Report from the Advisory Group on Mennonite Church USA Membership Guidelines

January 27, 2020

PREAMBLE

History: How did we get to where we are today?

INTEGRATION

Over the years, formal and informal relationships formed between members of the Mennonite Church (MC) and the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC). These included joint conventions, a hymnal project, youth ministry councils, as well as work on a joint Confession of Faith, a polity document and "Vision: Healing and Hope".¹

In 1989, the MC and GC general boards formed an Integration Exploration Committee tasked with bringing a recommendation for integration to the joint assembly in Wichita, Kansas in 1995. The committee presented a recommendation to integrate in Wichita, which passed (73.4% of MC delegates and 92.9% of GC delegates). This committee continued its work between 1995 and 1999, when the U.S. Transformation Team took over responsibility for the merger.

As the MC and GC denominations moved towards integration, guidelines for membership were developed and presented to the delegates in St. Louis, Missouri in 1999. Those guidelines recommended that "...the congregations and conferences that are currently members of the Mennonite Church, General Conference Mennonite Church, and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, and/or an area conference of one of these bodies, are welcomed and received into membership of the new

¹ <u>http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/vision-for-healing-and-hope/</u>

Mennonite Church."² Those guidelines also located decision-making authority concerning membership at the congregational level for congregational membership and the conference level for conference membership "...as part of the legacy of congregational polity."³ Those guidelines were passed by one denomination, but not the other and integration stalled.

According to the *Attachment to the Guidelines for Membership*, a key sticking point was the status of four congregations "...that were formerly dual members of [GC and MC] conferences, but have now been disciplined by one of the conferences while retaining membership in the other."⁴ These four congregations had members who were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ), which led to their discipline. The implications of polity proposed in the *Proposed Guidelines* (i.e. that congregations determine congregational membership and conferences determine conference membership) was unacceptable to those who took the stance that "extending the invitation of membership to persons in same-sex relationships is not in keeping with the faith statements of the Mennonite Church."⁵

Those leading the integration found no easy solutions for this "dilemma."⁶

In an effort to move integration forward, a decision was made to add a third section to the *Proposed Guidelines for Membership in the New Mennonite Church*. This work occured between 1999 and 2001. In 2001, new membership guidelines, entitled *Membership Guidelines for the Formation of Mennonite Church USA*, were presented to the delegates in Nashville (2001) and passed. These guidelines included "Section III 3: Clarification on some issues related to homosexuality and membership." Section III recognized the church statements from Saskatoon (1986) and Purdue (1987) "...to be the teaching position of the Mennonite Church USA (MC USA)" and specifically forbade any credentialed leader in MC USA from performing a "same-sex covenant ceremony".⁷

From the vantage point of history, it seems that a decision was made to identify LGBTQ persons as the problem holding up merger. Instead of clarifying the implications of the proposed polity of MC USA, a

² Proposed Guidelines for Membership in the New Mennonite Church

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Direct quote from the Consultation on Membership (Kansas City, March 1999) as found in the Attachment to the Guidelines for Membership.

⁶ word used to characterize the situation in the Attachment to the Guidelines for Membership

⁷ Membership Guidelines for the Formation of Mennonite Church USA.

fence was drawn around LGBTQ persons in a way that excluded them from full participation in the church, delegitimized the discernment of local congregations who welcome them as full members, and delegitimized the discernment of local congregations and pastors who believe the Spirit is calling them to participate in same-sex marriages.

A choice was made between the inclusion of LGBTQ persons or the inclusion of congregations and conferences that did not believe LGBTQ persons should be members of the church.⁸ The change in the Membership Guidelines from 1999 to 2001 reveals that choice. Many LGBTQ people within the church experienced this deeply as a message that they were expendable in the formation of MC USA, and, thus, are expendable in the church to this day.

MEMBERSHIP GUIDELINES IN THE LIFE OF MC USA

The passage of the *Membership Guidelines for the Formation of Mennonite Church USA* in 2001 paved the way for integration. The merger agreement was signed in 2001, the bylaws became effective on February 1, 2002, and merger became official on February 1, 2003. However, history has many asking if Mennonite Church USA was built on a poor foundation.

First, there were divergent understandings of the purpose and period of effectiveness of the Membership Guidelines (2001). Some congregations and conferences understood the Membership Guidelines as a temporary document for the purpose of bringing the church together. Other congregations and conferences understood the Membership Guidelines as a permanent document that laid out the teaching of MC USA on the place of LGBTQ persons and same-sex marriage in the church. The guidelines themselves state, "Therefore, as we complete the transformation/integration process during the next six years (to be reviewed with other structures in 2007), the following commitments and polity will guide our discernment and practice."⁹ This statement supports the position that the Membership Guidelines were a temporary document for the purpose of bringing the church together.

Second, the Membership Guidelines themselves were/are ambiguous. They affirm congregational polity, whereby local congregations and conferences "...have the authority to determine the criteria and responsibility to implement the process whereby..." persons become members of congregations and

⁸ Attachment to the Guidelines for Membership, section B.2.

⁹ Membership Guidelines for the Formation of Mennonite Church USA

congregations become members of conferences.¹⁰ Yet, congregations are to do this "...in consultation with the broader church, in a spirit of mutual accountability," and conferences do this "...in consideration of expectations of membership in Mennonite Church USA."¹¹ This ambiguity remains in the bylaws.

Third, Section III of the Membership Guidelines creates spaces for divergent interpretation and practice. While naming a history of knowing what it's like to be "…misunderstood and misjudged," the space for such misunderstandings was codified in the Membership Guidelines.¹² For example, there is a clear statement that the teaching position of Mennonite Church USA comes from statements from Saskatoon (1986) and Purdue (1987) "…describing homosexual, extramarital and premarital sexual activity as sin…"¹³ What isn't clear is how that statement relates to the authority of congregations and conferences when they determine membership.

At the same time, there is a clear statement that says "Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony." It goes on to say that such actions "…would be grounds for review of their credentials by their area conference's ministerial credentialing body."¹⁴ But, again, what isn't clear is how that statement relates to the authority of conferences and conference credentialing bodies. Do they have to do such a review? Are they obligated to come to particular decisions? Lines of authority are not clear, especially between conferences and national body.

The ambiguity in the documents themselves created space for congregants, congregations, pastors, and area conferences to discern the place of LGBTQ persons in their churches differently and the participation of pastors in performing same-sex marriages differently. The Membership Guidelines address these differences by saying, "We hold the Saskatoon and Purdue statements calling for the church to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views to be the teaching position of the church."

12 Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

This ambiguity, over time, created space for some congregations and conferences to embrace and fully include LGBTQ persons in the life of the church - with all ordinances, such as marriage, freely available - including the ordination of persons in same-sex marriages. It also provided a context for others to exclude LGBTQ people from full participation in the church, including marriage and ministry.¹⁶ This has resulted in nearly continuous conflict in MC USA, with people, congregations and conferences leaving MC USA.

MEMBERSHIP GUIDELINES TODAY

In **March, 2007**, the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) of MC USA began a review of the Membership Guidelines per the provision in Section III. Participants were asked, "As we continue on this missional journey, what should be the status of the membership guidelines? Why?"¹⁷ The listening committee from that meeting wrote, "While some members felt that [Membership Guidelines] could just be kept as a historical document, there was a recognition that for some conferences the alliance is fragile enough that revamping or eliminating the guidelines at this time would be damaging."¹⁸

In **September 2012**, the Executive Board updated the Membership Guidelines for the Formation of Mennonite Church USA. This version was to be an "administrative update" to the delegates for the purpose of "cleaning up language related to the merger and adding some clarifications."¹⁹At the January 9 - 12, 2013 meeting of the MC USA Executive Board, the following action was taken: "To approve the September 2012 version of the Membership Guidelines for distribution to the 2013 convention delegates as an 'administrative update,' without calling for discussion or vote."²⁰

Notes on the ensuing discussion by the Executive Board said, "While we sense there would be energy and value in a new process and a new document, will it take us to the place we want to be? Or should we simply remove part three of the present membership guidelines and update part one and two? We were reminded that there are many in MC USA that are not interested in being in a denomination that

¹⁶ Some people within MC USA express the belief that LGBTQ persons are welcome to fully participate in the life of the church, including credentialed ministry, if they remain celibate and single. This is experienced as exclusionary to LGBTQ persons who have a positive view of their sexuality and wish for the same opportunity to marry in the church.

¹⁷ Minutes from the Constituency Leaders Council, March 22 - 25, 2007, Lake Doniphan Conference Center, Excelsior Springs, Missouri

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Minutes from the Executive Board, Mennonite Church USA, January 9 - 12, 2013, Phoenix, AZ

²⁰ Ibid

welcomes gays or lesbians or pastors who perform same-sex marriage ceremonies and that is something they would like to have stated publicly."²¹

At the **2013 MC USA convention in Phoenix, Arizona** the current Membership Guidelines were presented as an administrative update from the Executive Board. They were not discussed or voted on by the delegate body. By observation, the administrative update changed the function of the guidelines from being a formational document to a foundational document. Once again, this was experienced as the church placating those who "are not interested in being in a denomination with gays or lesbians or pastors who perform same-sex marriages" to the exclusion of LGBTQ persons, their families and their allies within the church.²²

The administrative update in 2013 did not curb the growing conflict within MC USA. Increasingly, pastors performed same-sex marriages. Conferences discerned the status of those credentials in different ways - some saying the credential was in order, others suspending credentials or placing pastors on probation. In 2013, Mountain States conference credentialed a pastor in a same-sex marriage. This continued a pattern of some congregations and conferences moving towards full inclusion of LGBTQ siblings, while others insisted that such movement was unfaithful to the teaching positions of the church and increased threats to leave if the national body failed to discipline such conferences.

At **2015 MC USA convention in Kansas City, Missouri** the delegate body was presented with and passed two resolutions. One resolution, entitled *Forbearance in the Midst of Differences*, named the ongoing lack of consensus "…on whether it is appropriate to bless Christians in same-sex covenented unions" and invited us to offer "…grace, love and forbearance towards conferences, congregations and pastors in our body who, in different ways, seek to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ on matters related to same-sex covenanted unions."²³

The Executive Board sought to test "... the status of the Membership Guidelines by proposing the resolution below to the Delegate Assembly at Kansas City 2015," through a *Resolution on the Status of the Membership Guidelines*. This resolution referenced a new Executive Board policy to not recognize

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Resolution:Forbearance in the Midst of Differences

the credentials of LGBTQ persons in same-sex marriages unless the delegate body "...would change its stated polity."²⁴

The delegates' affirmation of the resolution *Forbearance in the Midst of Differences* and the *Resolution on the Status of the Membership Guidelines* was confusing. Do congregations, pastors and conferences have the freedom to discern matters related to same-sex marriage differently? Is the national body expected to enforce delegate agreed upon norms in Section III of the Membership Guidelines, even though the delegates passed the resolution on forbearance? The delegates were asked to respond to two resolutions that provided no clarity for the church in practice and, by observation, further polarized the church.

MOVEMENTS FOR LGBTQ INCLUSION IN THE CHURCH

Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests (BMC) was organized in **1976** to provide a safe and supportive space among gay and lesbian people. Throughout its history, BMC has sought to help the church be in dialogue about these matters, share the stories and experiences of LGBTQ people, and advocate for LGBTQ people within the church and society.

Between **1990** - **1992**, the GC's Commission on Education (COE) and the MC's Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries (MBCM) formed the Joint Listening Committee for Homosexual Concerns. Their purpose was "to care for gay and lesbian persons and their families in the [GC and MC churches] by listening to their alienation and pain in the church and society; to encourage and faciliate dialogue between persons of various perspectives concerning homosexuality and to foster continued theological discernment in the church on this issue; and to make recommendations to MBCM and COE regarding policy, program and church life..."²⁵ This report was presented to the MBCM and COE on August 20, 1992. These bodies then passed the report on "with thanks" to the general boards of both the MC and GC churches. It was determined by those boards that the report would not be made generally available. It would be available by request, without the committee's recommendation, out of the boards' concern that it would undermine the statements made at Purdue and Saskatoon.²⁶

²⁴ Resolution: On the Status of the Membership Guidelines

²⁵ Final Report: Listening Committee for Homosexual Concerns

²⁶ Read The Story of the Listening Committee at http://welcome-committee.info/booklet/2/booklet-2-zuercher/

In **2000** there was also an "Open Letter" that called for the church to be welcoming and inclusive of people from the gay and lesbian community. In summary, the letter stated the belief "...that sexual orientation is natural and morally neutral, and that to describe it as sin contradicts not only science but central scriptural truths of morality, justice, and compassion as taught by Jesus" and that "...the church should bless monogamous relationships of same-sex couples and affirm covenant vows between persons who pledge mutual lifelong fidelity and support to one another."²⁷ There were 26 original signers. That number grew to over 600 when others were given the opportunity to sign the letter.

In **2007** a group of pastors and leaders formed the Inclusive Mennonite Pastors network. This group consisted of Mennonite pastors and leaders who advocate for the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the Mennonite Church. During the season of Lent in 2009, they released an Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA with 89 signatories - growing to over 800 by Easter.²⁸ This group continues with an active Facebook page.

In **2009** at the Columbus convention, Pink Menno Campaign formed with the goal of supporting "... the inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in marriage, in ordination, and in the loving community of Christian fellowship within the Mennonite Church."²⁹ Pink Menno remains active in MC USA.

OBSERVATIONS

In retrospect, it is clear that the integration process failed to address key differences in expectations, polity and moral/theological convictions relative to LGBTQ persons. There is tension between the authority of congregations to discern membership and the expectation that the national body would enforce the teaching positions of the church through discipline. There is also tension between the authority of conferences to credential pastors and the expectation that the national body would enforce the polity position that says credentialed leaders cannot perform same-sex marriages.³⁰ These tensions have never been resolved.

 ²⁷ Read the story of the Open Letter at http://welcome-committee.info/page/open-letter/
 ²⁸ Read the open letter at

http://openlettertomcusa.blogspot.com/2009/04/open-letter-to-mennonite-church-usa.html ²⁹ http://www.pinkmenno.org/history-vision/

³⁰ Membership Guidelines, Section III

Leaders and leadership bodies have attempted to bring the congregations and conferences of MC USA together. However, ongoing conflicts, in the context of threats to leave, have remained as leaders and leadership bodies failed to provide clarity that would help move the church forward.

Over time, conferences interpreted the intentions of these guidelines differently, including whether credentialed ministers could perform same-sex weddings and whether persons in same-sex marriages could be credentialed.

In the pressures to reach an agreement on integration, some felt the urge to unity was abused. A binary choice was presented that placed the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the church over and against the beliefs of those who felt they should be excluded. Adding Section III to the Membership Guidelines stands as a decision point whereby church leaders, and the delegate body through their affirmation, made a decision about who was valuable and who was expendable. The purpose of Section III was not for the benefit of LGBTQ persons, their families, their congregations nor their pastors. The purpose was to facilitate integration and, in the process, harm was done to LGBTQ persons, their families, their congregations and their pastors.

The legacy of the 2001 Membership Guidelines is in direct contradiction to the purpose of "Vision: Healing and Hope." Conflict and loss, not healing and hope, is the legacy of the guidelines. We have lost LGBTQ persons and their families, those who hold traditional views of marriage and their families, persons who felt the need to exit due to ongoing tensions, people - especially the young - who witnessed how MC USA was functioning and discerned it was not for them, entire congregations and conferences, partners in mission, and on and on. This is not to say that all forms of loss are equal choosing to leave is not the same as being told you cannot fully participate - but loss is our legacy all the same.

Status: Unanimously agreed by the advisory group





(see end of document for explanation of chart.)

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Whereas the current policies of MC USA, particularly Section III of the Membership Guidelines have done violence to the personhood of LGBTQ people by forcing them to choose between full acceptance by their denomination and living into the abundant life to which God calls them.

Whereas God delights in the diversity of Divine creation and created humankind in the Divine image³¹;

Whereas Jesus, who is "the visible image of the invisible God" and the one through whom "God reconciled everything to God's self", offers radical hospitality to those traditionally despised by the religious institutions of his day and teaches that love is the fulfillment of the law³²

Whereas when "...confronted with the misuses of power in our... institutions, we seek to tell the truth and repent"³³

We confess:

³¹ Genesis 1

³² Colossians 1:15 - 20, Romans 13:8 - 10 NLT

³³ Renewed Commitments for MC USA 2018

that we have not affirmed the full status and worth of LGBTQ people as fully beloved by God; that we have caused great harm and pain to LGBTQ Mennonites and their families; that as a result of the impact and (ab)use of the Membership Guidelines Section III, marginalized people have been pitted against each other by those in power;

that we have not taken seriously "every human grouping [being] reconciled and united in the church."³⁴

We grieve:

that People of Color have been scapegoated as the reason for discrimination against LGBTQ people. that LGBTQ people have been blamed for the loss of some People of Color in the church. that dualistic tactics fail to recognize the ways that both racism and hetero-sexism function to uphold white supremacy.

that LGBTQ Mennonite People of Color are virtually erased.

the losses that have occurred across the spectrum of MC USA as a result of these guidelines and our ensuing strife around them.

the exclusion by polity of those in the LGBTQ community.

the loss of our siblings who have chosen or may choose to leave. Our doors will always be open.

We recognize that differences in biblical interpretation exist among us. However, we confess and grieve that these interpretations have at times been used to sacrifice some groups in order to include others in the community.

We acknowledge and celebrate the resiliency of the LGBTQ Mennonite community in their contributions and gifts to the body of Christ as MC USA seeks to "grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace."³⁵ Status: Agreed by advisory group.

³⁴ Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, Article 9

³⁵ Vision:Healing and Hope

Acknowledgment

23 responses



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Retire the Membership Guidelines Status: Marvin Lorenzana does not support this recommendation. All other advisory group members agreed.



Recommendation #1: Retire the Membership Guidelines 23 responses

Recommendation 2: Any document or policy about LGBTQ people must actively include representatives of the LGBTQ community in its creation. As a broader principle, decision-making must actively include the voices of any specific group who are the subject of a policy or document. Status: agreed by advisory group.

Recommendation #2: Any document or policy about LGBTQ people must actively include representatives of the LGBTQ community in its creation. ^{23 responses}



Recommendation 3: That the Executive Board consult with BMC, Pink Menno, and Inclusive Pastors to explore the creation of an LGBTQ constituency group with representation on the Constituency Leaders Council. (This recommendation recognizes a call we heard in delegate responses to the Membership Guidelines surveys at convention 2019.) (Status: Sandra Montes Martinez and Glen Guyton do not support this recommendation. Agreed on by all other advisory group members.



Recommendation #3: That the Executive Board approve/EXPLORE the creation of an LGBTQ constituency group 23 responses

Recommendation 4: That MC USA develop a process with BMC, Pink Menno, and Inclusive Mennonite Pastors to enable truth-telling, recognition of harms, and reconciliation with LGBTQ people, their

families, and others who have been harmed by the way LGBTQ people have been treated in the church. The goal of this process will be healing and hope for the church.

Status: Agreed by advisory group.

Recommendation #4: MC USA will develop a truth and reconciliation process with LGBTQ people 23 responses



Recommendation 5: MC USA's Executive Board, staff, and church-wide program agencies will not use sexual identity, gender orientation, or marital status as criteria to restrict a person's full participation in the ministries, activities, roles, and committees of our denomination. While we recognize that MC USA does not have the authority to require conferences and congregations to adopt this policy, we invite them to join in this healing practice of non-discrimination. Status: There is no clear consensus on this recommendation. **This language was re-drafted and subject to discussion by Isaac, Carol, Luke, Bob and Nathan.** One member of this sub-group does not support the recommendation. Sandra Montes-Martinez, Marvin Lorenzana, Nathan Good and Jon Carlson do not support this recommendation. Recommendation #5: MC USA's Executive Board, staff, and churchwide program agencies will not use sexual identity, gender orientation, or marital ...ivities, roles, and committees of our denomination. ^{23 responses}



PROCESS

November 30, 2019 A short article that the Advisory Group meeting took place and a final report is being worked on in preparation for the MC USA Executive Board meeting on January 17-18, 2020, and that the final Advisory Group report will be shared publicly after the January 17-18 EB meeting.³⁶

January 8, 2020: Executive Board Executive Committee will meet to review the final report from the Membership Guidelines Advisory Group. This follows Executive Board protocol for how agenda items are processed for inclusion in EB meetings.

January 17 - 18, 2020: The Membership Guidelines Advisory Group report with recommendations will be presented to the Executive Board, with representation from BMC, Pink Menno and/or Inclusive Pastors present, including a member of these groups who was part of the Membership Guidelines Advisory Group.

January 2020: A news release about the EB meeting with an overview of how they engaged the Membership Guidelines Advisory Group report will release. This will include links to the final report submitted to the EB by the Advisory Group.³⁷

³⁶ From the" Communication for the Membership Guidelines Advisory Group" document.
³⁷ Ibid

January - March 2020: The Executive Board will continue to engage the recommendations and discern a process for drafting a resolution to present to the delegates for a vote in 2021.

March 26 - 28, 2020: Constituency Leaders Council will offer feedback to the Executive Board. Representatives from the LGBTQ community, who were part of the Advisory Group, will be present.

April 2020: The Executive Board will process the feedback from the Constituency Leaders Council and finalize a resolution to pass onto the resolutions committee for a vote at convention 2021. Representatives from the LGBTQ community, who were part of the Advisory Group, will be present.

May 2020: The proposed delegate resolution and resources for discernment in relation to it, along with education about the history, function and impact of the Membership Guidelines, will be disseminated to conference leaders, pastors, conference assembly delegates. Agency CEOs will also be informed.

Process Ideas for church-wide discussion on belonging

Recognizing our diverse expectations, differences, and the ways we read and interpret scripture, we believe there is a shared identity in belonging to MC USA. We desire a process that invites us to explore our identity and how we belong together in MC USA.

Therefore, we recommend that MC USA take time to engage the experience of belonging. It is a question that has come up several times in recent history. It is a question asked by Racial/Ethnic leaders and others as we have sought to remain together as MC USA. The church-wide study should engage questions of identity, identification and belonging.

- Key questions:
 - What does it mean to be part of a faith community?
- Why am I a part of my congregation; why are we members of our conference; and why are we part of MC USA? Resources:
 - Recommend Peter Block, Community: The Structure of Belonging
 - Executive Board to read

- EB Staff develop questions for small group discussion) and possibly
- Bring Peter Block to convention to end the church-wide study
- Explore MC Canada's "Being a Faithful Church Together" resources.
- Create a recommended resource list to congregations and conferences who specifically want to be in discernment regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ persons.
- In addition MC USA may host webinars on the topic of belonging and/or provide resources for conference assemblies starting in the summer of 2020.

Status: Agreed upon by all advisory group members.



Process steps from 2020-2021 23 responses

Notes:

- Names appearing in the green status sections are there at the named person's request.
- Advisory group members used the following scale to register their level of support on the content of various sections and recommendations.



Gradients of Agreement

Developed in 1987 by Kaner, Berger and Community at Work

Slides by Catherine Barnes, PhD

 Advisory Group Participants were: Catherine Barnes (facilitator), Tina Begay, Sarah Bixler, Jon Carlson, Michael Danner (staff), Iris de Leon-Hartshorn (staff), Linda Dibble, Joanne Dietzel, Joanne Gallardo, Nathan Good, Glen Guyton (staff), Clyde Kratz, Marvin Lorenzana, Luke Miller, Sandra Montes Martinez, Vikki Pruitte-Sorrells, Don Rheinheimer, Phil Rich, Annabeth Roeschley, Clare Ann Ruth-Heffelbower, Randy Spaulding, Vivian Stevens Lyon, Isaac Villegas, Carol Wise, Bob Yoder