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To my sisters and brothers in Christ in Central Plains Mennonite Conference,

In the fall of 2011 Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis released their new policy on marriage in which they signaled their intention to allow Joetta Schlabach, their pastor, to officiate at covenanting ceremonies of same sex couples. As a response, the Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC) board asked the conference to engage in a time of discernment, which culminated in a series of regional meetings that were held in the fall of 2012. At these meetings the board asked for persons full of wisdom and the Spirit to gather and provide feedback on the decision that had been reached by Faith Mennonite.

A committee was convened to work through all of the wisdom that was offered at these meetings and to provide the Board and the Pastoral Leadership Committee (PLC) with a summary of the wisdom received. The response to Faith Mennonite's new policy was released by the CPMC board in April of 2013 and can be found on the CPMC website¹. At that time the PLC of CPMC was also tasked with reviewing Joetta's credentials, which falls under their purview. The CPMC board recognizes that this has not been easy and appreciates the time and energy they have put in over the last number of months as they have sought to speak with a unified voice. They have engaged in this difficult task and the attached letter is their response from the work they have done. We are sending this letter to Central Plains Pastors for you to share with your congregations as you see fit. If you have any questions or would like to respond to their statement please contact Susan Janzen, who is chair of the PLC, at sejanzen@msn.com, or Tim Detweiler, conference minister for ministerial leadership, at timdetweiler@centralplainsmc.org.

As many of you know this is a challenging time in Mennonite Church USA. I ask that you pray for God's wisdom on those who are leading the church in this highly-charged atmosphere of disagreement. I trust that if we together listen to what the Holy Spirit is telling us, even in the midst of our disagreements, the Spirit will make things clear as we remain in patient forbearance with one another.

Continuing to seek God's wisdom and grace,

Nathan Luitjens
Central Plains Mennonite Conference Moderator

¹ http://www.centralplainsmc.org/uploads/1/3/1/1/13118061/conference_board_letter_of_response.pdf

Report of the Pastoral Leadership Committee

Regarding Our Review of Joetta Schlabach's Credentials

A Brief Historical Overview

After a congregational study process in 2011, Faith Mennonite Church adopted a statement on Family, Singleness, and Marriage to include the blessing of marriage for same-sex couples: “As we strive to faithfully follow Jesus, we feel called to clarify that our welcome to LGBTQ members includes the blessing of marriage for those who seek it” (see FMC’s Nov. 7, 2011, document for the full statement).

In response, Central Plains Mennonite Conference organized four regional meetings in 2012, inviting member congregations to send representatives to offer counsel regarding the decision and process of Faith Mennonite Church.

On April 22, 2013, the Conference Board sent a letter to CPMC churches giving a response from these regional meetings. In that letter, the Conference Board said:

“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.”

On August 16, 2013, PLC met for extended, intense, and honest sharing of our varying, deeply felt, and sometimes conflicted individual perspectives on this issue, which represent the range of views present in CPMC. On the following day, PLC met with Joetta and representatives from Faith Mennonite Church to listen to their story and to their biblical discernment process for adopting their statement on Family, Singleness, and Marriage. Our interview with Joetta reiterated to us that their understanding of same-sex relationships and the way they read the Bible has led them to a different place than our denominational statements and Confession of Faith on the issue of blessing same-sex unions. We also heard clearly that they believe they are being guided by the Holy Spirit, and that they are committed to discerning what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ and ministers of the Gospel of Jesus in their setting.

PLC met on November 15-16, 2013, to process our conversations with Joetta and Faith Mennonite representatives. Thanks to the groundwork laid at our August meeting, as well as through further individual reading and reflection, we as a committee have begun to learn how to speak with and hear one another (rather than talking past each other) about issues surrounding homosexuality. Building the trust necessary to do this is slow but essential work if we are to discern God's will together, and we strongly commend such a process to all members of CPMC.

We recognize that there are deep divisions in the church on these matters of homosexuality. There is plenty of judging, condemning, dividing, and excluding going on between persons on both sides of this issue. This has not served the church well. We also confess that the church has not always treated members of the LGBTQ community with love and respect. There has been much pain and brokenness inflicted upon members of the LGBTQ community, their families, and others that has not reflected a Christ-centered response. PLC desires an approach that reflects a Christ-like way of addressing this issue.

PLC members acknowledge that while we do not all see eye to eye on this issue, we are committed to each other as sisters and brothers in Christ and to a process that works with our denominational statements and the *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* with

integrity. For these reasons, the Pastoral Leadership Committee has chosen the following principles to guide this process of reviewing Joetta's credentials:

1. It is important to allow ourselves time to do a good process because any decision will have an impact on brothers and sisters in Christ and on unity in Christ's body. We also recognize that the impact of our decisions will not be shared equally among us. We further recognize that while decisions need to be made with regard to the common commitments that bind us together, we must also continue to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
2. As we do our work, we want to exercise loving and patient forbearance in times of disagreement and stay committed to a Jesus-centered mission as the only reliable foundation for our discernment work. In our work, we understand that all members take the Bible seriously and care deeply about what it means to interpret the scriptures faithfully.
3. PLC takes seriously the counsel given during the regional meetings that credentialing issues are important to the members of our conference, particularly in terms of how Central Plains' actions impact the broader Mennonite Church USA system. We hold credentials in trust with the broader Mennonite Church.
4. As we trust the Spirit of God to lead us in this process, we want to find ways to build bridges for dialogue, relationships, and discernment. To quote Ervin Stutzman: "The issues that we face cannot be solved by human effort alone. We need the enablement of God's Spirit, and the strength of God's Word."
5. PLC will seek to speak in a united voice.

Discerning a way forward

As we move forward, we want to communicate that all are welcome in the body of Christ regardless of sexual orientation. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

We recognize a difference between "welcoming" and "agreeing." In all human relationships we relate with people we don't agree with, even in families. Agreement isn't the basis of our

relationship. We believe in a unity that is based on our commitment to follow Christ as Savior and Lord, a unity that calls us to be brothers and sisters with one another even when we don't see eye to eye.

Marriage is God-ordained, and the marriage covenant has its basis in scripture (see Gen.2:23-25). Our *Confession of Faith* affirms that scripture teaches "that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life" (see also Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). While we understand that there are different ways to interpret and apply the scriptures, it is not our prerogative to change the definition of marriage for our denomination.

We acknowledge that ordination in MC USA does not give permission for a pastor to perform a same-sex union. It is important to honor the limitations of the ordination credential within MC USA because those who have been entrusted with the office of ministry act in a representative way on behalf of the church.

We agree that one witness of the Christian faith to the larger world is to reflect together as Christian congregations on how a godly person expresses his or her sexuality. It appears that the larger culture often does not respect the spiritual, emotional, and social consequences of sexual expression. We acknowledge the attempt of Faith Mennonite Church to look for ways that call the LGBTQ persons among us to the same standards of sexuality as scripture teaches for heterosexuals.

Statement by the Pastoral Leadership Committee (March 1, 2014)

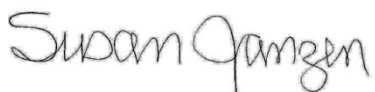
The Pastoral Leadership Committee affirms the discernment process through the regional meetings. We affirm the desire of Faith Mennonite Church and Pastor Joetta Schlabach to minister compassionately with people in the LGBTQ community.

In regard to Joetta Schlabach's credentials, there is no action that needs to be taken at the present time since there has been no ceremony of blessing of a same-sex marriage. We ask Joetta to honor the commitment she made at her ordination and hold to the privileges and limitations of that credential, which does not give permission for credentialed persons to

officiate at a same-sex ceremony. In the event that Joetta does officiate at a same-sex covenanting ceremony, action would be taken at that time as discerned by PLC. Such action could be noted in Joetta's file held in the MC USA ministerial database and include probation, suspension, or withdrawal of credentials; or other action determined by PLC.

We encourage all congregations to welcome and minister to whomever the Spirit leads into their midst. We call on the conference and its congregations to continue the commitment to dialogue about this and other important matters that call for our faithful discernment and response as the Body of Christ living in these times. We encourage a process that increasingly brings together believers with divergent understandings to do the hard but necessary work of discernment.

“Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Ephesians 4:15-16)

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan Janzen".

Susan Janzen, Chairperson

on behalf of the Central Plains Conference Pastoral Leadership Committee: David Breckbill, Dennis Schrock, Kathy Harder, Lois Janzen Preheim, Willis Busenitz

March 5, 2014