

In response to the review of a Western District Conference pastor’s credentials when she officiated a covenant ceremony like those mentioned above, our congregation wrote and presented a resolution to the delegate (decision making) body at our area conference gathering. As a congregation who is inclusive, but wishes to remain in community with other congregations in Western District Conference who may *not* be inclusive, the Rainbow Resolution (named for Rainbow Mennonite Church in Kansas City) proposed a change to the practice of our conference that would allow for pastors to officiate wedding and covenant ceremonies, with support from their congregation, without fearing discipline because of the sexual orientation of the newly joined couple.

As a delegate during this annual meeting, I was afforded a quick but thorough education in the decision-making processes employed by the denomination. Vocational experience in committee structures and Robert’s Rules of Order provided a head start to my study of this institutional tension,

¹ This acronym is used at the suggestion of the Mennonite LGBTQIA+ communities encountered in the research for this project, in an effort to be as inclusive as possible to the ever evolving and expanding lexicon of names and terms used to describe gender identity and sexual orientation. If you are unfamiliar with or have doubts regarding the use of this or any other terms used in the writing of this resource, I encourage you to have a conversation with your LGBTQIA+ sisters and brothers.

² See footnote on page 6.

and during the Western District Conference meeting in July of 2014 I realized that so much of the conflict that I was hearing and seeing in the broader church was the result of both the misunderstanding and misuse of existing church polity and institutional structures.

A question and answer session with a denominational minister who was attending the conference as a representative of the national arm of the denomination made clear that the current foundational documents of the church, which had been written in the mid-1990s, needed to be revisited. In this question and answer session, both denominational leaders and pastors who had been a part of the church for years were unclear as to the history, intent, creation, and application of the church's foundational documents. How were they written? Did the national delegate body vote to affirm them? Were they meant to be permanent documents or to help through the transition of creating the new denomination? All of these questions and several more were posed without many clear answers.

This confusion was startling to me. I realized that very few people knew exactly how these documents factor into our lives as members of Mennonite Church USA because on a day-to-day basis, they simply don't. On a congregational level, we do not rely as heavily on bylaws and polity but instead fall back on relationships with one another to inform our work in community together. However, the national denomination of the church relies on community without that deeply personal relationship. We are brought together as a larger body through our history and biennial gatherings, and participation in and support of Mennonite Church USA agency activities and missions, but we do not live together as we do on a congregational level. Put simply, there is no way that every church in the country can be interpersonally connected in the same way we are when we share pews. We have community through common interest rather than relationship.

Herein lies the struggle of the institutional church. Because of this specifically isolated form of community, we have to rely on mutual agreement, usually collected in the form of "foundational documents" to hold the community of churches called Mennonite Church USA together. They are a covenant. A promise to value and love one another. Mennonite Church USA has reached the point at which we need to renew our covenant to one another, but to renew it without fully understanding it would be irresponsible. It is now the duty of the church to not only renew our commitment to one another in community, but revisit these documents and decide whether or not they require revision in order to allow for agreement from the entire community. This is a difficult process and inevitably an emotional one. It is my hope for this resource that clarity would help ease the pain in this transition and the church that I have grown to call my home could build trust enough to move forward toward newly covenanted community. This resource is my attempt to clarify confusion with Mennonite Church USA polity, and better explain the situation in which the church finds itself. It is my sincere hope that clarity will aid the church in moving forward in community, and that we may find ways to continue living together with Jesus at the center of our faith, reconciliation at the center of our work, and community at the center of our lives.³

³ Palmer Becker. What is an Anabaptist Christian?. (Elkhart: Mennonite Mission Network, 2008), 2.

What is polity?

Polity (from the same Greek root as “politics”, *polis* meaning “city”) is the collection of structure, documents, and processes which govern religious institutions⁴. There are essentially three different forms of Christian polity—Episcopal, which utilizes a papal structure, Synodal/Presbyterian, which is more parliamentary or conference based, and Congregational, which allows for autonomy of local churches⁵. Mennonite Church USA relies on a combination of both Synodal and Congregational polity. These forms are then applied to religious life in a number of areas. The two areas that are most common and will be the focus of this resource are leadership structure and decision-making polity. These are the two areas with the most focused use of power and therefore are commonly at the center of institutional conflict.

A Brief History of the Creation of Mennonite Church USA

During the late 1980s two groups from the Mennonite tradition, Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church, began a discernment process and eventual joining together to form one denomination, eventually named Mennonite Church USA. These two groups employed slightly different forms of polity, Mennonite Church being more conference based and General Conference having a more congregational focus. This difference made the merging process complex and often confusing, and compromises ultimately had to be made in order for both parties to agree to a mutual understanding of what polity the new denomination would use. It is these compromises, as well as a lack of institutional trust, that have led to a widespread misunderstanding of Mennonite Church USA foundational documents.

Institutional Structure/Background

Mennonite Church USA comprises 21 area conferences⁶ to which local congregations belong. The entire denomination has roughly 95,300 adult members, and is the largest of more than 40 Mennonite affiliations in the United States.⁷ The denominational organization of Mennonite Church USA is multi-layered. Denominational leadership begins with the Executive Board, which is led by both the Executive Director, who is hired, and the Moderator, who is chosen by a leadership committee and affirmed by delegates. This pair facilitate the work of the Executive Board, which currently includes 18 representatives from many of the area conferences, but not necessarily all.⁸ Executive Board Members

⁴ Brunk, George R. III. “Essay on Mennonite Polity.” Essay, Goshen, IN, 1987.

⁵ Bertsche Johnson, Janeen and Willard Metzger. " Participation, Power and Process: Why Polity Matters." Leadership Clinic, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN, January 29, 2015.

⁶ A map indicating the geographical boundaries of each area conference can be found [here](#).

⁷ All statistics found on www.mennoniteusa.org and were updated in early 2015.

⁸ Names, contact information, and congregational/conference alignment information for each of the Executive Board Members can be found [here](#).

can be nominated by any member of Mennonite Church USA, then are affirmed by the sitting Executive Board and the delegate assembly. In addition, four seats on the board are reserved for board appointed representatives from racial/ethnic constituency groups.

The Executive Board meets three to four times annually to discuss matters of the denomination. Most recently this has involved discussions of the biennial convention held by Mennonite Church USA, to occur in Kansas City, Missouri in July 2015. This convention includes delegate sessions to discuss and vote on resolutions pertaining to the denominational vision, mission, and documents. The delegate body is made up of Executive Board Members, and representatives from congregations, conferences, constituency groups. Every member of the Executive Board is a voting delegate. Additionally, a congregation may send one delegate for every 100 members of the congregation (including the pastor if they choose to act as a delegate). In addition to congregational delegates, each area conference may send one delegate for every 1000 members, and each racial/ethnic group sends three delegates plus one for every thousand members of their constituency group.

Resolutions voted on by the delegate body are submitted by members of Mennonite Church USA, and sponsored by supporting congregations, individuals or area conferences. This sponsorship process is employed to show that the ideas communicated in a resolution are supported by a broader constituency than simply those who wrote the it. After a resolution is written, it is submitted to the resolution committee for review, sent to the Constituency Leaders Council for recommendation, and approved by the Executive board for vote by the delegate body.⁹ The Executive Board may also write resolutions that are then reviewed by the Constituency Leaders Council before they are put before the delegate body. These resolutions call for many things often including but not limited to increased awareness of an issue, rearranging priorities of the church, or changing polity. A similar process is used at the conference level, as described in the story of the Rainbow Resolution in the introduction.

There are four primary foundational documents that are the focus of this resource: *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, *The Membership Guidelines of Mennonite Church USA*, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership/A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership*, and *Our Purposeful Plan*. These four documents together are the most frequently invoked by denominational leadership, were the most formational during the creation of Mennonite Church USA (except for *Our Purposeful Plan* which was not written until 2012), and bear the most influence on the structure of our denomination.

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective

Confessions of faith are a common tool used by Christian churches. Though sometimes referred to by a different name, confessions of faith are usually intended to provide insight into the theological leanings of a church, the way in which they interpret scripture, and often a glimpse into their decision-making polity. In the case of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, the goal was to unite the church through guidelines for interpreting scripture, orthopraxy (faith practice), and perspectives specific to the Mennonite tradition. It was

⁹ Please see attachment for clarifying graph that depicts this process.

written by a committee assembled in the mid-1990s, for the express purpose of writing the *Confession of Faith* for the new denomination that would become Mennonite Church USA.

This committee consisted of 10 individuals, five from each of the two denominations that were to merge. It was co-chaired by Marlin E. Miller of Mennonite Church and Helmut Harder of General Conference¹⁰. The Confession was adopted by vote of the delegate bodies of both the General Conference and Mennonite Church during the delegate meeting in Wichita, Kansas in July 1995. This Confession was always intended to be a lasting document (not set to expire after the settling of the merger like some of those documents to be discussed later), though it was intended to be revisited occasionally for revision, as is common practice in many denominations. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* has not been revised since its initial adoption in 1995, 20 years ago at the time of this writing.

The confession is separated into four general sections. Articles 1-8 explain the Mennonite perspective on themes and ideas common to most Christian churches, Articles 9-16 explain the structure of the church and the roles it plays in Christian life, Articles 17-23 describe a distinctly Mennonite approach to discipleship and ministry, and finally, Article 24 “clarifies the reign of God.”¹¹ This document, though considered foundational to the church, is often referred to by denominational and conference leadership as a collection of guiding principles and not often used in a legalistic or disciplinary manner.¹² The six page summary provided at the back of this publication does a thorough job of outlining the primary concerns of each article. Chief among these are truthfulness, peace, community, care for neighbor, and stewardship of creation

Regular review of this document would offer opportunity for this polity to grown with the body of the church, and would also help to bring the foundations of our faith to the forefront of denominational conversation. George Brunk notes in his essay on Mennonite Polity that historically it has been “flexible and adaptable.”¹³ A regular review process would also allow for this flexibility and growth within the confines of contemporary theological thought. *New ideas are less likely to create conflict if there is an open line of communication for discussing them.* These ideas may not be adopted as polity, but if there is no opportunity for them to be heard we do ourselves a disservice and provide open opportunity for conflict within the church. We must have a culture of ongoing discussion, listening, and learning from one another if we are to live in true community as a denomination, as the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* states is our goal.

Membership Guidelines of Mennonite Church USA

The Membership Guidelines of Mennonite Church USA were developed as a part of the merger process in the mid-1990s. The purpose of this document was to outline basic principles that congregations would agree to uphold as members of the larger denomination. The conversation around and development of this document was crucial for developing the institutional trust necessary for the merging of Mennonite Church and General Conference. As stated previously, these two groups grew from the same Anabaptist seed but developed into two distinct impressions of what it is to be Mennonite. In order for each of the groups to feel respected in the development of Mennonite Church USA, the Membership Guidelines were established to uphold the ideas that they felt were core to the church’s identity. Whereas the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* is

¹⁰ Inter-Mennonite Confession of Faith Committee. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995), 6.

¹¹ Inter-Mennonite Confession of Faith Committee. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995), Back Cover.

¹² Ibid, 8.

¹³ Brunk, George R. III. Brunk “Essay on Mennonite Polity.” Essay, Goshen, IN, 1987.

referred to as a set of guidelines, *The Membership Guidelines of Mennonite Church USA* are viewed as the bedrock of the denomination and intended for a stricter adherence.

This document is separated into three parts: 1) guidelines regarding the basis for membership; 2) policy and practice of membership; and 3) “clarification on some issues related to homosexuality and membership.”¹⁴ The guidelines were intended to outline requirements for congregations who wished to be a part of Mennonite Church USA. While some of these guidelines apply to instances of individual membership within those congregations, it is important to remember that this document was written to lend structure to the larger community of congregations who were coming together to form the broader denomination.

The Membership Guidelines were written by an Integration Committee, formed of representatives from both Mennonite Church and General Conference. The document was then brought to the delegate body for the first time in 1999 at the biennial gathering in Saint Louis. The original document included only the first two sections mentioned above, and did not have statements regarding LGBTQIA+ individuals. It was at this meeting that the General Conference Mennonite Churches in Canada, who had been a part of the process up until this point, voted to accept the Membership Guidelines as they were, and Mennonite Church Canada was formed. This also changed the dynamic of the conversations among the United States churches, because a large portion of General Conference was in Canada, leaving the remaining General Conference churches as a significantly smaller constituency. Previous to the creation of Mennonite Church Canada in 1999 and Mennonite Church USA in 2001 there was no distinction based on geographical nationality.

The remaining Mennonite Church and General Conference delegates in the United States then addressed the disagreement that prevented them from approving the Membership Guidelines along with the Canadian churches. The issue at hand stemmed from dually aligned congregations. These congregations had been a part of both Mennonite Church and General Conference, and had been “loosed” by Mennonite Church for their inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals as members of their congregations.¹⁵ As these two groups joined to become Mennonite Church USA, a decision needed to be made about how these congregations would be incorporated back into the group from which they had previously been loosed, without Mennonite Church changing their position on LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

When these conversations were happening in 1999, the point of compromise that both groups could agree upon was the officiating of wedding/covenant ceremonies. There were already congregations who were welcoming LGBTQIA+ members, but it was not a widespread common practice for Mennonite clergy from either group to officiate wedding ceremonies for same-sex couples.¹⁶ It is because of this tension between inclusive and exclusive congregations that the original iteration of the Membership Guidelines, adopted by Mennonite

¹⁴ According to the GLAAD Media Reference Guide and Glossary of Terms, “homosexuality” is an outdated term that references a lexicon frequently used by medical professionals before the American Psychiatric Association removed same-sex attraction from the Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973. From this point on more accurate and respectful language will be used to discuss this portion of the Membership Guidelines, but the quote is used initially for the sake of accurate representation of the document discussed and the state of the church at the time of its composition.

¹⁵ In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that my home congregation, Rainbow Mennonite Church, is one such church.

¹⁶ Please note that referring to “same-sex couples” here and earlier references to “same-sex relationships” are not entirely effective uses of language, as the diversity of both gender identity and sexual orientation broadens to allow for a myriad of relational expressions. However, this language is used to describe a document and a culture that relied heavily on the term “homosexuality” as described previously, and therefore is employed to allow for consistency of language and to remain true to the document discussed.

Church USA in 2001, included a third section that dealt specifically with credentialed ministers' performance of covenant ceremonies. This third section includes an introduction explaining the issue of dually aligned congregations. The section pertaining to credentialed ministers and covenant ceremonies for same-sex couples states that should a minister perform such a ceremony, their credentials would be "reviewed by their area conferences credentialing body."¹⁷ There are, however, no explicitly stated outcomes for that review. This is thought to be intentional¹⁸, allowing area conferences to deal with this sort of conflict in a way that is best for the more immediate community.

The original iteration of the Membership Guidelines proposed by the Integration Committee was had a stated 6 year lifespan. However, the Executive Board instead opted to review the guidelines after six years and assess whether or not they were still necessary to the function of the church. This is the language that was ultimately voted on by delegates at the 2001 assembly. A review and update was completed in 2007 and the polity regarding dually aligned churches was removed—the rest of the document remained largely the same. The guidelines were revised rather than removed because the leadership and delegate body determined that at the time (in 2001) the Membership Guidelines were still necessary to reinforce the covenant within the denomination. Some are confused by this document after these revisions because history behind the inclusion of this ministerial restriction in the third section has been removed. As the church grows and ages, those who were a part of this discernment process have become more of a minority, leaving behind polity that is being implemented and enforced by those who likely do not know its history, and did not write or vote to approve it.

In recent months the Executive Board has also begun to cite this and other polity documents when releasing reports regarding not only the performance of same-sex covenant ceremonies (as well as wedding ceremonies, as marriage equality becomes more widespread in the United States) but also regarding the credentialing of LGBTQIA+ individuals. It would appear now that a large segment of the broader denomination is unsatisfied with that decision and is asking that it be reviewed.¹⁹

A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership

This ministerial polity manual was written between 1987 and 1995 by the Joint Committee on Ministerial Leadership. The discussion regarding its contents was the precursor to the development of all of the polity documents composed during the merging of Mennonite Church and General Conference. The intention for this polity was to lay the groundwork for the new Mennonite denomination in North America, which ultimately developed into Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. Unlike the two previous foundational documents, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* was never voted on or approved by a

¹⁷ Integration Committee for Mennonite Church USA, "Membership Guidelines" On-line.

<<http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/foundational-documents/>> (accessed 5 September 2014)

¹⁸ Bertsche Johnson, Janeen and Willard Metzger. "Participation, Power and Process: Why Polity Matters." Leadership Clinic, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN, January 29, 2015.

¹⁹ This gleaned from the formation of LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups within Mennonite Church USA, as well as a large increase in the number of churches who have joined the Supportive Communities Network—a list of inclusive congregations across Mennonite Church USA and Brethren Mennonite Church that was created and is maintained by the Brethren Mennonite Council for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender interests. In addition to these advocacy groups, during my research I encountered numerous congregations who were endeavoring on their own process to discern whether or not they would include LGBTQIA+ individuals in their congregations. Finally, Mennonite Church USA conducted surveys regarding this issue of both credentialed ministers and the registered delegate body for the 2015 biennial convention. These surveys both showed higher numbers of inclusive individuals, as well as many who fell somewhere in between inclusion and exclusion.

delegate body. Composed and edited by the leadership bodies of each of the two above-mentioned denominations, it was presented and affirmed by delegates but did not require explicit approval like the others.

The stated purpose of this document is to provide general direction for the relationship between leadership (especially credentialed ministers) and laity. The polity expressly states this specification and that the document is not intended to describe how area conferences relate to one another in the larger community.²⁰ In addition to this specification, the introduction also states explicitly that it “should not be viewed as a legalistic code; rather, it establishes a trajectory of change which each congregation and conference can follow, as is befitting to their needs and situations.”²¹ It is with this in mind that the five sections of this ministerial polity should be viewed.

Beginning in theological foundation, then moving through Mennonite history, polity for leadership, ministerial qualifications and ministerial ethics, this brief but thorough polity provides a foundation for Mennonite ministers, though it is not used as a measuring stick for performance. This polity was intended to provide guidance for leadership in a burgeoning new denomination in which trust was still building and many things were yet-to-be-seen—including what ministry would look like in Mennonite Church USA. Since its original publication, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* has undergone the most thorough review and revision of any of the documents explored in this resource. In 2012 the leadership of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA embarked on the process of revising this polity document, which they had composed together nearly 20 years earlier. After several drafts and reviews from the leadership bodies of those two denominations, a “working document” called *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership* was released in late 2014. This new document contains updated language, no history section as found in the original polity, and several updates and clarifications to polity as it pertains to the ever fluid perception of church leadership.²²

In 2014, when the document was released for public consumption, Mennonite Church Canada accepted the document as foundational, and allowed it to replace the previously published *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*. It wasn’t until after further refining of language, including the addition of the language from the third section of the Membership Guidelines²³ that the Mennonite Church USA Executive Board voted to accept this document as polity in early 2015. Because of how recent the implementation of this new document is, it is yet to be seen if its application within the church will remain the same. Based on the reception so far, however, it would appear that there have been no drastic attempts to apply the polity in a different, more legalistic way.

Our Purposeful Plan

Our Purposeful Plan is by far the most recent publication to be considered a foundational document of Mennonite Church USA. After 10 years as a denomination, in 2011 the Executive Board began a process to produce a document that could act as a reframing of the vision of the church. The impetus for writing this

²⁰ Joint Committee on Ministerial Leadership, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* (Newton, Kas.: Faith and Life Press, 1996), 7-8.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership*. (Harrisonburg, Vir.: 2014), 7.

²³ This language was added to *A Shared Understanding* due to the fact that it deals with ministerial credentialing and seemed appropriate to include in this polity. Statements have been made by both denominational leaders and Executive Board members regarding removing this language from the Membership Guidelines after its addition here, though no immediate action has been made to do so.

document is credited to multiple events, but essentially the realization was that after 10 years the culture of both the church and the nation had changed dramatically, and the goals of the church needed to be reconsidered. Essentially, *Our Purposeful Plan* functions as the strategic plan for the non-profit that is Mennonite Church USA—it is a tangible outline of goals to work toward the stated mission of the church.

This document was approved by the Executive Board in 2011 and affirmed (though, like *A Shared Understanding*, did not require approval for implementation) by the delegate body in the same year. Every two years the goals and language are updated by national staff and the Executive Board and reaffirmed by the delegate body at the national convention, with the most recent iteration published in February of 2014. The intention of the document is to define priorities for the church and outline goals to act on those priorities. *Our Purposeful Plan* currently lists seven priorities: Christian Formation, Christian Community, Holistic Witness, Stewardship, Leadership Development, Undoing Racism and Advancing Intercultural Transformation, and Church-to-Church Relationships.²⁴ These seven priorities shape both the staffing decisions and ministries of the national office of the church, as well as the actions of the Executive Board and area conferences.

In the four years since the original publication of *Our Purposeful Plan*, it has been cited mostly for its *ethos*. Whereas other foundational documents are occasionally referenced as a form of regulation or boundary definition, the Purposeful Plan is strictly referenced as a guiding document meant to outline general goals and visions of the church which ideally should be influencing our community and ministry. With the biennial convention approaching, it is important for Mennonite Church USA members and especially church delegates to consider the Purposeful Plan and what possible revisions or adjustments may be needed since the last review at the 2013 convention in Phoenix. Do these seven priorities still align with the current values of the church? Could there be more than seven? In what ways could our goals be made clearer and more accurately expressed by our churches?

Moving Forward with Grace

Community is a hard but necessary Christian calling. We see in scripture through the creation of woman that “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 1:18) and the community found within the very nature of the triune God,²⁵ that isolation is not the ideal. Instances of institutionalized community are even more complex since we do not have regular interactions with one another. The person who posts on the internet or writes the article or releases the denominational report does not necessarily know you personally or how their disembodied words will affect you. It is because of this disconnect that it is more important than ever for us to approach the topic of polity with great humility and compassion for our fellow community members.

We must remember that reviewing our polity does not mean we are changing the church—the church changes on its own and our polity requires review in order to accurately reflect our beautiful community united in Christ. But even more important than words on the page is the way in which we view and use our polity. In times of conflict the temptation is great to wield it as a weapon or a shield. We want to lift up a document as our stronghold, or use the text as a fence in which to contain the church. This mentality is not conducive to relationship. This mentality divides by forcing those with strong convictions to choose a side of the fence. I

²⁴ Mennonite Church USA, “Our Purposeful Plan.” On-line < <http://mennoniteusa.org/resources/purposeful-plan/> > (accessed 12 October 2014)

²⁵ William C. Placher, ed. *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 134.

challenge us to move forward in a different way, to leave room for grace at the table and attempt to view our polity as that which unites us, rather than divides us.²⁶

This grace must also include kindness enough to repent. Friends, we have not been kind. In our interactions with one another, our statements, our resolutions, our debates—we have been cruel in the name of the kindest Savior. We must be willing to acknowledge that regardless of our perspective on polity, or theology, or the status of the church—we have failed our community in our attempts to see things through the eyes of our neighbor, and have thereby failed to love them. Palmer Becker describes these differences as “holding...convictions somewhat differently.”²⁷ It is my belief that along with convictions we hold traditions, expectations, stories, and hopes. All of which may be held in a multitude of ways. Have we become an ungenerous people? Can we not find a way to share that which we hold so dear that does not injure those we are attempting to welcome?

These are the questions that lay before our church. I challenge us to sit with them, pray over them, and talk about them along with our polity. We must not be so concerned with the words that we forget the person to whom we are speaking. We must not forget to listen and learn from one another. And we certainly must not forget to love as Christ loved us.

²⁶ Lois Barrett, “Polities that United and Divide: Magnets and Fences” Without spot or wrinkle: reflecting theologically on the nature of the church. Occasional papers. No. 20. Karl Koop and Mary H. Schertz. Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000.

²⁷ Palmer Becker. What is an Anabaptist Christian?. (Elkhart: Mennonite Mission Network, 2008), 1.