**Introduction of Rainbow Mennonite Church Resolution**

**and the Western District Conference (WDC) Discernment Task Force**

**Assembly 2014, Waxahachie, Texas**

**July 5, 2014**

**Work of the Resolutions Committee – Richard Gehring, Chair, and WDC Moderator-Elect**

1. Jan/Feb: Resolutions Committee appointed by WDC Executive Committee:

○ Richard Gehring (moderator-elect), Manhattan Mennonite Church - Chair

○ Doug Penner (past moderator) Southern Hills Mennonite Church, Topeka

○ Anita Kehr (pastor) First Mennonite Church, Newton

2. Feb 28: Resolution received from Rainbow Mennonite Church, Kansas City, “that pastors, in consultation with their congregations, consistent with Mennonite polity, and without fear of censure, may officiate or refuse to officiate ceremonies that consecrate before God monogamous, life-long unions, regardless of the sexual orientation of those being united.” Received by the WDC Executive Board and forwarded to Resolutions Committee.

3. Mar 20-22: Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) met at Bethel College. In order to keep the leadership of MC USA and other conferences aware of potential action that could affect WDC's relationship with the broader church, the WDC report to CLC included information regarding the proposed resolution - written by Conference Minister Clarence Rempel, with input from the WDC Executive Committee.

4. Mar 25: Resolutions Committee met at Manhattan Mennonite Church

○ Reviewed responsibilities as outlined in WDC Resolutions Policy.

○ Recognized the interest of MC USA in any action taken by WDC regarding persons in same-sex relationships.

○ Responded to the Rainbow resolution.

5. Apr 2: Resolutions Committee sent letter of response to Rainbow Mennonite Church:

○ Set of questions:

• Is the resolution in fact “consistent with Mennonite polity?”

• Is “in consultation with their congregations” adequate?

○ Invitation for Rainbow to respond in writing, followed by face-to-face meeting between the Resolutions Committee, Rainbow Mennonite leaders and Conference Minister.

6. Apr 13: Rainbow responded in writing to the Resolutions Committee’s questions and proposed times for meeting.

7. Apr 21: Meetings at Southern Hills Mennonite Church, Topeka – Resolutions Committee and

Conference Minister all present.

○ Conference call with Ervin Stutzman, Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) and Terry Shue, MC USA Director of Leadership Development. WDC Moderater Diana Schunn also involved:

• Emphasized importance of maintaining communication with broader church through time of WDC discernment.

• Learned more about MC USA discernment process regarding persons in same-sex relationships.

○ Meeting with Rainbow Mennonite Church leadership, resulting in recommendations from Resolutions Committee:

• Rainbow submit resolution for discussion only in 2014, allowing for a year-long discernment process for WDC.

• Allow WDC to maintain conversation with broader church.

• Allow WDC delegates adequate time to engage in thoughtful, prayerful discernment.

• Rainbow change “in consultation with” to “with the affirmation of” their congregations.

• WDC Executive Board appoint a task force “to oversee the development and implementation of a plan to actively pursue the processing of this resolution between the 2014 and 2015 Annual Assemblies,” with one member of this task force from Rainbow Mennonite Church.

8. Apr 27: Rainbow accepted Resolutions Committee recommendations at a congregational meeting without dissent.

9. May 3: Executive Board received final report from Resolutions Committee and the revised resolution from Rainbow Mennonite Church.

○ Unanimously approved a recommendation to “Create a task force to foster discernment on the following:

• information from MC USA regarding membership guidelines and polity,

• the proposed resolution from Rainbow Mennonite Church, and

• enhanced WDC delegate involvement.”

○ Began appointment process for the Task Force, with the intent of having the Task Force ready to share a plan of action at WDC Assembly.

**Rainbow Mennonite Church Presentation - Keith Jantz, Chair, and Ruth Harder, Pastor**

A young Christian couple who attend their Mennonite church regularly and often participate in church activities decide to join in holy matrimony and raise a family under the faith umbrella of the Mennonite church. After receiving approval from the congregation, their pastor officiates the wedding in the church, a ceremony well attended by and supported by the congregation. All are happy.

Later, the pastor is subjected to automatic review by the WDC leadership commission, placed on probation, and subjected to the risk of losing his ordination solely due to the act of officiating that marriage ceremony. Why? The newly married devout Christian couple is of the same sex.

Rainbow Mennonite Church was organized in 1957, a church plant of Western District Conference, originally called Kansas City Mennonite Church.

In 1964, Grace Mennonite Church of South Central Conference and Kansas City Mennonite Church of Western District Conference, merged to become Rainbow Boulevard Mennonite Church, making Rainbow one of the first dual-membership churches.

Rainbow’s original church building was located on Rainbow Boulevard, which is how the congregation acquired its name. The church now stands on Southwest Boulevard, but we have retained the name Rainbow.

We at Rainbow began the practice of welcoming into membership people of diverse sexual orientations as early as 1979. At a workshop held at Rainbow in 1978 dealing with an alternative understanding of the church and homosexuality, persons who were openly gay were invited to speak and tell their stories. Around this time, several sermons were presented by the pastor dealing with the biblical material and other issues related to sexual orientation and the Christian faith.

In 1990, Rainbow joined the Supportive Congregations Network of the Brethren Mennonite Council as an accepting member and later as a publicly affirming member in 1996. The supportive Congregations Network made it possible for gay and lesbian persons to identify churches where they would be welcomed as full members. Not everyone in the WDC and South Central conferences agreed with our decision to accept as members all persons professing faith in Jesus Christ regardless of sexual orientation, nor did everyone agree with our decision to become part of the Supportive Congregations Network of Brethren Mennonite Council. Eventually, after failed attempts at reconciliation and understanding, our membership with South Central Conference was officially terminated in 1999. RMC would no longer be a dual-conference church.

Our discontinued membership in South Central Conference did not stop us from continued dialogue with conference and denominational leaders regarding matters of membership, polity and openness. For example, two Rainbow members participated in a 1999 Consultation on Membership Polity for the soon-to-be merger between Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church.

From 1999 on, Rainbow has continued to study and listen, to participate in conference committees and discussions, and to work toward greater inclusion of all our brethren in all facets of congregational life, regardless of their sexual orientation. We have also respected that not all congregations may agree with our stance and have supported the authority for local churches to discern their understanding in these matters.

The resolution before you today is part of our ongoing effort towards a greater inclusion, a process that began as early as 1978.

In 2014, recognition of the rights of individuals seeking same sex marriages grows towards more universal acceptance on an almost daily basis. Policies and restrictions established 20 + years ago no longer appear applicable given the current trends. While many within the Mennonite church view this change as an intrusion from the secular outside world, the fact remains that some LGBTQ individuals are Christians seeking to further their spiritual connection with God and Christ through their local Mennonite church. On the regional and national basis, the Mennonite church policy currently discourages or forbids such activity inside local congregations.

Recognizing this discrepancy, the Rainbow Mennonite Church submits the following resolution in an effort to ease the pressure on pastors performing same sex marriages within the church. While our congregation strongly supports transition to a more tolerant approach to these situations, we are fully aware that granting pastors latitude to perform same sex marriages within the WDC would not only be incongruent with MC USA polity established in 1991, but would also not be agreeable to some congregations within WDC and other Mennonite conferences across the nation. One only has to read the numerous columns and letters to the editor in “The Mennonite” and the “Mennonite World Review” to gauge the polarity of this controversial subject among various congregations.

This resolution is designed to remove pressure from our pastors regarding officiating same sex marriages. Such activity would be locally determined by the individual congregations and only allowed under clear affirmation by the congregation. We clearly recognize that some pastors and congregations currently possess NO desire for such marital ceremonies to occur within their church. That autonomy would remain should this resolution be accepted by WDC at some future time. Concern has been expressed that this resolution usurps the power of the Leadership Commission and its review process. That is not the intent, nor the nature of this resolution, which in itself merely provides a guideline for the commission on this single issue and, in essence, confirms a decision that the Leadership Commission of WDC has made previously.

In the process of exploring possible change in current MC USA polity, our fervent desire is to progress with discussion and discernment of the idea of modification of WDC and/or MC USA’s approach to the issue of officiating gay marriages WITHOUT exacerbating polarization to the point of causing congregations to elect to leave their regional and national affiliations. Therefore, this resolution is introduced not for adoption today nor even for vote nor straw consensus. Rather this change is presented for delegates to return to their congregations for discussion and discernment to further explore this issue, explore possible change in polity, and consider how that change would appear. This concept is designed simply to remove pressure from individual congregations and pastors and allow them the freedom to make their own determinations as to when proceeding is or is not appropriate. We should NOT allow this issue to divide our larger Mennonite governing bodies. We must remember that our unity is based more strongly upon our Anabaptist and pacifist beliefs, those strong characteristics, which separate Mennonites from other religions. We must as Pastor Harvey Chupp said, retain our personal convictions but honor our commitment to the larger Mennonite fellowship.

Final comments from Pastor Ruth Harder:

I began as pastor at Rainbow about 10 months ago. The writing and acceptance of this resolution had already taken place at Rainbow. I do support it and am thankful to be part of a congregation that is working diligently, faithfully and I believe sensitively on seeking common ground and working toward greater inclusion and unity.

We at Rainbow value our membership in Western District Conference. We are grateful for the dialogue that has taken place in these past few months and we hope to continue to work in a spirit of love, trust and faithfulness.

Again, we recognize that this continues to be a divisive conversation in MC USA and that Membership Guidelines are currently under review by the denomination. We think and we hope that presenting this resolution for discussion only, and having a task force that includes Rainbow representation, will give us more time to seek genuine common ground and understanding.

**Introduction of Discernment Task Force – Diana Schunn, WDC Moderator**

Some history to the formation of the Discernment Task Force: having the privilege of serving on the Constituency Leadership Council (CLC) for Mennonite Church USA, we recognize that when area conferences make decisions we ultimately affect our entire church family. Congregations and other conferences have left or talk about leaving MC USA based on decisions and actions that heighten tension. Terry Shue shared that Mennonite Church USA Executive Staff is asking that no conference make a decision that will negatively affect our brothers and sisters – decisions such as leaving the conference or moving forward with a decision that is against MC USA polity.

Due in part to the CLC experience and receiving the Rainbow Mennonite Church resolution, the WDC Executive Board created a task force. The Discernment Task Force is to foster discernment on the following:

1. Information from Mennonite Church USA regarding membership guidelines and polity.

2. The proposed resolution from Rainbow Mennonite Church.

3. Enhanced participation of WDC delegates throughout the year.

The Discernment Task Force anticipates meeting over a 12-18 month process, taking input from the WDC Annual Assembly business meeting and helping as we move forward. This group will collect information and make recommendations to the Executive Board. The task force is not a decision making task force but rather we report to the Executive Board of WDC.

Members: Jim Schrag (First Mennonite Church – former Executive Director of MC USA), Kent Moore (Rainbow Mennonite Church – former Moderator of Rainbow Mennonite), Brett Klingenberg (Pastor, First Mennonite Beatrice, Nebraska and Human Sexuality Task Force member), Lee Lever (Pastor, Austin Mennonite Church, WDC Leadership Commission and former WDC conference minister), Ana Galindo (Iglesia Menonita Comunidad de Esperanza, Dallas), Diana Schunn (Grace Hill Mennonite, immediate past Moderator of WDC), and Clarence Rempel (WDC Conference Minister).

The task force invites feedback and encourages you to contact a task force member or send emails to wdc@mennowdc.org and Nancy will forward all questions or comments to the entire Discernment Task Force.

**Report of the Discernment Task Force - Jim Schrag, Chair**

I am Jim Schrag, from First Mennonite Church, Newton, Kansas, a retired pastor and churchwide staffer.

The task force has met once in early June and has been in email correspondence with each other throughout the month. At the end of this explanation, we will welcome your counsel and advice for the task that lies before us.

You have received the presentation from the Rainbow Mennonite Church in Kansas City. Discernment connected with that resolution has been the impetus for appointment of the task force. We feel it is appropriate to start with a broader approach that first examines matters of church polity, which is about relationships among congregations, between area conferences, and with the national conference. Following that, we will act as consultants to the Executive Board of Western District on the specific issue of same-sex unions performed by pastors in the Western District.

We know that Western District Conference, with its 110 years of membership in the General Conference Mennonite Church and its 12 years of membership in the Mennonite Church USA, has a long-standing tradition of congregational polity. This has meant that congregations have often made their own decisions on matters of faith and practice as well as in organization.

To illustrate this, I refer to a document dated September 25, 1996, while Western District was still a part of the General Conference. The document outlined a policy for dealing with inter-congregational issues. It named several issues congregations sometimes struggle with each other to discern. These issues were: 1) sanctity of life, 2) sexual orientation, 3) membership in the military, 4) war taxes, and 5) gender equality.

Then it stated, (and I quote) “Our history is shaped by experiences of grace in preservation of the congregation’s responsibility to define criteria for membership, faith, and practice. While this polity has definite hazards, it has also been a source of great blessing.”

Our Task Force intends to first ask—“In 2014, are the hazards and the blessings of a congregational polity different or the same as they were 18 years ago in 1996?” It will be important for us to discern whether or not we live in a time that is fundamentally different in 2014 than we experienced in 1996.

Clarence Rempel has informed us that a Fall Reference Council meeting on Nov. 15 will focus on polity - its history, theology, and clarification. A spring 2015 meeting of the Reference Council will focus on the Rainbow Mennonite Church resolution and any other similar statements from other congregations. The council will examine their merits, their ethical validity, the implications for denominational credentialing and for conference unity, and their application of a particular polity. We believe our task force discernment can feed into those discussions, which will involve a broad spectrum of leaders from within Western District.

For your information, and quoting an abbreviated statement from the constitution, “The Reference Council serves as a council of WDC leaders, discerning and advising the Executive Board, the Delegate Assembly and the WDC on issues relative to faith and life.  Reference Council is not a decision-making body but rather promotes dialogue, voices collective aspirations and concerns, and provides opportunity for communication.”

Now…Today we come to request your help to get started. The first step in our discernment process depends upon all of you and, in fact, upon every participant in your congregation from your youth to your oldest member.

We have prepared an online survey of 20 statements that we will send to you this coming Wednesday, for distribution by email to the members of your congregation. The survey will be in both English and Spanish. The Western district office will send the link to your congregation. We also request that you use the bulletin announcements which will be written for you. We would like to receive the responses from your members by July 31st.

The survey will have 20 statements divided into four different sections. First, you are asked to respond to statements about the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. That document was adopted at Wichita ‘95 by the former General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church. You and everyone else who takes the survey will be asked to mark whether you “strongly agree” with each statement, whether you “agree” with it, whether you “disagree”, or “strongly disagree,” or whether you have “no opinion” or just “don’t know.” For each of the 20 statements, you will also be given space to write your comment or clarification of your response.

For example, concerning the *Confession* you will be asked to agree or disagree with the following statement, “The *Confession of Faith* is intended to provide a standard to discern the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of individuals, congregations, conferences, or church institutions.” There will be 4 more statements about the *Confession of Faith* for your agreement or disagreement.

Part two of the survey will be about the Mennonite Church USA Membership Guidelines. One of the statements to which you will be asked to respond with agreement or disagreement is this: “The guidelines continue to serve conferences and their congregations in ways that bring unity, order, and clarity to teaching and doctrine as well as to organizational matters.” There will be 3 other statements about the Membership Guidelines.

The third part will be about polity, which, as noted, is about relationships among congregations, between area conferences, and with the national conference. There will be 7 statements in that section for you to agree or to disagree with. The first statement reads this way: “Western District Conference congregations should be free to make their own decisions in matters of Christian belief and of practice with the confidence that their membership will remain in good standing in the conference.”

Part four of the survey will cover views of how the church deals with matters of sexuality. One of 4 statements there is the following: “Scripture and church documents (Confession of Faith, Membership Guidelines, etc.) provide clear guidance to the church concerning human sexuality in light of current and scientific thinking.” Will you agree or disagree?

So, you can see that you and your congregation are very much involved in giving input at the outset of our shared discernment process. You are participants in the discerning process, not spectators or bystanders. Through the modern miracle of Internet communication, we will be able to quickly compile your responses into data that reflects your discernment on these matters. We’re pleased that we can offer the survey in both English and Spanish to reach everyone with an Internet connection.

It will be important for you to invite broad participation from your congregation’s members in this process. For example, a family with two in high school, one in college, with mom and dad would submit 5 separate responses.

Following this grass-roots input and analysis of it, the task force will chart its course, covering the scope of at least the coming year. We expect to address questions like the following:

* What is the meaning of a congregational polity today? What are the blessings and the hazards?
* How do we regard some statements in official, Mennonite Church USA church documents?
* What do we understand by certain terms and expectations, such as “faith and practice” or “mutual accountability?”
* What is a “teaching position” of the church, and how should Western District and its congregations regard statements that are labeled “teaching positions?”
* What are some limitations, if any, on congregations in their “self-governance” in matters of belief and practice?
* We expect to discuss, with the Leadership Commission, matters relating to credentialing of pastors.
* We intend to address issues of “mutual accountability” between and among WDC congregations, with other Mennonite Church USA conferences, and with the statements and policies of the Mennonite Church USA delegate body.
* When the broader context has been established, we will focus on the resolution brought to us by Rainbow Mennonite, to see if it fits into the framework of church life we have outlined.
* Finally, the task force, with the Executive Board, will need to assess the consequences of our findings in these discussions.

Now you may rightly ask, “Will you study the Scripture?” To that question, I reply that it is not our intent to adopt one or another interpretation of scripture on same-sex relations. Our approach is to recognize the reality and the integrity of different interpretations, based on our inherent trust in you, our brothers and sisters in faith, who we know hold a variety of convictions on these matters.

So we say it again: We are not a decision-making body; rather, we are a consulting body to the Executive Board of Western District. Resolutions and proposals come to the delegate body from the board, not the task force.

We ask for your support in prayer for this task force in the coming year. We are humbled by the request to lead in discernment of current and important issues. We pray that the advice, the viewpoints, and the analysis that we offer to leaders of the conference will be led by the Holy Spirit’s wisdom. We are encouraged by our Anabaptist heritage that offers us a “binding and loosing” process of discernment which becomes a Mennonite way of finding God’s direction.