

April 24, 2013

Dear Central Plains Mennonite Conference Brothers and Sisters:

We greet you this spring in the name of our Lord and risen Savior, Jesus Christ. In this season we celebrate with joy in the hope of the resurrection.

It has now been several months since our fall regional meetings concluded. The purpose of these meetings was to prayerfully receive the counsel of our member congregations to Faith Mennonite Church, the Conference Board, and the Pastoral Leadership Committee in response to Faith Mennonite's policy on marriage, family and singleness. We are grateful for the high level of participation and the mature counsel from those "full of wisdom and the Spirit" whom your church sent. As the Conference Board and staff, we now write to you with a response to the counsel you have offered.

It is clear from the counsel we received that our members believe that a commitment to a Jesus-centered mission precedes church policy and structures. Commitment to that mission provides the only reliable foundation for the discernment of sin and church discipline. Even so, in the regional context policies and structures that grow out of this commitment do shape the commitments we make in our relationships to one another. Our members take the issue of sin seriously and our recognition of the universal nature of sin makes us slow to pass judgment on one another.

As a conference board and ministry staff, we hold in trust the positions discerned by the church for our conference. To that end we re-affirm the teaching position of Mennonite Church USA on the topic of human sexuality (that right sexual union occurs only between a man and woman in a life-long covenantal marriage relationship) found in Article 19 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Many participants in the regional meetings shared their feelings of ambivalence or ambiguity toward the issue of same-sex relationships, yet we received no discernible call for a change in our church's teaching positions on human sexuality. As a result, we call Faith Mennonite to align with the position of Mennonite Church USA and refrain from offering same-sex covenanting ceremonies as a ministry of the church.

We lament several things about Faith's process. We lament that Faith Mennonite did not seek the counsel of conference congregations, including congregations closest to them, as part of their discernment process. There may have been legitimate reasons for that choice, but the effect was hurtful. We lament that Faith Mennonite did not honor the faith commitments that we hold in common by sharing a thorough, biblical basis for the policy that was adopted. In the spirit of Revelation 1-3, we will leave this in the hands of Jesus who is Lord of the church.

We acknowledge that Pastor Joetta Schlabach's willingness to participate in same-sex covenantal ceremonies is an attempt to minister with compassion to people that the church has often excluded. In the feedback we received, many challenged Faith Mennonite and Joetta to think about other ways to minister with compassion.

Our polity on ministerial leadership says that with ordination, an office of ministry is entrusted to an individual that empowers that individual "to act in a representative way on the church's behalf." From the counsel we received, it was clear that credentialing issues are important to the members of our conference, particularly in terms of how our conference's actions impact the broader Mennonite Church USA fellowship of conferences. To honor our covenantal relationship with the broader church, the Pastoral Leadership Committee has begun the process of reviewing Joetta's credentials. Our variance policy places the onus on the local teaching leader to provide a strong biblical rationale for adopting a position that is at variance with church statements. The PLC will ask Joetta to provide this rationale for

the pastoral practice she has adopted. We will give the process of review adequate time to come to a clear resolution.

The feedback from the regional meetings demonstrated that, relationally, we expect a lot from one another when we experience disagreement among our members within and among our congregations. It is hard to overstate the strength of this feedback. The feedback also led us to three conclusions:

1. We need to be giving proactive attention to mission, biblical interpretation, and the discernment of sin and faithfulness.
2. We need to identify clear pathways for discernment around complex issues in our cultural context as they relate to our church's positions.
3. We need to ensure that there are safe places to hear voices from the margins of the church and society, to test our foundational beliefs in the context of prayerful biblical discernment, and to identify standards for Anabaptist communal biblical discernment.

When congregations are considering positions of variance in the future we anticipate bringing peer congregations alongside for ongoing relationships of discernment and discipleship.

Faith Mennonite is to be commended for ministering with compassion to people whom the church has historically not responded in love. The regional meeting conversations raised the question for many participants of how the church can faithfully meet people who deal with same-sex orientation and are in same-sex relationships with truth and love. We believe that we need to build our skills and understanding for how to be communities of hope and healing for people who identify as LGBT.

We offer a number of resources for those who care to explore these issues further. These resources can be found on the conference website at www.centralplainsmc.org Look for the "Discernment Resources" page under the "Resources" tab. There, you will find "A Summary of Major Themes from the Regional Meetings" which is enclosed with this letter. We also commend to our conference congregations a short Bible study on Revelation 1-3 entitled, "How Would Jesus Exercise Regional Church Discipline."

In closing, we want to express our gratitude for the high level of commitment our conference congregations demonstrated toward one another and to discerning where the Spirit is leading. May we continue to seek the way of Jesus in all things until it seems good to the Holy Spirit. May the Spirit of our risen Lord Jesus teach us, correct us, and refine us so that our witness will be marked by the fullness of his grace and truth.

May the peace of Christ be with you,

Conference Board Members:

Blaine Friesen, Nathan Luitjens, Margie Waltner, Colin Hofer, Seth McCoy, Jay Miiller, Matt Troyer-Miller, and Sherilyn Ortman

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