**Reference Council Meeting Highlights - November 15, 2014**

**Western District Conference**

**For Reference Council, April 11, 2015**

**By Wendy Funk Schrag**

Following an opening worship and prayer time, Richard Gehring, WDC moderator, provided an orientation to the purpose of Reference Council.

Jim Schrag, chair of the Discernment Task Force, provided historical background on the creation of the MC USA Membership Guidelines, focusing on the 2001 MC/GC merger, the 2007 review of structure, and the Rainbow Mennonite Church resolution, explaining that the resolution would “disown” the 2001 decision but would reaffirm the WDC Ministerial Leadership Commission decision several years ago. This decision referenced a review of pastoral credentials when a pastor performed a same sex union, and the review did not result in the censure of credentials.

Richard reviewed the background of the Rainbow Mennonite Church resolution and encouraged meeting participants to read the entire background document and not just the resolution. The resolution “upholds the right of the indiviual congregation to discern how homosexuality will be subject to Biblical interpretation, and pastors, with the affirmation of 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.” He provided information about the WDC resolutions process, specific to the Rainbow Mennonite resolution.

Terry Shue, MC USA Director of Leadership Development, shared current developments in MC USA, using the metaphor of “shifting ground.” Terry encouraged everyone to pay attention and to discern where God is leading us. Terry acknowledged anxiety across MC USA. He reviewed some of the issues in surrounding conferences around pastoral reviews and credentialing of pastors who are of same sex orientation. Terry reviewed some recent findings of credentialed pastors in MC USA. Terry thanked the leadership of WDC for communication with MC USA and working hard at process.

Patty Shelly, MC USA Moderator-elect, relayed information on the current polity work of the Executive Board of MC USA. The Executive Board is currently discussing whether the “Shared Understanding of Church Leadership,” which is an update to an earlier MC USA pastoral polity manual, requires delegate action to be approved. The section on same sex unions currently in the Membership Guidelines was moved to the updated polity manual, in response to a request by MC USA Conference Ministers. She expressed thanks to WDC for waiting to act on the Rainbow Mennonite resolution. She also cautioned that expectations may be too high for the Kansas City conference and that differences will not be solved in a week. She emphasized God is calling us all to remain in the body of Christ.

Jim Schrag provided an overview of the WDC survey results of the approximate 1,700 respondents. Jim stated that in addition to the responses to the survey questions, comments resulted in 500 pages of additional opinions. Jim cautioned this was not a scientific survey and is also not a straw vote on the Rainbow resolution. Jim provided a summary of the survey results around 4 themes:

1. Views of authority in the church
   1. A large majority affirmed the authority of scripture over confessions of faith. Some comments revealed ambiguous feelings about the term “authority.”
   2. About half agree that the Confession of Faith was designed as a “standard” for judging faithfulness. About a third disagreed, saying that the confession was not intended for this purpose. Most comments said the confession should not be viewed as a rule book or law. We are not of one mind about how to view common statements of faith and practice.
   3. A large majority agree that scripture is the “authoritative voice and standard” for discerning truth from error. But many asked about the present work of the Holy Spirit which may bring new understanding of scripture, or even new revelation about truth.
   4. When asked about the guidance of scripture or confessions on matters of sexuality, only a third said that scripture or church statements were adequate to guide. Half said they questioned the validity of scripture or church statements on sexuality as a reliable guide. People spoke of the phrase “in light of modern and scientific thinking” with both affirmation and disdain.
2. Responses grouped under the theme of practice.
   1. “church discipline rightly understood and practiced,” (from the Confession of Faith) received 2/3 support. While this was affirmed, some worried about who gets to choose the definitions of “rightly understood and practiced.”
   2. Responding to a statement from the Membership Guidelines, there is strong support for conferences having discretion to determine their own practice of values held in common with others in the denomination. There is uncertainty about where the locus of power to define “right practice” lies—is it with the conference or the denomination?
   3. The disciplining of pastors who perform same-sex covenant ceremonies is opposed by over half of respondents while it is supported by a strong third. We are highly polarized around this issue. When asked if persons view performing same-sex covenant ceremonies as being the same as previous changes of attitude and practice, such as accepting divorce, over half said they were the same while a third said the present issue is “fundamentally different.”
   4. When it comes to the “practice” part of “faith and practice,” there was majority support for the notion that issues relating to what congregations can do or should refrain from doing, is best left to either the congregation or the conference, not the denomination, depending on the issue at hand.
3. Views of official church documents
   1. Half (50%) support the Confession of Faith statement that “God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life.” 40% oppose the statement. The responses indicate we may be in a stalemate in terms of strength of opinion pro and con.
   2. Turning to the MC USA Membership Guidelines, over half believe the guidelines still provide good resources. Some commented that the membership guidelines are fine but they are not enforced. Others think they need to be updated to make sense to younger people.
   3. Almost 2/3 believes that WDC congregations should be free to determine their own belief and practice. A little less than one third feels that the congregation’s prerogative for such choices should be limited.
   4. In seeming contradiction, half affirm that we should be “subject to” official statements of the denomination. One third says this should not be required of us.
   5. Consultation of congregations with WDC is supported by a large majority. While there was broad support, some felt that consultation implied rules, of which there are too many in their opinion. Consultation, many felt, did not imply subservience to rules being handed down from someone else.
4. Responses about unity and relationships
   1. Over 80% agree that Western District Conference benefits from relationships with other conferences.
   2. Two thirds say that unity does not depend upon uniformity.
   3. Almost 2/3 believe that WDC unity can be preserved if congregations are allowed to choose different practices on same-sex relationships.
5. Demographic findings
   1. The older you are the more you agree with both the traditional definition of marriage and with the ban on same-sex covenants. The younger you are, the more you disagree with both statements.
   2. The more rural you are, the more you agree with the traditional views, the more urban you are, the more you disagree with the traditional views.
   3. Men are slightly more traditional in their views than women.

Gilberto Flores, then Associate Conference Minister of WDC, provided background on the Hispanic pastors’ statement. The Hispanic pastors met several times to discuss the Rainbow resolution. Their main points of decision were: we disagree with the resolution, but we want to stay in WDC. We don’t want to continue talking about this because we have no more words to say. Their discussions focused on love, unity, communion, and the reason for the church to exist. This resulted in the statement saying that they will not be judgmental or critical of churches who move to a more welcoming stance. At the same time, they ask others to respect their decisions.

Table discussion of the survey results followed. Table groups expressed appreciation for the Hispanic letter and process, that it be a model for us to follow. Several people spoke about how their church used the opportunity of the survey to meet together to discuss the topic and the survey questions.

The afternoon focused on the strengths and hazards of congregationalism. Richard provided background on 5 strengths of congregationalism and 5 hazards of congregationalism. The strengths and hazards were developed using statements from the survey and from the Discernment Task Force and the WDC Executive Committee. Table discussion followed with invitations to respond with the wider group. Those that responded indicated a tension between strengths and hazards but also a balance that needed to be applied and managed carefully.

Richard explained three statements of congregationalism and asked tables to discuss arguments for and against each statement.

1. Each WDC congregation has the unrestricted privilege of local discernment regardless of previous understandings or decisions by the congregation or conference.
2. The WDC delegate body may ask a congregation to practice consultation (to be defined by the leadership of WDC) when a congregation is making a decision that affects others.
3. The WDC delegate body may name certain issues about which they do not recognize the privilege of congregations to make decisions on their own.

Participants placed a sticky dot on each statement of Congregationalism on a continuum of 1 – 10 with 1 being fully supporting and 10 being fully opposing. Statement 1 had the highest number of people who disagreed with it. Statement 2 had the highest number of people who agreed with it. Statement three had people at both ends of the spectrum who agreed and disagreed.

The day ended with an open mic time, closing song and prayer.