

## Summary of Themes and Categories from Regional Meeting Feedback

This is a summary of the counsel of the participants in the four regional meetings held in Central Plains Mennonite Conference during the fall of 2012. For a complete outline of these meetings, see the Guided Conversation document at [www.centralplainsmc.org](http://www.centralplainsmc.org). In short, participants were invited to give their counsel to one another (i.e. the congregations of Central Plains), to Faith Mennonite Church, to the Pastoral Leadership Committee and to the Conference Board regarding how we respond when congregations differ on matters of faith, such as same sex orientation and committed same sex relationships. The themes below are not listed in any particular order or priority.

**Theme 1:** The regional meeting process demonstrated that we have high relational expectations for one another when we experience disagreement among our members. The volume of feedback in this theme makes it hard to overstate its significance.

Categories:

- Our members express a strong call to loving and patient forbearance in times of disagreement.
- Our members express a strong call to attend to our spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, and sensitivity to the Spirit's leading in times of disagreement.
- Our members express high expectations for healthy *and* ongoing communication processes when we face issues of disagreement
- Our members recognize the challenges of coming to clear resolution when we face issues of disagreement
- Our members expressed strong affirmation for the regional meeting process as a way of doing discernment on matters of faith and life.

**Theme 2:** The regional meeting process provided an opportunity for an open and important conversation about issues of sin, doctrine, hermeneutics and mission.

Categories:

- Many members reaffirm that the Bible is clear on the sinfulness of same-sex relationships as formerly discerned by the church
- We take the issue of sin seriously.
- Our recognition of the universal nature of sin makes us slow to pass judgment on one another
- 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.
- Our members take the Bible seriously and care deeply that the Bible is interpreted faithfully. We raise important questions about what it means to interpret the scriptures faithfully.

**Theme 3:** Many participants in the regional meetings offered affirmations for Faith Mennonite Church and the hope for an ongoing or future relationship with Faith.

Categories:

- Members commend Faith Mennonite's ministry to the LGBT community as experimental witness.
- Members commended Faith Mennonite for the intentionality of their process and their willingness to be vulnerable in telling their story to the rest of conference.
- Members expressed a deep sense of good will and love toward Faith Mennonite, praying that teaching and learning will flow in all directions.

**Theme 4:** Many participants in the regional meetings offered strong counsel to Faith Mennonite in the form of warnings, admonitions, and rebukes:

- Members called Faith to reconsider the direction they have chosen, pleading with them to turn back before they cross the line of blessing same-sex covenantal relationships.
- Members admonished Faith Mennonite with heartfelt longing to turn back from the policy they have adopted.
- Members rebuke Faith Mennonite to repent and turn back or go their own way.

**Theme 5:** Many participants in the regional meetings expressed strong support for the Confession of Faith

Categories:

- Members believe that the Confession of Faith is an important document for teaching and describing our common faith
- Many members affirm the teaching on marriage found in Article 19.
- Many members carry questions about how we faithfully and fairly apply the Confession of Faith
- It is noteworthy that there was no discernable call for a church-wide or conference-wide change in the church's teaching position on human sexuality.

**Theme 6:** Participants offered considerable constructive counsel to the Conference Board.

Categories:

- Many members counseled the board to stay the course with the teaching position of the church on human sexuality and marriage and to disciple Faith Mennonite into alignment with our commitments.
- Many members expressed caution to the board against rash discipline of Faith Mennonite as a member congregation.
- Some members expressed a hope for a speedy resolution, calling the Board to not let this process go on indefinitely.
- Some members expressed trust in the board's ability to apply their best wisdom toward the outcome.

- Though a number of members encouraged Faith to consider disaffiliating of their own choice, there was little in the way of a discernable voice calling for the expulsion of Faith Mennonite or a change in their membership status.

**Theme 7:** Participants offered considerable constructive counsel to the Pastoral Leadership Committee.

Categories:

- Many members counsel the PLC to revoke Joetta’s credentials when/if she acts in an official capacity in a same-sex covenantal ceremony.
- Fewer members encouraged the PLC to note that she is at variance on this issue in her registry file
- Fewer members yet counseled the PLC to find her credentials in order
- A couple of respondents encouraged the PLC to seek creative alternatives such as a limited probation over a period of time.
- The general comments indicated 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.

**Theme 8:** Though it was not strongly stated, there was a discernable voice among participants in the regional meetings that affirms congregational autonomy on contextual matters of faith and life.

**Theme 9:** Participants strongly identified their own internal feelings of ambivalence, tension, and ambiguity toward the issue of same-sex relationships.

Categories:

- Many members identified ambiguities regarding how the church should be in ministry toward the LGBT community – this was also seen in the wide-ranging general comments and the tendency to retreat to rhetorical questions rather than declarative statements.
- Many members expressed ambivalence in affirming Faith Mennonite for being welcoming but not wanting Faith Mennonite to affirm same-sex relationships.
- Members identified the wide array of tensions that are in play when doing discernment on issues of disagreement such as same-sex relationships. Such tensions include unity/diversity/uniformity; sexuality as one issue, marriage as another; intra-congregational *and* inter-congregational diversity of opinion; focusing on specific issues versus focusing on mission; acting in a timely way versus leaving things hanging indefinitely.