

A Resolution for Repentance and Transformation

Current policies of Mennonite Church USA do *violence*¹ to *LGBTQIA* people by failing to affirm their full, God-given identities and by restricting their full participation in the life, ministries and rituals of the broader church. The rejection of LGBTQIA people by MC USA has silenced and denied ministry callings, torn apart families, forced parents to choose between their church and their child, and caused many LGBTQIA people to leave the church. In some cases, rejection by their faith community is a factor in LGBTQIA people self-harming or even dying by suicide.²

The 2001 Membership Guidelines, especially Section III,³ are the basis for many of these wounds, and also for harm done to the ministry and witness of our denomination and congregations. The Guidelines were not created for the benefit of LGBTQIA people. The Guidelines' purpose was to facilitate denominational integration, and, in the process, the church willingly offered up LGBTQIA people, their families, their congregations, and pastors as scapegoats for the sake of a false peace and unity.

The legacy of the 2001 Membership Guidelines is in direct contradiction to the vision and calling of MC USA; they have given us conflict and loss, not "healing and hope."⁴

Excluding LGBTQIA people from the church is a rejection of God's joyous delight in the diversity of creation and a denial of the Divine image and breath animating all humankind.⁵ It is unfaithful to the calling and ministry of Jesus who, as "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 and rejected by religious institutions and teaches that love is the fulfillment of the law.⁶ It is a denial of the work of the Holy Spirit who empowers LGBTQIA Christians to give and receive every gift in the body of Christ.

Excluding LGBTQIA people harms not only LGBTQIA people and *allies*, but it also harms the full body of Christ. Such exclusion is a rejection of the witness of individuals, congregations, and conferences who live out God's life-giving love in and through full affirmation of the lives of LGBTQIA people. It is a failure to realize the denominational vision of "healing and hope" and therefore restricts the life and mission of MC USA. It is a rejection of spiritual gifts that God longs to share through LGBTQIA people with the Mennonite church.

¹ Bolded, italicized words appear in the Glossary at the end of this document.

² For example, see Ron Adams, *The Rule of Love*, The Mennonite, Nov. 2013; also Roberta Showalter Kreider, *The Cost of Truth: Faith Stories of Mennonite and Brethren Leaders and Those Who Might Have Been*. 2004 Strategic Press.

³ Section III of the "Membership Guidelines" reads, in part, "We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life.;" and, "We hold the Saskatoon (1986) and Purdue (1987) statements describing homosexual, extramarital and premarital sexual activity as sin to be the teaching position of Mennonite Church USA;" and, "Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony."

⁴ MC USA Vision: Healing and Hope at <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/vision-for-healing-and-hope/>

⁵ Genesis 1-2

⁶ Colossians 1.15-20, Romans 13.8-10, NLT

In our denominational discussions about inclusion, many Mennonites have falsely claimed that LGBTQIA exclusion is necessary for MC USA to remain in fellowship with people of color. This tactic of pitting *marginalized groups* against each other falsely assumes uniformity of thought among and within diverse groups of people, even as it denies the existence of LGBTQIA people of color within the church.

Our calling as disciples of Jesus compels us to “[c]onfront the misuses of power in our... institutions” by “seek[ing] to tell the truth and repent.”⁷

Therefore, be it resolved that, as members of Mennonite Church USA committed to *truth-telling*, repentance, and transformation in the Way of Jesus:

We confess that:

- Our denomination’s policies, structures, practices, and theologies have excluded LGBTQIA persons from fully sanctioned participation in the denomination and have caused great *harm* to LGBTQIA Mennonites and their families.
- We have failed to offer the Good News of God’s “grace, joy and peace”⁸ to LGBTQIA Mennonites and their families.
- Our denomination and congregations are diminished in vitality and faithfulness by the loss of our siblings who have chosen to leave because of exclusionary practices and policies.
- We have not affirmed the full status and worth of LGBTQIA people as fully beloved by God.
- We have scapegoated people of color as the reason for discrimination against LGBTQIA people, and blamed LGBTQIA people for the loss of some people of color in the church.⁹
- LGBTQIA Mennonite people of color are virtually erased.
- We have not taken seriously “every human grouping [being] reconciled and united in the church.”¹⁰
- As a result of the polity implications of the Membership Guidelines Section III, we have driven wedges of mistrust between MC USA pastors and their congregations, and between congregations and conferences.

⁷ Renewed Commitments for MC USA, 2018

⁸ Mennonite Church USA *Vision: Healing and Hope*

⁹ Quoted from Advisory Group report p. 11. This scapegoating is one way that we name how Mennonite institutions have done and do violence to people in the church. While not the focus of this resolution, we hope that dealing honestly with one form of oppression in the church is also a call to engage more seriously with others, like White Supremacy.

¹⁰ Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, Article 9

We commit to:

- **Rescind** the Membership Guidelines, Section III.¹¹
- Include LGBTQIA people and/or representative allies in the creation of any resource, document, or policy produced or distributed by the denomination that specifically affects LGBTQIA people.
- Require that the Executive Board consult with LGBTQIA leaders¹² to create an LGBTQIA constituency group with representation on the Constituency Leaders Council and/or other denomination-wide leadership groups.
- Provide denominational resources for individuals, congregations, and conferences to engage with repentance and reconciliation in their own contexts. Such resources should explore historic harms, encourage **truth-telling**, and address areas of **intersectionality**.
- Follow the leadership of LGBTQIA Mennonites to provide support and resources for LGBTQIA leaders in the church. This should involve investment of denominational time and money.
- Formalize and publicize policies for MC USA's Executive Board, staff, and church-wide program agencies that prohibit the use of sexual orientation, gender identity, or marital status as criteria to restrict a person's full participation in the ministries, activities, roles, and committees at the denominational level.
- Embody a theology that honors LGBTQIA people and relationships with all future MC USA theological statements, including but not limited to future revisions of *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*. When MC USA partners with other denominations or faith groups, its input into the process will advocate for this theology.

GLOSSARY

Allies - Within the context of the LGBTQIA community, allies are individuals who are not LGBTQIA (i.e., they are heterosexual and cisgender), but who support the LGBTQIA community. Being an ally means: sharing power, taking risks, taking responsibility, being open to the unknown, becoming part of addressing injustice, leveling the playing field, accepting differences, making allowances, and leading by action. It is important for an ally to join LGBTQIA persons in solidarity, and not play a patronizing role in the journey towards equality. [Definition adapted from *Safe Zone* (2016) by the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests.]

Harm - Here used broadly to mean the diminishment of physical, mental, and/or spiritual health as a result of beliefs, policies, and practices that reject the faithful witness of LGBTQIA people and their faith communities. Harm is related to *violence* (see definition below).

¹¹ This will effectively eliminate section III of the Guidelines. Sections I and II are part of the MC USA bylaws.

¹² Many LGBTQIA Mennonite leaders are affiliated with advocacy groups including Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests, Pink Menno, and Inclusive Mennonite Pastors.

Intersectionality - A lens that helps us understand the overlapping dimensions of identity, privilege, and oppression. A community whose theology and structures tend to intersectionality will recognize the interlocking nature of each person's identity markers (such as gender, sexual orientation, race, economic status, age, etc.) and how they are granted the space to belong and the power to thrive.

LGBTQIA - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. The acronym is one generally accepted way of representing a diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities. Sometimes "queer" is used as an umbrella term for LGBTQIA.

Marginalized groups - Those who are denied access to institutional power because of one or more aspect/s of who they are. Because the dominant cultural norms in MC USA, as in wider U.S. culture, have been established by those who are predominantly white, heterosexual, cisgender, and male, marginalized groups in our context include Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, LGBTQIA people, and women.

Rescind - "take back, cancel" (*Merriam-Webster*). At the time of writing "A Resolution for Repentance and Transformation," MC USA leadership is proposing to "retire" the Membership Guidelines with little or no mention of the pain the Guidelines have caused. "Rescind" represents a stronger rejection of the painful legacy of the Membership Guidelines in the formation and life of our denomination.

Truth-telling - Following the practitioners of restorative and transformative justice, publicly telling the truth about harm is an essential step toward healing. Truth-telling centers the stories of those who have been harmed, reveals the impact of past actions, and opens the door to accountability and change.

Violence - Occurs when the actions of individuals, institutions, or structures of power intentionally or unintentionally hurt, damage, or destroy the value of an individual or a group. Exclusion is a threatening act that enforces the experience of othering -- treating some people in the church as essentially different and generally inferior -- and continues the cycle of marginalization. Othering and marginalization are forms of violence; they cause emotional, physical, and spiritual harm.