

In 2001 Ohio Mennonite Conference became a conference of Mennonite Church USA when the denomination we had been a part of, Mennonite Church (MC), merged with the General Conference (GC) denomination. In order to merge the two denominations *Membership Guidelines* were established. In 1999 the original *Membership Guidelines* (Part I and Part II) failed to gain enough approval due to differences in the level of acceptance of LGBTQ persons into the life of congregations. In light of that a Part III was added entitled “Clarification on some issues related to homosexuality and membership.” Parameters were created in Part III which forbid pastors holding credentials in a conference of MC USA from performing a same-sex covenanted ceremony. If they did, such action would be grounds for review of their credentials by their area conference’s ministerial credentialing body. With the addition of Part III to the *Membership Guidelines*, the delegate bodies of both denominations gathered together in Nashville in July 2001 and approved the guidelines by nearly 90% to facilitate the merger.

Since 2001, people, congregations and conferences across MC USA have interpreted and implemented the *Membership Guidelines* in different ways. Some interpreted them as a temporary agreement which was written and agreed to primarily for the purpose of the merger and the birth of MC USA, thus being time sensitive. Others interpreted them as a binding covenant for an unlimited time, highlighting both the covenant and commitment language contained therein.

Complicating matters, the two denominations which merged held different views on polity as related to who made decisions. As a general rule, the General Conference gave its churches much more autonomy in decision making while Mennonite Church congregations gave more authority to their conference in making decisions. Throughout their history, Anabaptist and Mennonite churches have never been top-down and authoritative in decision making outside of congregations, a cluster of congregations, or perhaps a conference. Even in conferences which are given more authority and where congregations hold to a common confession of faith, congregations have acted differently on such matters as the level of acceptance of members who served in the military, those who are divorced and remarried, and women in pastoral leadership, just to name a few.

Much has happened in our society and the church over the past 20 years, especially regarding the level of how much LGBTQ+ persons are accepted into the life of our congregations, including for some conferences, the approval of pastors performing same-sex marriages. In a few instances this has included granting ministerial licenses to pastors who are in a same-sex covenanted relationship.

Recognizing the differences in theological interpretation in congregations and conferences across MC USA, the delegates at the 2015 assembly in Kansas City approved two resolutions: 1) *On the Status of the Membership Guidelines*; and 2) *Forbearance in the Midst of Differences*. In order to exercise forbearance in the midst of the differences, *On the Status of the Membership Guidelines* resolved that the delegate body would not entertain changes to the *Membership Guidelines* for four years.

Four years later, at the MC USA delegate assembly in 2019, again in Kansas City, the delegates recommended that the Leadership and Executive Board of MC USA move forward in discerning

a way to process what to do with the *Membership Guidelines*. Since that time an Advisory Group was formed, met together and offered recommendations. MC USA's Constituency Leaders Council (CLC), with representatives from all 16 conferences and the agencies of MC USA, spent time at two of its recent biannual meetings discerning and offering feedback to the Executive Board.

At its January 22-23, 2021 meeting the Executive Board (EB) of MC USA made the decision to bring a resolution to its CLC to retire the *Membership Guidelines*. This is the anticipated timeline of next steps in the process:

- Mar. 12-13, 2021 - CLC meets to discuss the resolution and offer feedback to Executive Board
- April 16-17, 2021 - EB will be meeting to decide a final resolution to be brought to delegate body.
- Spring 2022 – Most likely the earliest MC USA's delegate body will gather in person to vote.

It is important for Ohio Conference delegates and our congregations to understand that MC USA's *Membership Guidelines* only deal with the membership of a conference to MC USA. It has nothing to do with how a congregation determines its own members or even how a conference determines its member congregations. Ohio Conference's delegates made a decision at its ACA in 2016, and it is in our current Constitution, that a congregation does not have to be a member of MC USA to be a member of Ohio Conference.

Ohio Conference is one of several conferences of MC USA which continues to humbly hold a more traditional understanding of Scripture as it relates to sexuality and especially that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. We continue to hold our credentialed ministers accountable to the resolution passed by the Ohio Conference delegate body in 2015 that they will not perform a same-gender ceremony and that Conference will not recognize a congregation's request to credential a pastor in a same-sex relationship.

At Ohio Conference's Annual Conference Assembly in 2017, the delegate body approved a resolution proposed by the Leadership Team that included a statement that we will continue our affiliation with Mennonite Church USA. Three changes would trigger a review of that affiliation:

- A substantive change in the Confession of Faith;
- A substantive change in the membership guidelines of MC USA;
- A change in policy or practice at the national level that would require Ohio Conference to recognize the credentials of pastors who have performed same-sex marriages or who are involved themselves in a same-sex relationship.

While there is currently no suggestion for changes to the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, nor any requirement from MC USA for area conference's to recognize the credentials of pastors who have performed same-sex marriages or who are involved themselves in a same-sex relationship, the Leadership Team of Ohio Conference believes that the actual retirement of the *Membership Guidelines* would be a substantive change that would trigger a review of our affiliation with MC USA.

As the Leadership Team of Ohio Conference we see our affiliation with MC USA as more than one issue. Over the past several years we have heard many pastors and members of our congregations question how well Ohio Conference fits with where Mennonite Church USA is at today. We have also heard some pastors and congregational members express appreciation for MC USA.

In anticipation of MC USA's *Membership Guidelines* being retired sometime in 2022, and in keeping with the resolution passed by our delegate body in 2017, the Ohio Conference Leadership Team suggests the following two step path to begin discerning what future affiliation with a denomination might look like:

- In the upcoming months Ohio Conference Leadership Team, with input from our pastors and delegates, will continue to clarify our own identity, purpose, mission and God's vision for us in the future.
- We will discern together what it means for Ohio Conference to affiliate with a denomination today and what we want that relationship to look like in the future.

We want to make clear that these action steps are in no way indicative of what we might decide as a Conference regarding future affiliation with MC USA if a resolution to retire its *Membership Guidelines* were to pass in 2022. Implied in trying to discern God's will on matters is that we come into the discernment process with as little bias as possible and no pre-conceived favor of the result. We allow the Holy Spirit to lead in the entire process which includes any decision or decisions to be made.

On behalf of the Leadership Team our prayer is that as a conference we will continue to be faithful to who we feel God is calling us to be as we interpret Scripture and discern the Holy Spirit's leading together.