

A Brief History:
THE INCLUSION OF LGBTQs WITHIN THE
MENNONITE CHURCH AND
CENTRAL DISTRICT CONFERENCE

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Background: MENNONITE CHURCH USA

- ❖ **Made up of 21 area conferences; officially began in 2002**
- ❖ **Led by Executive Director, Ervin Stutzman (previously Jim Schrag) and the Executive Board - 18 members**
 - Moderators: Elizabeth Soto, Patty Shelly, David Boshart**
- ❖ **Decisions made by delegates at biennial assemblies**
 - Kansas City - June 30 to July 4, 2015**
 - **Every congregation can send delegates (based on membership)**
 - **Every conference sends delegates (based on membership)**

Preview: HOW WE GOT HERE...

- ❖ **Bethlehem '83 Convention (1983)**
- ❖ **Church-wide study - *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life***
 - 1985 (commissioned in '80 by GCMC and 'in 81 by MC)
- ❖ **Saskatoon/Purdue Statements (1986/7)**
- ❖ **Confession of Faith (1995)**
- ❖ **MC USA Merger (2001)**
- ❖ **Membership Guidelines (2001)**

Preview: ONGOING DISCERNMENT

- ❖ **MEMBERSHIP** - membership for G/L persons in committed relationships
(congregational membership for G/L persons)
 - ❖ **MARRIAGES** - officiating at G/L marriages
(hetero pastors performing G/L marriages)
 - ❖ **MINISTRY** - licensing/ordination of G/L pastors in committed relationships
(pastoral credentialing for GLBTQ persons)
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How We Got Here: BETHLEHEM 1983

Preceding Bethlehem '83

- **In 1980 General Conference Mennonite Church (GCMC) authorized a study on human sexuality; in 1981 Mennonite Church (MC) joined**
- **Jointly formed a committee of medical doctors, psychologists, biblical scholars, ethicists, and church leaders worked to identify common ground and issues requiring further discernment (four year process)**

Bethlehem '83 – First joint delegate meeting of MC and GCMC

- **Agreed to move toward working together**
 - **Set direction toward a shared Confession of Faith**
 - **Heard an initial report of the committee on human sexuality**
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How We Got Here: BETHLEHEM 1983

“In 1983 the two largest bodies of Mennonites in North America met in their first joint assembly at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The sexuality committee gave an interim report. Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (BMC) set up a display at the assembly with the initial approval of the governing boards. However, within a few hours it was ordered to be dismantled. At most general assemblies since, BMC’s presence has been unofficial and at the margins.”

From an article called, Homosexuality and the Mennonite Church, by Loren Johns, in Greenwood Publishing Group’s *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality and Religion*



How We Got Here: 1985 - 1987

1985 - Mennonite Church - *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*

- a working document and commended it to congregations for study

1986 - General Conference Mennonite Church - *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*

1986 - GCMC also passed “A Resolution on Human Sexuality”

- was not the work of the committee
- given GCMC’s congregational polity, it was not understood to be binding

1987 - MC passes similar resolution – Purdue ‘87 statement

How We Got Here: SASKATOON '86 / PURDUE '87

“We covenant with each other to **study the Bible together and expand our insight** into the biblical teachings relating to sexuality. We understand the Bible to teach that **sexual intercourse is reserved for a man and woman united in marriage and that violation of this teaching is a sin.** It is our understanding that this teaching also **precludes premarital, extramarital and homosexual sexual activity.** We further understand the Bible to teach the sanctity of the marriage covenant and that any violation of this covenant, including spouse abuse, is sin.”

How We Got Here:

SASKATOON '86 / PURDUE '87 (CONT.)

“We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of **remaining in loving dialogue** with each other in the body of Christ, recognizing that we are all sinners in need of God's grace and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance.”

“We covenant with each other to take part in the **ongoing search for discernment** and for openness to each other. As a part of the nurture of individuals and congregations **we will promote congregational study** of the complex issues of sexuality through Bible study and the use of *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life: A Working Document for Study and Dialogue.*”

How We Got Here: 1990's - ANXIETY AND MERGER

“In 1990 the two Mennonite bodies appointed a joint “Listening Committee” to “care for gay and lesbian persons and their families ... by listening to their alienation and pain ... to encourage and facilitate dialogue between persons of various perspectives ... [and] to make recommendations ... regarding policy, program, and church life.””

1991 – Listening Committee report /recommendations presented; neither implemented

1995 – Decision to merge/integrate MC and GCMC

1995 -- Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective

“Officially, the Mennonite churches seemed torn between two strong commitments: the commitment to maintain a clear and biblical ethical teaching that rules out sexual union between gay or lesbian persons on the one hand, and the commitment to love and show compassion toward all—especially the marginalized—on the other hand.”

Quotes from an article called, Homosexuality and the Mennonite Church, by Loren Johns, in Greenwood Publishing Group's *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality and Religion*

How We Got Here:

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995)

Article 19 – Family, Singleness, and Marriage

“We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life.... According to Scripture, right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship.”

How We Got Here: MC/GC MERGER PROCESS

- ❖ **St Louis 1999: Merger voted on but not approved**
- ❖ **Constituency Leaders Council (CLC): Newly formed CLC begins work**
- ❖ **Membership Guidelines: Part III created**
- ❖ **Nashville 2001**
 - ❖ **Membership Guidelines, with Part III, approved**
 - ❖ **MC USA merger approved: official February 1, 2002**

How We Got Here:

ONGOING DISCERNMENT WITHIN MC USA

- ❖ **MEMBERSHIP – membership for GLBT persons in committed relationships**
 - Allowed by MC USA Membership Guidelines while affirming traditional understandings
 - Late '70's one congregation in Kansas approved membership for G/L; others since then, depending on the conference
- ❖ **MARRIAGES - officiating at G/L marriages**
 - Ministers in several conferences have officiated at same-sex ceremonies; most have had their credential put on probation
 - Lancaster Conference withdrew the ordination credential of Chester Wenger
- ❖ **MINISTRY – licensing/ordination of G/L pastors in committed relationships**
 - Mountain States Mennonite Conference licensed Theda Good at First Mennonite Church, Denver, early in 2014; Executive Board took action to not recognize her license
 - CDC announced plans to license a pastor in a committed relationship

CDC's Approach: CONGREGATIONAL POLITY

How we understand ourselves

- ❖ **as a family of adult sisters and brothers**
 - ❖ **as a place for fellowship, discussion, and mutual accountability**
 - ❖ **as a place where relationships are vital as we seek to follow Christ**
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CDC's Approach: DISCIPLINE AND DISCIPLING

Quotes from CDC Polity Statement, 1999

“We believe that *discipline* belongs in the congregation and is not a function of the conference.”

“The relationship between conference and congregation is not the same as the relationship between the congregation and its individual members.”

CDC's Approach: DISCIPLINE AND DISCIPLING

Quotes from CDC Polity Statement, 1999

“When the apostle Paul speaks of the body of Christ, it is a body of which individuals are members, not a conference of which congregations are members.”

“The conference *disciples* by providing opportunities for people to come together and seek the meaning of discipleship in our time.”



How We Got Here:

ONGOING DISCERNMENT WITHIN CDC

MEMBERSHIP

Late 1980's and beyond - some CDC congregations have discerned openness to L/G members

2009 - Request for conversation re membership in CDC from St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship; CDC Board works on creating Membership Criteria for congregations entering CDC

2010 - After conversation at Regional Gatherings and the previous Annual Meeting, delegates affirmed the following Membership Criteria in June 2010:

- Jesus Christ is the center
- Congregational discernment that is biblically-based, Christ-centered and Spirit-led
- Guided by MC USA's vision statement and the Confession of Faith (1995)
- Affirms CDC's statement on polity
- CDC Constitutional requirements: participation, financial support, conference committees

How We Got Here:

ONGOING DISCERNMENT WITHIN CDC

MARRIAGES: CREDENTIAL REVIEWS

Membership Guidelines – Part III – *“Pastors. . .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.”*

2011-12 Ministerial Committee engaged in a credential review of a pastor whose congregation affirmed the decision to officiate at same-sex ceremonies.

- The committee’s decision affirmed the pastor’s ministry in that context and noted on MC USA ministerial profile that the actions were at variance with MC USA standards.

2014 Credential reviews were conducted of another CDC pastor and a chaplain. The decisions in each case were similar to that of the first credential review.

2015 Recently completed another review of a chaplain

How We Got Here:

ONGOING DISCERNMENT WITHIN CDC

MARRIAGES: CREDENTIAL REVIEWS

- ❖ The Ministerial Committee requests:
 - Statement articulating the minister's biblical foundations for their decision
 - Statement of support from the congregation
 - Meeting: minister, a congregational rep, conference minister and committee.
- ❖ In each case so far the ordination credential has been deemed "in good standing" and a note recorded on MC USA ministerial profile that their action was at variance with the MC USA Membership Guidelines.

How We Got Here:

ONGOING DISCERNMENT WITHIN CDC

MINISTRY

In the spring of 2014, the Ministerial Committee received a request to license the associate pastor called by Columbus Mennonite Church. After the usual process, they recommended licensing.

The Ministerial Committee invited the Board to join in the decision.

In October the committee and board approved the licensing and decided to delay the licensing until after the 2015 MC USA convention in Kansas City. Did so knowing that the license would not be recognized by MC USA. and ready to engage in “faithful dissent.” The committee prepared a statement on the biblical foundations for its decision.

How We Got Here:

ONGOING DISCERNMENT WITHIN CDC

MINISTRY: TIMELINE OF DECISION TO LICENSE PASTOR

- ❖ December 2013 Conference Minister (CM) met with Columbus Mennonite's (CMC) Search Committee; looked at several possible candidates
- ❖ April 2014 CMC learned of a member's interest in the pastoral position
CM shares with CMC pastor that MC USA asks that LGBTQ pastors not be credentialed
- ❖ May-June CMC engages in congregational meetings about CMC's openness to hiring an LGBTQ pastor; affirms readiness
- ❖ Late June CMC informs Ministerial Committee and CM of plans to call this member and seek credentialing for him
- ❖ July CMC votes (79 yes; 1 no) to call pastor in a committed relationship

How We Got Here:

ONGOING DISCERNMENT WITHIN CDC

MINISTRY: TIMELINE OF DECISION TO LICENSE PASTOR (CONT.)

- ❖ August CMC formally requests licensing toward ordination
Ministerial Committee interviews and affirms gifts and readiness for ministry; pastor begins working
- ❖ Aug – Oct Ministerial Committee and Board meet to respond to the recommendation, consult with larger church, determine timing of licensing service
- ❖ September Conference Minister installs associate pastor of CMC
- ❖ July 26, 2015 Upcoming date for licensing service

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION IN CDC

- ❖ CDC Board has formed a **Sexuality and Faithful Relationships Task Group** to prepare a document to assist us in our commitment to engage in Bible study and loving dialogue about understandings of healthy sexuality and ethics for all Christians.

Members:

- ❖ Loren Johns, chair, Eighth Street Mennonite Church
- ❖ Ron Guengerich, Silverwood Mennonite Church, CDC Board chair
- ❖ Michael Miller, Assembly Mennonite Church
- ❖ Kiva Nyce-Webb, Chicago Community Mennonite Church
- ❖ Alex Sider, First Mennonite Church, Bluffton
- ❖ Regina Shands Stoltzus, Assembly Mennonite Church

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION IN CDC AND IN MC USA

❖ Settings for CDC conversation:

- CDC Regional Gatherings - February-March-April of 2015
- CDC Annual Meeting at Southside/AMBS - June 11-13, 2015

❖ Settings for MC USA conversation:

- Delegate surveys
 - Convention/Assembly in Kansas City, June 30–July 4, 2015
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