

**Summary of Themes and Categories from the Table Group Reports from the  
Constituency Leaders Council  
March 21, 2014**

*(Note: This report is summary of the feedback of the table group responses to these questions as an addendum to the CLC minutes. It is not a summary report of the entire proceedings of the meeting.)*

The Mountain States Mennonite Conference decision to credential a person in a same-sex relationship has had a seismic impact on MC USA. At the CLC meeting in Newton Kansas, 84 conference and associate group leaders entered into prayerful deliberation in table groups around the following 6 questions:

1. Having heard from Mountain States Mennonite Conference (MSMC) and the report of the Task Force, what feedback does the CLC want to communicate to the leadership of the MSMC?
2. What is God saying to us and to Mennonite Church USA, as we listen and reflect?
3. Are there better ways than our current organization (and written statements) to cultivate relationships between congregations, area conferences and the denomination?
4. How will we tend our common life as Mennonite Church USA, especially in light of differing beliefs and practices?
5. What direction can the CLC offer the Executive Board as they tend to the relationships among congregations, area conferences and the denomination at this time in our history?
6. What direction can the CLC offer the Executive Board as they respond to MSMC's recent credentialing process?

The analysis of the responses included all table group feedback. The table group responses were analyzed in four ways. First, all table group feedback was sorted into thematic tables according to questions. Second, all feedback from questions 4-6 were combined and sorted into a thematic table. Third, all feedback from all questions was combined and sorted into thematic tables. Finally the three sets of thematic tables were triangulated to distill a limited number of themes and constituent categories. The comprehensive dataset from table groups will be retained and will inform the Task Force's work going forward. The analysis of the table group process will be further informed by the summary of plenary sessions recorded by Bill Zuercher.

The following is a summary of the themes and categories generated in feedback from table groups. The report is divided into three sections representing the process flow from the CLC meeting: reflecting on what has happened, reflecting in the midst of our experience, and direction to the Executive Board for going forward. Themes 1-3 represent CLC reflection on what has happened with regard to the MSMC decision. Theme 4 represents CLC reflection on our experience out of our time spent in prayerful silence. Themes 5-12 represent the direction CLC offered the Executive Board.

Themes 5-12 can be further divided into several sections. Themes 5 and 6 reflect the generative thinking of CLC table groups with regard to what is possible as we move forward and serve as a platform for specific recommendations. Theme 6 particularly surfaced the idea that tending our system will need to happen at three levels: clarifying the expectations we hold for accountability in our relationships across our system; clarifying our processes for how change happens; and strengthening inter-conference consultation and peer review processes.

Themes 7-12 speak specifically to direction CLC is giving to the Executive Board regarding how to respond to the MSMC decision. This is understood in three ways. First, CLC

offered suggestions for how the Executive Board tends to the whole as it responds to the particular MSMC's credentialing process. These themes address issues such as crisis management, naming reality, and exploring new models for our relationships. Second, CLC asked the Executive Board and the MSMC to be in consultation before Theda Good's credential moves from licensure to ordination. CLC asked the Executive Board to engage MSMC leaders in a process of resolution that can serve as a model for future disagreements.

### ***Reflecting on What Has Happened***

**CLC participants understand the decision of the MSMC as an event that reflects a larger reality within Mennonite Church USA.** (Question 1)

#### *Theme #1: Affirmation for MSMC Moving the Conversation to the Surface.*

CLC Participants expressed a clear sense that the MSMC decision has opened a conversation and process that needs to be dealt with in a more intentional way within Mennonite Church USA. This sense was expressed in three categories:

- a) Many CLC participants expressed affirmation for the MSMC decision as a catalyst for surfacing a conversation that has needed to happen system-wide.
- b) CLC Participants acknowledged that the situation precipitating the MSMC decision is indicative of a systemic shift in practice that could have emerged in various places within our denomination.
- c) The report of the task force and MSMC leaders surfaced many uneasy questions that remain unanswered for CLC participants.

#### *Theme #2: Biblical/Theological issues.*

Many CLC participants expressed discomfort with the perceived insufficient biblical/theological basis for the MSMC decision. This was expressed in two ways:

- a) CLC participants wish for MSMC to make such a presentation.
- b) Some CLC participants are uncomfortable with the lack of theological clarity around matters of sin and social justice as related to the MSMC decision and in MC USA.

#### *Theme #3: Unreliable Consultative Processes Across the System.*

CLC participants believe that the current consultative processes across the denominational system are inadequate and lack sufficient definition. This was expressed in three ways:

- a) CLC participants expressed an assumption that more consultation among conferences and between conferences and the Executive Board would have happened in the MSMC decision.
- b) CLC participants identified that when and how such consultation could have happened was unclear both to those most directly involved and to those who were standing by.
- c) Some CLC participants raised the question whether more consultation would have resulted in a different outcome.

### ***Reflecting in Our Experience***

**CLC participants listened in silence to understand what God is saying in our current dilemma.** (Question 2)

*Theme #4:* Out of the time of listening, several participants gave voice to how they sensed the

Spirit wanting to orient the hearts of church leaders. This was expressed in three ways:

- a) By far, the dominant call was to move forward trusting God and trusting one another.
- b) Leaders were encouraged to accept the hard journey upon which we find ourselves as we attend to the whole.
- c) Leaders were encouraged to do our work with an awareness to the stories of pain and transformation.

### ***Direction for Going Forward***

**CLC participants imagine there are better ways than we currently have to cultivate relationships between congregations, area conferences and the denomination as we seek to remain unified in the face of difference.** (Questions 3 and 4)

#### *Theme #5: Change in structure is needed.*

CLC participants expressed broad openness to exploring new ways of structuring our relationships as a denominational system. This was expressed in three ways:

- a) Many CLC participants suggested exploring models based on a smaller set of common commitments seen in organizations such as Mennonite World Conference, Mennonite Women, and Mennonite Central Committee.
- b) Many CLC participants suggested exploring models where the church is united around center-set commitments defined by mission rather than boundaries and rules.
- c) Exploring various ways to cultivate relationships in Mennonite Church USA in the face of difference raised a list of cautions and wonderings with regard to the unintended consequences of change.

#### *Theme #6: Processes need strengthening*

CLC participants expressed the need to strengthen our organizational processes. Three kinds of processes need strengthening:

- a) CLC participants identified need for greater clarity in the expectations we hold in our *relationships* among congregations, area conferences and the national conference.
- b) CLC participants believe that our processes for *change* are not articulated clearly enough.
- c) CLC participants believe that our inter-conference *consultation and peer review* processes are not working adequately and we need greater clarity about how to optimize these processes when we face disagreement.

**CLC Participants gave direction to the Executive Board for tending relationships among congregations, area conferences and the denomination at this time in our history.** (Question 5).

#### *Theme #7: Tend the Crisis*

CLC participants ask the Executive Board to provide leadership in tending the current crisis. Two issues are of primary concern:

- a) Frequent communication from the Executive Board with regard to the steps the Executive Board will be taking to address the current crisis will be key to managing the crisis.

- b) CLC participants believe it is important to work with groups to keep them from abrupt and uninformed departure.

*Theme #8: Name and accept the current reality and lead toward a new future*

The CLC asks the Executive Board to take leadership in naming and accepting our current reality and provide leadership in charting a path to a new future for our denomination. This work should be informed by the following two concerns:

- a) CLC participants see the Purposeful Plan as an asset in sustaining the future of the denomination.
- b) CLC participants believe it is important for the Executive Board to provide leadership for theological/biblical discernment on issues of human sexuality.

*Theme #9: Explore new models for relationships*

The CLC asks the Executive Board to explore new models for structuring our relationships in our denominational system. New models should take into account the following three matters:

- a) CLC participants believe it is important that new relationship models consider the possible unintended consequences of changing our denominational system.
- b) Within the proposals of alternative models for relationships, CLC participants seem to prefer a set of common commitments to serve as the basis for relationships.
- c) CLC participants believe that the Executive Board should develop guidelines for inter-conference consultation when issues of variance are at stake.

**CLC participants gave direction to the Executive Board for responding to Mountain States Mennonite Conference's recent credentialing process. (Question 6)**

*Theme #10: Executive Board leadership on the broader church stage*

CLC participants identified important ways the Executive Board can lead in its relationship to MSMC before the broader church. This was expressed in the following four ways:

- a) Executive Board should express appreciation for the MSMC process where possible.
- b) Executive Board should unapologetically name that all agree that MSMC is at variance with Mennonite Church USA documents and agreements made when MSMC joined the denomination.
- c) Recognizing that the Mountain States Decision is indicative of systemic issues in the denomination, Executive Board should lead a process for organizational change, including a review of our documents and update them where necessary.
- d) Executive Board should provide leadership in developing theological/biblical clarity on issues of human sexuality.

*Theme #11: Process needed before Theda Good's Ordination*

CLC participants believe that more consultation is needed between the MSMC Leaders and the Executive Board before Theda's credential moves toward ordination.

*Theme #12: Executive Board leadership relative to MSMC*

CLC identified ways for the Executive Board to engage MSMC leaders directly in order to develop a process for redemptive resolution that can serve as a model for future disagreements. Developing such a process should take into account the following two concerns:

- a) CLC participants requested a confessional recounting of what happened to which Executive Board and MSMC leaders can both give assent.

- b) CLC participants encourage the Executive Board to pursue a resolution process that is redemptive rather than punitive, which may include consequences for taking an action that is at variance with denominational commitments.