



## **Clarification on Mennonite Church USA Polity and the Role of the Membership Guidelines of Mennonite Church USA**

*For consideration by the Delegate Assembly, May 2022, Kansas City, Missouri*

### **Background**

1. The Membership Guidelines for the formation of Mennonite Church USA were created to define the expectations for member conferences as they joined MC USA. Denominations had differing polity around the roles of area conferences that led to how each denomination handled pastors' officiating same-sex marriages.
2. In 1999, the Membership Guidelines failed to pass due to a lack of clarity around the status of dual conference congregations disciplined by one denomination but not the other for allowing openly gay members.
3. For integration to move forward, section III was added to the Membership Guidelines to clarify MC USA's expectations for area conferences on these matters. Both delegate bodies approved these guidelines in 2001.
4. The Membership Guidelines for the formation of MC USA were created to facilitate the integration of Mennonite Church and General Conference into a new denomination. The guidelines were to be reviewed for their ongoing usefulness in six years (2007).
5. In 2007, the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) began a review of the Membership Guidelines. Still, conflict over gay persons in the church made the review process difficult, and it didn't move forward.
6. In 2013, the Executive Board (EB) submitted a revised version of the guidelines to the delegate body as an administrative update. No delegate vote was taken.
7. In 2015, the Kansas City 2015 Delegate Assembly adopted [The Resolution on the Status of the Membership Guidelines](#), stating, "The Membership Guidelines, adopted by the delegates in 2001 and updated in 2013, shall continue to serve Mennonite Church USA as the guiding document for questions regarding church membership and same-sex relationships/marriages, alongside the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective."

The resolution *Forbearance in the Midst of Differences* affirmed that "While acknowledging different interpretations, we affirm the centrality of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture as an essential part of our collective discernment. We also affirm the goodness of marriage, singleness, celibacy, sexual intimacy within a marriage covenant, and fidelity for all people..." The resolution also acknowledged that "...there is currently no consensus within MC USA on whether it is appropriate to bless Christians who are in same-sex covenanted unions." Therefore, "...we call on all those in MC USA to offer grace, love, and forbearance toward 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.” Since 2015, conferences, congregations, and pastors have lived into this resolution resulting in varied practices concerning same-sex marriage and the credentialing of same-sex married persons.

The delegate assembly also passed the three-part resolution On the Status of the Membership Guidelines. The resolution explained that sections I and II of the MG “...provide a biblical foundation for church membership...” and “...explain the multi-faceted policy and practice of membership now embodied in the Mennonite Church USA bylaws (Articles III and IV).” The resolution also explained that the MC USA Constituency Leaders Council recommended the inclusion of section III in 2001 to clarify “some issues related to homosexuality and membership.” The 2015 resolution sought delegate feedback on the ongoing relevance of the MG for MC USA. The relevance of the MG was tested by this statement, affirmed by the delegate body, “The Membership Guidelines, adopted by the delegates in 2001 and updated in 2013, shall continue to serve Mennonite Church USA as a guiding document for questions regarding church membership and same-sex relationships/marriages, alongside the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.” This resolution also stated that “...the delegate assembly will not entertain changes to the Membership Guidelines for the next four years.” That moratorium ended at the delegate assembly at MennoCon19.

These two resolutions are in tension. As MC USA conferences, congregations and pastors live into the freedom granted by the resolution *Forbearance in the Midst of Differences*, section III of the Membership Guidelines has ceased to be actively enforced policy within MC USA.

There has been a consistent articulation from the LGBTQ members of MC USA that section III of the Membership Guidelines has caused them harm.

The prohibition against credentialed MC USA pastors performing same-sex marriages in the Membership Guidelines is not an actively enforced policy in all congregations and conferences. The polity statement in the Membership Guidelines states, “Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony. Such action would be grounds for review of their credentials by their area conference’s ministerial credentialing body.” Neither the original ***Membership Guidelines for the formation of Mennonite Church USA***, nor the current version, nor ***A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership: A Polity Manual for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA*** outline the review process or gives authority to the Executive Board of MC USA to supersede the governance authority of the area conference or local congregation.

Pastoral accountability is a function of the area conference which holds the credential. It is not the responsibility of the Executive Board. Pastors, congregations, and area conferences discern the appropriateness of performing same-sex marriages in their contexts. Congregations are accountable to area conferences. Conferences have broad latitude in determining membership and credentialing. The original ***Membership Guidelines for the formation of Mennonite Church USA*** states that disputes related to section III be resolved by area conferences, not the Executive Board. In that spirit, we commit to the difficult work of being church together amidst our differences working at Biblical justice and reconciliation where there is conflict.

**Resolution: Therefore, we retire the Membership Guidelines as the active polity in Mennonite Church USA.**

*Approved by the Mennonite Church USA Executive Board, April 16, 2021*