**Comments to WDC Reference Council**

**November 16, 2014**

**Patricia Shelly, Moderator Elect, MCUSA**

Greetings from the 18 members of the Executive Board of MC USA.

I am grateful to be with you as wrestle as a conference with these very important questions in our church life. As you know the Executive Board has also been discussing these matters as well, as we try to speak on behalf of the delegates between our biennial sessions and represent our 21 conferences.

At the Executive Board (EB) meeting in late September, we considered several matters that speak to our agenda for today:

1) We appointed an Ad Hoc Structure Committee to explore ways the denomination might “develop new processes”, including the possibility “of new structural models in pursuit of healthy ways to promote our unity in the midst of the diverse expressions of faith and the serious differences that have arisen between and among our area conferences.” (<http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/EBReport_June30_2014.pdf>)

Persons appointed to that committee are Joy Sutter and Isaac Villegas, board members from Pennsylvania and North Carolina, respectively; Keith Weaver, conference minister from Lancaster Conference and Katherine Jamison Pitts, Conference ministers from Pacific NW Conference. They have been meeting this fall and will bring a report/recommendation to the EB in late January.

2) We discussed the document **“A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership”** a working document that is an update of an earlier polity manual that was initially affirmed by the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church and is now jointly used by both MC Canada and MC USA. You may remember that earlier this summer, the EB had stated that we intended to bring this updated manual to the delegate sessions for approval, because we mistakenly thought the initial manual had been approved by delegates. We have since discovered that this was not the case. So the EB is still considering how the document might be approved.

We sought counsel on this matter from the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC), a group of about 70 representatives from our 21 conferences and constituency groups. The CLC functions as a group of elders and gives counsel, but does not make decisions. The EB asked them for feedback on the document as well as the kind of approval process it should have.

CLC met in early October and spoke to these matters: There is a sense from most of the CLC comments that the EB should adopt this updated manual with the recommendation of CLC; though some think the delegates should vote on it. Many responses counseled that delegates need an opportunity to discuss the theology and practice in the manual; that these are matters that concern the whole church.

There was also a strong awareness that the section on same-sex unions (which is currently part of the Membership Guidelines, but that is being moved into the updated version at the recommendation 3 years ago of conference ministers) is likely to be a flashpoint of discussion with delegates. But there was no clear counsel about whether this section should remain or be removed from the manual.

So EB will consider this counsel as it makes a decision about how to approve this polity manual.

3) In addition to the survey of credentialed leaders, the EB is encouraging congregations and conferences to appoint their KC delegates early in the Spring, because we are hoping to provide opportunity—probably electronically--for delegates to give counsel as we prepare the agenda for the KC delegate sessions.

4) Another decision that has been made this fall is the appointing of a Resolutions Committee for KC 2015. The EB has appointed Isaac Villegas and David Boshart, two board members to be on the committee. The CLC has nominated Shannon Dycus (Indiana-Michigan) and Sonya Stauffer Kurtz (New York Conference). The EB will appoint two other members yet, taking into account gifts for the committee work as well as gender, geographical, and racial ethnic balance.

The guidelines for submitting resolutions should be posted on the MC USA website; the resolutions committee will review the resolutions submitted and seek counsel from the CLC in its Spring meeting concerning the resolutions that should be brought to the delegate sessions.

Expectations for the June assembly. EB has heard many diverse voices encouraging us to act in specific ways to address some of the differences among us as congregations and conferences. In response, the board has pointed toward the delegate sessions in Kansas City as a time for the delegates to speak to some of these matters. We have encouraged congregations and conferences to wait until after KC and not to act precipitously.

In this regard, the board is very grateful that WDC has decided to delay its decision-making on the current Rainbow Mennonite Church resolution until after the denominational assembly next summer.

While we want to give delegates a chance to speak at the Kansas City; it will still take wise planning to determine how to best structure the discussion and what questions to bring, in order for us to be able to hear each other and the Spirit. That is, what particular resolution would help us best discern together?

At the same time, some of us on the board have begun to wonder if we have raised expectations too high. There is no way that our differing convictions on biblical interpretation and same-sex relationships will be resolved in one week of delegate meetings in Kansas City. We will continue to need to be patient with each other and committed to working together.

I would like to conclude, by reading the last two paragraphs of the EB’s June statement:

“We grieve the pain that exists across our denomination, yet we rest in the confidence that God is calling us all to remain part of the body of Christ that encompasses all who call upon his name. As a board, we know our humanity and fallibility. We are seeking to listen faithfully to the Holy Spirit in our midst; to the leading of Scripture, and to you, the members of Mennonite Church USA. We ask your prayers and your blessing in the name of Christ as we continue to seek the way towards God’s vision for our future.

Together we pray that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God (based on Philippians 1:9).”

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