



**Western
District
Conference**

*An area conference of
Mennonite Church USA*

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**WESTERN DISTRICT
CONFERENCE**

**DISCERNMENT TASK
FORCE
SURVEY REPORT**

FALL, 2014

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Report of Survey Results

From members of WDC Congregations

July 15 – September 4, 2014

General Background:

In March, 2014, Rainbow Mennonite Church, Kansas City, Kansas, submitted the resolution cited below for action by the WDC delegate body in July. Prior to the session, the Executive Board requested, and the congregation agreed, to present, but not vote upon, the resolution.

A task force composed of Jim Schrag (chair), Bill Zuercher (Recording Secretary), Brett Klingenberg, Diana Shunn, Kent Moore, Lee Lever, Ana Galindo, Sandra Martinez, and Clarence Rempel (ex-officio) was appointed and met in June, 2014, prior to the delegate assembly in July. They offered a general plan for discernment to delegates. The task force will bring reports and recommendations to the meetings of the conference Reference Council in November, 2014 and in spring, 2015. The first session of the council will focus on WDC polity. The second session will focus on matters related to the Rainbow Church resolution.

Rainbow Church Resolution:

Now, therefore, be it resolved that the Western District Conference of the Mennonite Church USA, out of respect for the responsibility and commitment “to seek to understand and interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as we are led by the Holy Spirit in the church,” upholds the right of individual congregations to discern how homosexuality will be subject to biblical interpretation, and

Be it further resolved that 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, lifelong unions, regardless of the sexual orientation of those being United.

On-line Survey of WDC Congregational Members

WDC congregational members were invited to answer a survey of 20 statements, some of these being quotations from foundational documents of Mennonite Church USA. The survey was organized into four areas of inquiry, asking for opinions about the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, the *Mennonite Church USA Membership Guidelines*, statements about church polity and unity, and statements about views of same-sex attraction and covenant ceremonies.

Survey statements (inviting agree or disagree responses)

1. “They [confessions] provide guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture. At the same time, the confession itself is subject to the authority of the Bible.” (Confession of Faith Introduction, p. 8)
2. The Confession of Faith is intended to provide a standard to discern the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of individuals, congregations, conferences or church institutions.
3. “We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship. Other claims on our

understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture.” (Confession of Faith, Article 4, Scripture, pp. 21,22)

4. “We acknowledge that discipline, rightly understood and practiced, undergirds the integrity of the church’s witness in word and deed.” (Confession of Faith, Article 14, Discipline in the Church, p. 56.)

5. “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life.” (Confession of Faith, Article 19, Family, Singleness, and Marriage, p. 72)

6. “Where area conferences with their congregations are committed to the vision, mission, and teaching positions of the denomination, they have the freedom to seek God's wisdom and discernment as to how to apply these principles in a life-giving way in the many chaotic, broken and/or sinful situations which present themselves to the church. This should be done in consultation with the broader church, in a spirit of mutual accountability.” (Guidelines, Part 2)

7. “Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a samesex covenant ceremony. Such action would be grounds for review of their credentials by their area conference’s ministerial credentialing body.” (Guidelines, Part 3)

8. The Membership 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.

9. Our unity as a conference or as Mennonite Church USA depends upon common adherence to our statements of belief and practice.

10. WDC 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.

11. WDC congregations should be subject to and follow the official statements of Christian belief and of practice of the Western District Conference and of Mennonite Church USA, as affirmed by their delegate assemblies and voluntarily accepted in becoming members.

12. When WDC congregations are considering decisions of major importance in the expression of their Christian belief and practice, they should consult with WDC leadership in their decision-making.

13. The statements of belief and practice of Mennonite Church USA should be binding upon its conferences and their congregations.

14. The “teachings” of the WDC or of Mennonite Church USA should carry only “advisory” authority for the congregation.

15. Western District Conference needs fellowship with and counsel from other conferences in Mennonite Church USA.

16. Unity in the congregation, the WDC and Mennonite Church USA does not depend upon uniformity in belief and practice.
17. Scripture and church documents (Confession of Faith, Membership Guidelines, etc.) provide clear guidance to the church concerning human sexuality in light of modern and scientific thinking.
18. The issue of affirming same-sex marriage covenants is fundamentally different than previous changes of attitude and practice toward slavery, women in church leadership, and divorce.
19. WDC unity can be maintained even if different congregations adopt different practices toward same-sex relationships and same-sex covenant ceremonies.
20. Resolutions such as the pending one offered by Rainbow Mennonite Church, encourage other WDC congregations to become “welcoming” to a broad spectrum of persons who need the church.

Intent, method and interpretation of the Survey

The survey was designed to invite, and to some degree, also measure (for purposes of comparing the weight of viewpoints) input from the WDC grassroots. To the knowledge of the Task Force, this is the first and only survey of this kind of a segment of congregational members in any conference in Mennonite Church USA. While the results, reported below, reflect a measure of the reality of opinion present in the conference, we emphasize that this has not been viewed as a “vote” on the matters raised; neither is it a “scientific survey or poll.” It should rather be viewed as a tool of the discernment process. By the closing date of the survey (Sept. 4, 2014) we received almost 1,700 responses which totaled almost 500 pages.

As to method, the survey was constructed to solicit opinions of support, non-support, or evaluation about church statements or popular assumptions held about WDC or MC USA—all stemming from issues related to the Rainbow delegate resolution. A common thread in many of the statements invites response to notions of where authority lies for decision-making. A few of the comments to statements indicate that some members might have had the impression that all the statements expressed official views of the district or denomination. This impression was probably fueled by mixing official quoted statements from foundational documents with statements created for the survey that asked for responses to hypothetical conditions. But the intent of both quotes and statements was understood by a large majority. Further, some offered critique on the wording of statements, both quotes and hypothetical statements. We recognize that some of the quotes and statements were very complex. We complement all who attempted responses and comments.

The responsibility for providing evaluation of responses to each statement below was divided among 5 members of the Task Force, each one offering evaluation of four statements. Each one did this in their own style. The report for each statement reflects both numerical count of agreement or disagreement, and a rough grouping of comments based on similar opinion offered. About one in five (20%) of responders wrote comments. Anonymity of the respondents is being protected. No attempt has been made to connect individuals with congregations. Response to each statement is self-contained, and does not relate to other statements.

The reader should note that the tenor of comments, pro or con, may or may not reflect the same proportions marked agree or disagree. For example, a large proportion of agreement may have been marked, but perhaps more people wrote comments of disagreement than those who wrote comments of agreement. Many comments were written not strictly to agree or disagree, but rather to offer a more nuanced statement of the complexity of the point being made. While some commented that these were “hard questions,” most responded with well-thought-through evaluations and suggestions.

**Final Summary of Survey Responses
Discernment Task Force, Western District Conference
October 2014**

1 “They [confessions] provide guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture. At the same time, the confession itself is subject to the authority of the Bible.” (Confession of Faith Introduction, p. 8)

Answered: 1652 Skipped: 44

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	33%
Agree	48%
No Opinion/Don’t Know	10%
Disagree	06%
Strongly Disagree	03%

Comments: 291, 18% offered comments

New Notes

- *This second round of comments had many more references to the Methodist diagram of “reason, tradition, scripture, and experience (plus Holy Spirit).
- *There were more comments about how the current confession was written at a certain time and place.
- *There were many comments saying that this question was “circular.”
- *Again there was a broad perspective of scripture and confession: scripture is authority, not confession; the confession is not doctrine; the confession is outdated; scripture as authority alone can be damaging (we need to include tradition, reason, experience, holy spirit); personal revelation is important; communal discernment is important.
- **Most interesting comment:* “I wish that our confession of faith was an oral tradition, memorized in our hearts, yet open to changes as our experiences lead us to understand each other and the scriptures.”

Old Notes

Over 80% of respondents agreed with this statement while 9% disagreed. There was a general understanding that the Confession of Faith was a good thing and helpful to the Church. Most people seemed to see that the Confession of Faith held a distinct place in our Church but that it shouldn’t go beyond its intention. The comments given most often had to do with the authority of the Bible and interpretation summed up below:

- *the community of believers is where interpretation of scripture is held (although the community of believers referenced was rarely if ever defined)
- *what about the place of the Holy Spirit in interpretation?
- *I am uncertain what “authority of the Bible means”

Although there was a high degree of belief that the Confession of Faith is subject to the authority of the Bible, there was a general uncomfortableness, fear, or uncertainty of what “authority of the Bible” means. Some comments linked their discomfort with words like “authority” and “guidelines” to their dismay at the lack of inclusiveness in the current confession. Others however appreciated those words as clarifying their belief.

Point of Interest

There were nine comments in a row that stated “as we understand the Bible in our real time culture.” It seemed these nine people did the survey together. But there were other comments about current culture verses historic culture and interpretation. Many of these comments seemed to indicate that real time culture is the/a determining factor of current scriptural interpretation and that what happened in the past may/should not be part of the discussion.

2 The Confession of Faith is intended to provide a standard to discern the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of individuals, congregations, conferences or church institutions.

Answered: 1636 Skipped: 60

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	18%
Agree	37%
No Opinion/Don't Know	11%
Disagree	22%
Strongly Disagree	11%

Comments: 225, 14% offered comments

The reader should note that the numbers quoted for this statement are from an earlier internal report. They have not been changed in this final report because the general proportions remain the same for the final report. The numbers and percentages above are the final numbers and percentages.

I reviewed all of the responses and made some general categories with “themes” of comments. There are a total of 179 comments made (some comments offered where more like questions of clarification and were not directly helpful to this exercise and some comments ended up having statements that fell into more than one general category).

The largest majority of comments (102 of the 179 - 60%) felt that that the Confessions of Faith (COF) are not a rule book.

- 39 of the comments focused specifically on statements that the COF are not a rule book, or the authority and should not be used as a law
 - “not a rule book”
 - “not a discerning authority”
 - “intended for teaching and nurture”
 - “not a law”
 - “not a judge of right or wrong”
 - “not a litmus test”
- 34 of the comments focused more on the faithfulness, judgment and guide statements
 - “COF should be a standard to encourage faithfulness”
 - “not a weapon of judgment”
 - “a guide”
- The remainder of the comments included themes of God and the Bible being the judge

- “We should not be judging, that’s God’s job”
- “COF should be a guideline not a standard. The Bible is a standard”
- “COF are more personal, not used to judge others”
- “I do not totally support every aspect of the COF. I take it to be an interpretation. As such, it does not carry the same authority as the Bible.”

There were 20 comments that focused on the COF being a responsible for accountability, standards and what happens if you don’t believe they are the standard:

- “COF provide standard we have agreed to adhere to” (5 comments)
- “those unfaithful, why should they stay in the conference?”
- “If churches or pastors don’t agree to respect/follow COF go to another conference, don’t try to conform others”
- “to discern faithfulness, do so with the entire COF”
- “COF sets boundaries of faithfulness”
- “COF are standards, then proceed with the variance”
- “the standard is the absolute way of discerning”
- “We have become too tolerant of things that are not biblical.”
- “without accountability to the standard, we crumble as a relevant church group”
- “COF shouldn’t change to make Rainbow Church’s beliefs sound OK and acceptable”
- “COF reveals beliefs or actions of unfaithfulness to the core”

The next general theme focused on no blaming and had more to do with why they believe the COF were written and how they should be used. A total of 20 comments fell into this category:

- “COF not for blaming but for encouraging common beliefs and values”
- “It should be a standard but leave room for discussion without threat”
- “There are other things, scripture and local context and leading of the Holy Spirit that play a bigger role”
- “COF are a statement to be the truth, not a standard by which to judge faithfulness”
- “learn from Jesus’s ministry”
- “our relationship with God as we grow more Christ-like”
- “The goal should be to come to a place where parties could agree to disagree”
- “COF designed to give direction, to summarize common understandings to bring healing and hope to the world”
- “A statement that says, ‘This I believe’”
- “to discern whether we have beliefs in common”
- “to give us direction”

Some people asked questions about the question or criticized the way it was written:

- “who is the discerning body in the church to determine faithfulness?”
- “Where is the question about, ‘do we even need a standard to discern the faithfulness/unfaithfulness of others?’”
- “The question is judgmental/negative”

Direction on the next steps or advice:

- “COF need to be revised” (6 comments)
- “Standards change over time” “the church has had numerous confessions throughout church history (13 comments)

- “it is written by man and there is a margin of error within man’s understanding of God”
- “We no longer need a top down authoritative approach from MCUSA, allow congregations to discern”
- “I’d rather the church/conference determine that”
- “individual congregations should not have so much authority”
- “The Bible is the authority, is the confession necessary?”
- “COF are not a Holy-Spirit inspired document, not a creed of Mennonites. The intent is in dispute.”
- “Be careful to not cause a split in the Mennonite Church”
- “The COF is wrong on numerous topics, and I do not think we should use it to discern the faithfulness of anyone.”

I believe the summary of the majority of responses could best be described by this person, “I see it as less of a standard to discern faithfulness and more of a reflection of what unites us. And this must be updated regularly. It is more about what we share in common and less about how we hold each other accountable.”

3 “We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship. Other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture.” (Confession of Faith, Article 4, Scripture, pp. 21,22)

Answered: 1637 Skipped: 59

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	33%
Agree	46%
No Opinion/Don’t Know	06%
Disagree	12%
Strongly Disagree	04%

Comments: 290, 18% offered comments

While the affirmation for this COF statement is overwhelming (79%), many wanted to qualify the words “authoritative source and standard” as well as clarify scripture’s relationship to “other claims on our understanding.” The scriptures are not the only, or supreme source of authority for living, some said.

1. Very many comments wanted to include references to the present work of the Holy Spirit.

- “This leaves out or diminishes the role of the Spirit.”
- “The Scripture is a guide. Other religious writings inspired by the Holy Spirit can also be used as guides. The Holy Spirit reveals God’s will in many different ways to each of us.”

- “I agree but I also believe that God is working in our world to this day and that we must always be open to the spirit creating in us a new thing and a new way to help usher in the kingdom.”
 - “Obviously, the scripture is an important and critical source, but it is not the only one. Prayer and being in communion with God is also critical, as is the moving of the Holy Spirit. The other claims mentioned should be tested and corrected by these as well as by the light of the Holy Scripture.”
- 2. Many commented on the reality and integrity of different interpretations of scripture.**
- “Even though we all may acknowledge Scripture has authority in our lives, we each view and interpret Scripture through our own lens which may not be the same as others. We must make room for differences in interpretation.”
 - “This comment seems to presume a single, clear meaning of individual pieces of scripture. I don't agree with that. Further, the very nature of Anabaptism requires the use of reason, culture, experience, etc to understand the bible and its meaning. I have difficulty with the use of the phrase "authoritative source" as used in this question.”
- 3. A few raised the concern that we do not currently give proper regard to biblical authority. Now culture is supreme.**
- “Not just accepted due to cultural changes of what has become “normal.” Continue to be in the world but not of the world.”
 - “I don't believe Scriptures have changed to accommodate current trends.”
- 4. Some referred to a method of finding truth through the gathered body.**
- “As Anabaptists we emphasize the right of individuals and congregations, etc., to interpret the words of Jesus (Scripture) as a community of believers, not as dictated by church officials.”
 - “What about discernment as a community of faith, inspired by the Holy Spirit? Maybe tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers have less authority than Holy Scripture, but community discernment as a people of faith and revelation/movement/inspiration from the Holy Spirit may have equal footing with the Scriptures, at least in the interpretation of those Holy Scriptures, and determining in what ways they have authority in our lives.”
- 5. Some commented on the relationship of culture and scripture.**
- “Scripture must take into account the context that it was written in, i.e., the tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers that existed at that time. The truth from the Scriptures lies not in the words themselves, but the message God through his son Jesus is sharing with us. Therefore, the message of the Scripture, not the words, are what we need to focus on as the authoritative source and standard we use for preaching and teaching about faith and life.”
 - “Scripture is certainly our authoritative source. But we can only understand scripture through our individual and/or collective interpretive lenses. Those lenses include our tradition, culture, experience and reason.”
 - “I agree with the first sentence. I also agree that other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life need to be tested by the light of Holy Scripture. However, I don't know that all other claims of understanding need to be "corrected". As "new"

revelations are revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, there needs to be change. If no revelations are sent then there is probably no need to change.”

- This article doesn't provide for the role interpretation plays in one's understanding of scriptural authority. What scripture does/does not authorize is not self-evident, so neither should scripture's authoritative function be thought of as self-evident -scripture cannot be separated from "tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers" - scripture can't be thought of as something outside of these things that can "test and correct" these things; scripture (how it was recorded/written, by whom it was written, for what reasons it was written) is situated squarely within these things, so if anything, these things should have a role in "testing and correcting" scripture. - discernment, careful & thoughtful interpretation within a community (at the conference level and at the congregational level), and freedom to define should be of utmost importance.

4 “We acknowledge that discipline, rightly understood and practiced, undergirds the integrity of the church’s witness in word and deed.” (Confession of Faith, Article 14, Discipline in the Church, p. 56.)

Answered: 1,618 Skipped: 78

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	22%
Agree	46%
No Opinion/Don’t Know	14%
Disagree	13%
Strongly Disagree	05%

Comments: 319, 20% offered comments

Almost all respondents answered the question. Among those who did, more than two thirds (68%) agreed with the statement to some degree. Only 18% disagreed to some extent.

Only 20% of respondents offered comments. Whether those who commented were representative of the spectrum of responses is not known at this time. In general, the comments suggest that there was no consistent interpretation of the statement; many commenters found it too abstract and vague (e.g. “No idea what this means. Very abstract. Part of the problem with our confession of faith.”). Some found it potentially leading or misleading (“You needed to include the next sentence from the Confession of Faith. ‘If there is not discipline then false teaching can corrupt.’”). Many others qualified their agreement or disagreement (e.g. “I would agree, if the phrase ‘... we also acknowledge that discipline, when practiced wrongly, or when practiced without humility and love, can undermine the integrity of the church’s witness.’ was added.”). The key words and phrases on which comments focused were “disciplined,” “rightly understood and practiced,” and “integrity.”

Regarding “discipline”:

- Some commenters highlighted that a lack of discipline equals a lack of integrity or a descent into chaos.

- “If the current proposal before WDC is representative of discipline ‘rightly understood and practiced’ then it seems no discipline is becoming the right practice. Where is the integrity in this?”
- “‘Discipline’ seems to have become a critical missing piece among the greater Mennonite Church since the MC/GC merger. Love must always envelope discipline for guidance and correction-- or there is no order. Chaos and confusion are products of the reign of Satan-- and the lack of discipline in the larger church body appears to be driven in the direction.”
- “Order vs. Chaos From Genesis to Revelation to now- God is a God of Order. The Church (Christians) needs to reflect God's Order to the world. When we ‘let down’ our guard or become lax or immune to the sin problem, our witness in the world loses its effectiveness.”
- Other commenters were uncomfortable with the word “discipline” and found it to be a harsh and punitive term; among the alternatives suggested were “accountability,” “give and receive counsel,” and “discipling.”
 - “I am apprehensive about the word ‘discipline’ in this question. It is too harsh a term.”
 - “I believe, first of all, that the word ‘discipline’ is no longer helpful, with its connotations of hierarchical authority, punishment and sanction handed down from those in power. A better word may be ‘accountability,’ with its implications of mutuality and commitment to a process.”
 - “The process of disciplining has been very hurtful over the years. However, I believe the question asked at time of church membership - Are you willing to give and receive counsel? - is an important one. It helps us realize that ‘...discipline is related, first of all, to the mutual care of members for one another.’”
 - “I don't know. This depends on the definition of discipline. If discipline means practicing something with fortitude, for example, such as exercising every day, then I agree; if discipline means punishment for being wrong, I disagree.”
- A number of commenters voiced their support for discipline at the congregational level more so than the conference or denomination level.
 - “within the congregation to member, not the conference to church”
- Other commenters expressed their support for discipline in love, similar to the discipline that parents provide to their children.
 - “But we must discipline in love and not be judgmental. We should not use discipline as punishment.”
 - “I think ‘discipline’ in the way it has been historically used in some Mennonite churches is just judgment by another name. . . . On the other hand, if we are talking about disciplining children to train them, then I agree that discipline is important in teaching them the correct words/deeds. I would be a very poor parent if I did not teach my son that hitting other children is not Jesus' way to resolve problems!”
 - “Discipline to punish or exclude or Discipline to support and nurture? We have a history of punishing and excluding. I'm no longer interested in spending time punishing people for the sake of Jesus.”

Regarding “rightly understood and practiced,” commenters do not perceive this being done well in Mennonite circles.

- “I wonder what ‘rightly understood and practiced’ looks like. I don't think we're very good at that part.”

- “Are we, as an institution, actually practicing this? John Howard Yoder's credentials were suspended then revoked and yet now we still publish his works online so that we can ‘benefit from having easy access to his material.’ What does that say about our integrity in word AND deed?”
- “I definitely don't believe that discipline has always been rightly understood and practiced within the church. If it had been, John Howard Yoder’s transgressions would have been caught and dealt with more swiftly and decisively.”
- “I want to agree with this statement, but in actual practice I have so seldom seen discipline ‘rightly understood and practiced’ that I have grave doubts whether we can get it right. When not ‘rightly understood and practiced,’ it typically does more harm than good.”
- “Theory and practice collide in this claim. Theoretically, good discipline DOES undergird the church. And the historical reality is that we almost never find good methods whereby to practice and apply it. Every application of public discipline that I've encountered has resulted in dissolution of fellowship, believers driven from communion, etc.”

In terms of integrity, love and faithfulness were described as the keys, more so than “discipline.”

- “Discipline is a gray area that is very difficult to practice in the church. It is subject to harsh and punitive actions that are akin to punishment and can hamper discernment and reconciliation. What truly undergirds the integrity of the church's witness in word and deed is love.”
- “I don't think it's discipline that undergirds the integrity. . . , Maybe it's faithfulness?”
- “I think that it is love, (‘understanding’ and ‘compassion’ for all) that ‘undergirds the integrity of the Church's witness...’”

Other comments tended to address the following:

- Who decides?
 - “Who decides what is ‘rightly understood?’ That is God's right.”
 - “I don't know. Who is making the decisions about discipline? Are we correcting for being ‘wrong’. Or, are we interpreting discipline to mean doing a consistent practice to remain healthy?”
- The need for being a welcoming church
 - “I can't predict how the church's witness to the world is affected by implementation of discipline in the broader church. I want to be known as a welcoming church.”
- Matthew 18 as a model for discipline and conflict resolution
 - “I believe strongly that this needs to be under the Rule of Christ as set forth in Matthew 18. I'd love to see more congregations and church leaders following this precedent for church discipline.”

5 “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life.” (Confession of Faith, Article 19, Family, Singleness, and Marriage, p. 72)

Answered: 1,638 Skipped: 58

Date: 9/04/14

Strongly Agree

35%

Agree	15%
No Opinion/Don't Know	09%
Disagree	19%
Strongly Disagree	21%

Comments: 444, 27% offered comments

Most respondents weighed in on this statement from Article 19 of the COF which has been widely debated in the current discussion on human sexuality. The responses indicate polarization with an edge to those in agreement (50/40 percent), slightly more than one third in strong agreement. The strong statements in agreement with the statement often cited scripture texts. However, it is not clear if everyone in agreement would keep the "one man and one woman" language. A number of the comments affirmed the covenant language and the lifetime commitment language but wanted the language to include same sex couples. Many noted that people who have been divorced would be at variance with this statement.

This definition is at the center of the debate and is not universally accepted. Half of the church accepts Article 19 of the COF but a small percentage of that 50 percent would allow for same-sex unions. That means that less than half the church is in agreement with the "one man and one woman" language.

There were 444 comments from 27 percent of the respondents, the most for any of the statements. The demographics of the responses indicated urban, rural, and generational. Rural and older tended to be more conservative, urban and younger more liberal.

The comments fall into several categories:

1. Article 19 reflects the clarity of the biblical witness about marriage.
 - "The Bible makes this VERY clear. I don't understand why this is even an issue."
 - "Look to the Bible the inspired Word of God - it clearly states marriage is between a man and a woman."
2. Article 19 is clear, I agree with it, but we should be flexible.
 - "To begin with, I wholly agree with the summary of Article 19. I also fully agree with the "for life" part of the above statement. I realize that the Bible is fairly explicit in defining a marriage. However, I do believe that the Bible is affected by the culture of the time..."
 - "We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between two individuals for life," would be a much more whole and inclusive statement. Homosexuality and heterosexuality are gifts from birth, and because of this, homosexuality and heterosexuality should be regarded as part of God's good creation.
3. I am in transition about this topic.
 - "This is an area in which I am currently struggling. I feel like there's a lot of pressure to "choose a side." I'm still interpreting my thoughts and feelings on this issue and don't feel I can choose at this point in time..."
4. Article 19 should be edited to be more inclusive.
 - "This statement is a case in point where confessions must "give an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times" (Confession, p. 8)... To deny such individuals the blessing of the church is in effect to withhold part of the gospel from them, and therefore itself constitutes sin. It is time for this statement to either be updated or deleted."
5. Article 19 is not central and should be eliminated from COF.

- “This is out dated and offensive.”
- “I have heard it used against too many people in order to condemn divorce and homosexuality, and I have seen too many people leave the church for words such as this. I have seen people ostracized and hated because of this sentence. I have felt ostracized and hated because of this sentence. I accept that this is a valid belief that a person can have, but I will never accept it as a part of the Mennonite confession of faith, because I am a confessed Mennonite, and this is not what I believe.”

6 “Where area conferences with their congregations are committed to the vision, mission, and teaching positions of the denomination, they have the freedom to seek God's wisdom and discernment as to how to apply these principles in a life-giving way in the many chaotic, broken and/or sinful situations which present themselves to the church. This should be done in consultation with the broader church, in a spirit of mutual accountability.” (Guidelines, Part 2)

Answered: 1540 Skipped: 156

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	21%
Agree	60%
No Opinion/Don't Know	09%
Disagree	08%
Strongly Disagree	01%

Comments: 299, 20% offered comments

*What does mutual accountability mean? Top down, conference led, congregational led?
MCUSA should serve churches and conferences as well, should be both ways*

Right at 80% of people agreed with this statement. There was strong support for congregational and conference decision making while wanting to be a part of a larger denomination. This indicates a desire to be together but also recognizes the different circumstances that churches and conferences find themselves in around the U.S. I thought this was well summed up by the comment;

*“YES...Area conferences and congregations must respond to their own context and see what Jesus is inviting them to do in their own location.”

While there was much agreement, there were differing views on where the true power and decision making was located: MCUSA? WDC? Local Congregation?

* Who determines what is chaotic, broken and sinful? MCUSA or individual congregations?

*I would propose individual churches to be encouraged to lead themselves during times of discussion and conflict around church life/personal issues.

*Either we are free or we are not, we can't have both ways.

*Gives too much power to the denomination, the top down method. We are Mennonites, bottom up!!!

Others pointed to the distinction between congregational context and theological beliefs:

*Conferences or local churches cannot individually interpret certain basic scriptural truths

*While there are some non-faith issues that are definitely at the discretion of individual congregations, the underlying beliefs and values of the denomination should be agreed upon and supported by all conferences and congregations belonging to the denomination. This goes to the heart of what it means to be a denomination.

In some ways I thought many of the respondents liked the statement but were unsure how it really works, best summed up by this statement: I feel this is a trick question

7 “Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony. Such action would be grounds for review of their credentials by their area conference’s ministerial credentialing body.” (Guidelines, Part 3)

Answered: 1559 Skipped: 137

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	28%
Agree	10%
No Opinion/Don’t Know	08%
Disagree	23%
Strongly Disagree	31%

Comments: 355, 23% offered comments

The reader should note that the numbers quoted for this statement are from an earlier internal report. They have not been changed in this final report because the general proportions remain the same for the final report. The numbers and percentages above are the final numbers and percentages.

The largest majority of comments (60) contained messages about how this decision should be made at a congregational level.

- “That’s a congregational matter.”
- “I believe the pastor and local congregation together, in the spirit of Christ, can discern what is the right path.”

Several (6) comments felt the pastor alone should be able to discern/decide while another group (5) felt the decision should be made between the pastor and congregation with consultation of the conference.

- “This should be left to the individual pastors.”
- “If there has been good congregational process, which the area conference could help facilitate, then I don’t think a pastor’s credentials should be subject to review.”

Another category of comments (49) surrounded the strong support of the current COF and felt that there should be stricter adherence to the discipline of pastors who perform same-sex covenant ceremonies.

- “As ministers, they need to uphold the COF”
- “Remove their credentials”
- “Not review but terminate”

A smaller group (6) wanted to see credentials reviewed but dismissal not one of the options.

A review of the current COF was suggested (41 comments) in support to delete the same-sex covenant ceremony statement.

- “Needs to be reviewed and updated to today’s world aspect.”
- “That’s what the membership guidelines say, and that’s what the member churches agreed to when joining MCUSA. Change the membership guidelines rather than ignore them.”

Multiple people (21) stated that marriage is not about what sex the couple is but rather about love, commitment and a healthy relationship.

- “Pastors should always prayerfully consider participating/performing any marriage covenant. Premarital counseling and establishing a relationship with the couple is important. The criteria for performing a covenant ceremony ought not to hinge on the sexual orientation of the people.”
- “Love knows no gender”
- “We are all children of God. Who are we to keep anyone away. The church should be inclusive.”

Several people offered what appears to be a “middle ground” option.

- “Under no circumstance should same sex ceremonies take place inside the church it is in direct conflict with the bible and our COF, those ceremonies can take place somewhere else but not inside gods church.”
- “I agree with this statement which reflects my own convictions but given the diversity of convictions and allowed current practice in our denomination, this language will need to be modified.”

8 The Membership 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.

Answered: 1539 Skipped: 157

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	15%
Agree	40%
No Opinion/Don’t Know	18%
Disagree	19%
Strongly Disagree	08%

Comments: 305, 20% offered comments

While a majority of 55% agree with the statement the majority of comments offer critique of the Guidelines. Further, many seem to be only aware of, and therefore only responded to part III of the Guidelines which state “polity” about same-sex covenants.

1. Some feel the Guidelines are good but are not properly utilized or applied.

- “The current membership guidelines seem to make sense, they are biblical based. The problem is there is no accountability when guidelines are not followed making these guidelines worthless.”

- “I think the guidelines are biblically based and can serve us well. However, we cannot allow the secular agenda to push the world’s view of sex, marriage and relationships into our churches.”
- 2. Many questioned both the current need for and use of the Guidelines.**
- “Do the Guidelines reflect today's realities in a broken world? Are they seen as guidelines and not laws? Do they give space for communal congregational discernment of an issue? If so, they could serve well in bringing unity and clarity.”
 - “The Membership Guidelines reflect a denomination in its nascent phase, more than a decade ago. These must be revisited. This should include exploring the question, "Do we currently need Membership Guidelines?"
 - “The Membership Guidelines were never meant to be permanent; they were designed for the sake of the merger. They should be reexamined and revised or perhaps even discarded. They do not offer us unity, order or clarity.”
 - “Guidelines need to be updated so they make sense to the younger generations.”
 - “My understanding is that the Membership Guidelines were never meant to be a permanent document. Perhaps a revision of the Confession of Faith to include Membership Guidelines is in order.”
 - “The membership guidelines were intended for the creation of MC USA, and reflect the issues and reactions of that time. They should be updated to reflect current circumstances.”
 - “The membership guidelines were a poor compromise to begin with. They apply a top down hierarchy of leadership. It would be more appropriate to have bottom up hierarchy so that congregational remains the accountability standard for it members.”
 - “The Membership Guidelines were never meant to be permanent; they were for the sake of merger only. They are, simply, no longer applicable and should be disregarded (or at least re-examined/revised). They are divisive and do not bring unity.”
- 3. Many wondered if the idea of guidelines has lapsed into being rules of discipline.**
- “We are conceived as a non-creedal church, and our documents of understanding amongst ourselves must, in my view, reflect that. A better organized and communicative polity is always to be wished for, particularly in the Mennonite Church. Guidelines that are precisely that, and not rubrics, can be helpful in achieving unity, order, and clarity.”
 - “I believe they can be a tool by which to have thoughtful, discerning conversations and find greater unity and clarity as conferences and congregations, without simultaneously defining "unity" as "uniformity" or expecting a regulated "order.”
 - “So long as they are mere "guidelines" and not dictates, I would agree.”
 - “I think it's important to include elements of the guidelines that create unity in a loving body of believers--that allow for communal discernment and mutual accountability in the local congregational context: guidelines that are not rigid and lead to destruction and the taking of sides, but emphasize grace over judgment.”
 - “Guidelines are nice; it doesn't mean that everyone in the group has to do everything the same way. The definition of diversity needs to be extended and is painfully outdated.”
 - “Do the Guidelines reflect today's realities in a broken world? Are they seen as guidelines and not laws? Do they give space for communal congregational discernment of an issue? If so, they could serve well in bringing unity and clarity.”
-

9 Our unity as a conference or as Mennonite Church USA depends upon common adherence to our statements of belief and practice.

Answered: 1553 Skipped: 143

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	18%
Agree	34%
No Opinion/Don't Know	11%
Disagree	28%
Strongly Disagree	09%

Comments: 390, 25% offered comments

Most respondents answered this question. A little over half (52%) agreed with the statement in some way, and 37% disagreed with it to some extent. Only 25% of respondents offered comments. Whether those who commented were representative of the spectrum of responses is not known at this time.

Several commenters expressed the opinion that there is no common adherence now and that the conference is already in trouble as a result. They also noted that the statement begged the question, "Which statements?"

- "This is a loaded question. Our conference and denomination do not have any common adherence to 'our statements of belief and practice' and never have had it. Different congregations have different practices and stances on issues of divorce, the role of women in the church, the morality of serving in the military or as a police officer, the necessity and mode of baptism for church membership, and the manner in which communion is served. Yet, these things have not stirred up the tensions over unity that the issue of same-sex marriage has. I would think that we could come to a shorter statement of unity on some of the basic principles of the Anabaptist movement (i.e. Christocentrism, peace, etc.) but I don't think that 100% agreement on a longer COF is helpful or even possible."
- "That may or may not be true, but what is true is that we don't--and may never--have common beliefs. So there is presently no unity and no unity in sight."
- "If we believe our unity DEPENDS upon common adherence we are in trouble already."
- "Because the WDC has allowed for 'flexibility' in application of the guidelines, we are losing members and losing our outreach appeal."
- "We don't even have common adherence within our own congregations. It is unrealistic to expect that this is what will keep us together. Rather, it is the areas where we can work together and provide resources to each other that will bring us unity."
- "Belief, yes. It is your practices that have gotten you in trouble."
- "I strongly agree with this statement, because it is obvious that as a result of churches deviating from our common beliefs, the unity in Mennonite Church USA is being severely threatened."

Many commenters said that unity depends on something other than common adherence to our statements of belief and practice, including:

- a shared commitment to try to move towards Jesus in our daily and corporate lives
- using our money to do loving deeds in the world

- embracing our common humanity, the call for transformation, peace, and justice
- walking together as we seek to understand God's ways
- our loving response to diversity of opinions
- our commitment to following Jesus and proclaiming God's kingdom
- being transformed by Jesus
- recognizing we can do more together than we can individually
- our compassion for others and living out of God's love for humanity
- a commitment to support each other in living lives that follow the example of Jesus: love the poor, embrace the marginalized, find the best in everyone and work for peace and justice in our communities and our world
- our shared vision and mission, and our shared self-involving confession that Jesus is Lord
- our common adherence to THE BIBLE; Scripture is the final answer!
- when we believe the Bible as the authoritative Word of God for all faith and practice. If we deviate from the Bible there is no unity
- focus on the Anabaptist principles and social justice
- our love and acceptance of each other

Other commenters noted that “common adherence” does not necessarily mean uniformity or conformity.

- “Conference relationships should be mutually respectful and motivated by deep love for each other and God's will in the world. But we can seek accountability, care, and relatedness without conformity to one way of living a life of faith. In fact, it seems antithetical to expect or dictate uniformity while professing a ‘priesthood of all believers’ that is many and diverse.”
- “Unity and uniformity are two very different things. Uniformity is marching in lockstep with no allowance for different views, Unity is commitment to common core values with room for diversity of opinion and agreeing to remain together despite differences. Like a marriage, with the family moving in a common direction while the members express their core values in different ways.”

Some commenters challenged the relevance of MCUSA membership guidelines as statements of belief and practice while others used the membership guidelines to challenge the notion of common adherence.

- “Yes, but I don't think membership guidelines need to be a part of our statements of belief and practice.”
- “Per Membership Guidelines, ‘Within the context of unity, MCUSA celebrates the rich diversity among its constituent entities. The church is an interdependent and diverse body of believers who together form the body of Christ.’ For me, rich diversity is not restricted to multiculturalism; it includes persons with religious beliefs and practices different from mine.”

Still others thought that it was time to review and revise MCUSA’s core statements (e.g. Confession of Faith):

- “Adherence to some statements of belief and practice may be necessary and important, but if that is the case, then we are overdue for redefining those core statements. And, the Church may likely need to include fewer statements of common beliefs.”
- “Our conference and the Mennonite Church USA cannot have unity until the statements of belief and practice and the Confession of Faith is revised and rewritten.”

A number of comments talked about the “statements of belief and practice” as “guidelines” rather than “doctrine” and emphasized that we are not a doctrinal denomination:

- “These ‘statements of belief and practice’ are guidelines, not doctrine. We are not a doctrinal church. Our diversity should be considered a blessing; it gives us our strength.”
- “Trusting the practice of communal discernment and mutual accountability within local congregations should be given attention--after all ‘our statements of belief and practice’ are guidelines, not doctrine.”
- “A more fitting statement would give attention to communal discernment and mutual accountability. Furthermore, unity that values strict adherence to beliefs/doctrine over dialogue, ongoing critical thought, and consideration of the Holy Spirit is not meaningful or healthy.”

There were many comments where the phrase, “agree to disagree” was used.

One commenter addressed the role of MCUSA in this context.

- “I feel congregations should take the priority, take the lead, but be joined together in area conferences, rather than some hierarchical structure. The larger denomination is a place we can work together for mission, education, etc. NOT a ‘control’ center.”

Other comments of interest included:

- “Efforts at forcing unity always end badly. Efforts at cultivating unity through friendship and listening, however, have a much better chance.”
- “Anabaptist tradition is more of a confederation, than a unified set of practices.”
- “In my opinion, the core beliefs we share and have agreed on in the Confession of Faith as Mennonites are far more important that they be agreed upon.”
- “Yes, agreed, but these beliefs are not static and must be revisited in light of the movement of God's spirit in our midst.”
- “My middle answer isn't so much that I don't know as that there is a middle level of agreement necessary. If we share no common understanding or adherence, then we probably don't really qualify as Anabaptist. On the other hand, if there is no room for diversity, then we ignore the movement of the spirit and become like the Pharisees trying to protect the institution at the expense of ministry.”
- “That's the real question, right? As a congregation, a group meets together and discern God's Word in their lives. As a member of a larger group (i.e., your conference or Mennonite Church USA) the congregation identifies itself with that group via historical, cultural, or familial ties. But if the actions of other congregations in the larger group don't follow your congregation's discernment of God's Word, the choices given have been to either force the other congregation into discipline or have your congregation leave. The third way, however, is to embrace those statements of belief & practice that are mutually shared and continue to dialogue on those that cause friction.”
- “While unity is not impossible, it becomes very difficult when we do not adhere to the statements of belief and practice because some churches will constantly be pulling away in both directions. Adhering to common statements lessens that tension.”
- “Over many years our spiritual ancestors have sacrificed much (including being torturing and death) for our Anabaptist faith. As a result, our current generations have benefited from a unified statement of belief. This is important to preserve as it impacts our lives in many ways

including how governments view our youth claiming conscientious objector status. It is unacceptable to jeopardize this for internal differences of opinion.”

- “True unity doesn't result from laws but results from open communication and respect. Each congregation has a unique community, both inside and outside the church walls, to relate to. People and experiences are not all the same!!”

10. WDC 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.

Answered: 1532, Skipped: 126

Date: 9/04/14

Strongly Agree	28%
Agree	35%
No Opinion/Don't Know	08%
Disagree	20%
Strongly Disagree	09%

Comments: 318, 21% offered comments

Almost two-thirds (63%) of the respondents agreed with the statement. Less than a third (29%) disagreed. This indicates a significant degree of support for congregations being free to make their own decisions in matters of Christian belief and practice. Many comments portrayed this freedom as an Anabaptist distinctive, especially within the General Conference legacy.

- “Congregational autonomy is a historic Mennonite tradition and one of Anabaptism's great strengths. It should not be compromised.”
- “This is the historic polity position of the Western District Conference. Each church is acting within its local community, and each community has different needs. This should continue to be WDC policy for the foreseeable future.”
- “We need larger parameters (in Mennonite Church USA) than exist now. Congregational autonomy is true to the Anabaptist vision of a believers' church and was true of General Conference.”
However, there were many qualifying comments in the direction of hoping that congregational decision-making would be in consultation with conference leaders and other conference congregations, especially when decisions involved significant variance from conference and denominational understandings.
- “WDC should be more for consulting than micro managing each congregation. Have more faith and trust in the Pastors and boards of each church to do what is right for that congregation.
- “I think that our polity should be primarily focused with power in the local congregation. The conferences and denomination should be best understood as a cooperative effort of the congregations and not as a separate source of power.”
- “I don't think a 'lone ranger' approach is the best way. However, there should be some leeway for congregations to look at matters in their particular context.”
- “Yes, but only in consultation with conference and other congregations when making a decision that differs from common practice.”

- “Proposed revision: WDC congregations should be free to make decisions in matters of Christian belief and of practice after prayerful consultation with the conference.”
Many comments expressed concern about knowing the limits of congregational autonomy.
- “Then who needs a conference? Just every church for themselves? I'm not attending my church because of what this church believes but because what "Mennonites" believe and stand up for and the Mennonite Church USA's constitution beholds what I believe. If it changes, then I will have to look for a church that considers what the Bible says to be true.....”
- Why belong to a conference if you're not going to abide by the rules?
- I think that congregations should have some freedom in making decisions, but overall I think that churches in the WDC should be in agreement on key issues.

11 WDC congregations should be subject to and follow the official statements of Christian belief and of practice of the Western District Conference and of Mennonite Church USA, as affirmed by their delegate assemblies and voluntarily accepted in becoming members.

Answered: 1507 Skipped: 189

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	16%
Agree	35%
No Opinion/Don't Know	17%
Disagree	27%
Strongly Disagree	06%

Comments: 333, 22% offered comments

189 people skipped the question, 22% offered comments, and almost a quarter of people didn't want to answer. Half agreed with the statement while a third disagreed.

One thing that was noticeable was the amount of responses in support of the statement. It seemed there were a number of people with whom this statement clarified their understanding of church, conference, denomination relationship. Some of those many statements could be summed up:

- *Yes, we are subject to what we have decided
- *That's how a denomination works
- *"A member should uphold and support the beliefs and practices of the conference and denomination"

There was also a good amount of people with whom the language of "subject" was difficult; either hard to understand or not palatable.

- *I don't know what the phrase "be subject to" means.
- *The whole idea of "subject to" kind of makes me feel a little sick. That's not Christian!
- * In today's lack of unity, we should set aside harsh requirements for absolute compliance

There were also several statements lamenting the fact that some people joined but never affirmed certain things or were out-voted:

*Many of us did not "voluntarily" accept the guidelines when we became members. We were simply outvoted by the majority.

A few people commented what it meant to be in a covenant community with commonly held convictions:

*I think congregations should be subject to what they have discerned the combination of Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the larger community to say in any given circumstance. I believe official statements of Christian belief and practice are for the purpose of helping us define ourselves and work toward common goals, not to follow for the pure sake of following something

*To a point I believe this to be true. However, I do believe that there are times when a congregation may discern the Spirit leading them in a direction that may challenge accepted guidelines and parameters. None of our guidelines are sacrosanct. We must allow room for dissent and prophetic witness. Such decisions on the part of congregations must be responded to with some amount of trust, openness, and willingness to learn and discern together as a conference.

12 When WDC congregations are considering decisions of major importance in the expression of their Christian belief and practice, they should consult with WDC leadership in their decision-making.

Answered: 1528 Skipped: 168

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	22%
Agree	59%
No Opinion/Don't Know	09%
Disagree	08%
Strongly Disagree	02%

Comments: 301, 20% offered comments

Clearly the largest majority "agree" to some level with this statement. There is strong agreement to put emphasis with the word "consult".

- "They may consult but the conference should not have final say since conferences cannot have the personal and circumstantial awareness that individual congregations have in different situations."
- "I do think there should be consultation and mutual accountability, but receiving counsel does not necessarily mean that there will be agreement or that the congregation will take all the advice they receive."
- "This would help with communication and decision making."
- "Part of being in relationship with one another means good communication. Good communication also requires trust that listening and a strong desire for understanding will be paramount (this trust is difficult when the threat of discipline looms large)"

There were several questions related to what qualifies "major importance".

- "What is major importance for my congregation may not be so for another."

There were a fair amount of comments stating that consultation would not be helpful

- “WDC and MCUSA theologians are too often too disconnected from reality to be helpful.”
- “too many rules”
- “WDC does not have the power to stop a congregation from making a decision that it feels is in the best interest of its members and community”

Several comments were made about the lack of support or trust for WDC (and in some statements MCUSA) leadership.

- “This sounds correct. But you still have to have good leadership that have some common sense and not fall for pleasing congregations who are trying to be ‘politically correct’ and use such spiritual language that the Holy Spirit is leading them to illegal and accepting relationships that are not condoned by the Bible.”
- “I don’t think our church, when faced with a question, has ever found a clear answer from WDC.”
- “If and only if the wdc leadership is strong and committed to the Word. Would you, leadership, seriously listen to a congregation wanting to bring in practicing, unrepentant pedophiles?”

Several comments stated that congregations ultimately make their own decisions:

- “Consult=looking for resources in the decision-making process, asking for prayer but the decisions come down to the church community.”
- “Decisions made at the congregational level should only affect themselves.”

There were multiple calcification statements:

- “May consult with WDC leadership”
- “Be in dialog with might be better than consult with”
- “I do not believe WDC leadership is the ultimate decision-maker.”
- “If this is for the purpose of discernment, yes.”
- “If the definition of ‘major importance’ amounts to ‘liable to be a headache for conference authorities’ it seems only courteous for there to be some prior dialogue.”

13 The statements of belief and practice of Mennonite Church USA should be binding upon its conferences and their congregations.

Answered: 1509 Skipped: 187

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	12%
Agree	26%
No Opinion/Don’t Know	12%
Disagree	35%
Strongly Disagree	15%

Comments: 304, 20% offered comments

Many respondents commented about the implications of the word “binding.” 50% disagreed with the statement; 38% agreed.

1. A few comments were like the following:

- “Yes, agree, if you don't go and change the meaning of marriage as it stands now. One man and one woman.”
- “You do not have to be a member of MC USA. To remain a member in good standing one needs to follow the guidelines set forth by the conference. If one is in disagreement they do not have to belong to the conference. While congregations have their autonomy there are still certain guidelines to follow to remain in good standing. Pastors have had their licenses revoked for various reasons because they refused to follow the guidelines. Congregations have been removed from membership roles.”
- “I agree, with the stipulation that these statements should be under constant review to be certain that we are a reflection of the love of God to all.”

2. A large number of statements wanted to question or qualify the term “binding.”

- “Diversity is important to the health of lively organizations. To make something binding does not allow for the varied experiences of the members of the conferences and congregations.”
- “I think that the Anabaptist tradition grants more latitude for individuals and congregations as they work to discern the will of God in their context.”
- “But when the church begins picking out certain practices as test cases and ignoring a whole host of other variations which may be even more vital to church life, the whole process loses its credibility.”
- “Only IF the statements are such that congregation and area conferences can pray, discern, and work locally.”
- “The term “binding” could be replaced by “strongly influential”.”
- “Given the outdated statements, I have to disagree. Even when updated, I believe they should not be used to judge or coerce.”
- “The Mennonite church is not doctrinal. The Spirit moves in mysterious ways. To assume that all congregations can be in agreement on all things is not realistic. I support a congregational polity where neither MCUSA or conferences need to assert power over its congregations.”
- “Such language breeds exclusion and does not foster Christ-like love. These are legal and contractual practices of the world and seem to have less place in the body of Christ, the Church.”
- “Yes, in the sense that we commit to do this with one another, but not in the sense that these can never be challenged. If a congregation believes it would be acting unjustly and not according to the Spirit of Christ to follow a guideline, it must follow the Spirit.”
- “Only in the rare circumstance where the statements are agreed to by literally ALL participants, not just the majority of participants. The “dictatorship of the majority” is not biblical. As scripture demonstrates, the minority voice is sometimes the voice of God.”
- “Is binding a contract? an oath? Can I not consider myself a member of my national denominational group if I don't agree with one or two statements in the belief and practice of Mennonite Church USA? Again, I would rather we dialogue and discuss our concerns than oust conferences and/or congregations.”
- “That promotes a power issue with leadership. The statements of belief and practice of Mennonite Church USA should be seen as encouragements toward unity, order, teaching and doctrine, and at the same time supporting new ways of interpretation as well as

upholding traditional values, which builds stability in the greater whole without destroying relationships with variances.”

- “It depends what “be binding” means - I would disagree if this means that congregations are automatically removed from membership when they disagree with some beliefs and practices of MC USA. If that were the case, almost every congregation in the denomination would be removed from membership! However, I would agree if it means that the congregations should take seriously the beliefs and practices of MC USA, and dialogue respectfully when in good faith they find areas of disagreement or lack of clarity.”
- “Binding” is not language to which I could agree. This seems to say a majority may impose its beliefs upon a minority. It further incorrectly suggests there is a single interpretation of beliefs and practice.”

14 The “teachings” of the WDC or of Mennonite Church USA should carry only “advisory” authority for the congregation.

Answered: 1496 Skipped: 200

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	15%
Agree	44%
No Opinion/Don’t Know	13%
Disagree	22%
Strongly Disagree	06%

Comments: 201, 13% offered comments

Most respondents answered this question. More than half (58%) agreed with the statement in some way, and 27% disagreed with it to some extent. Only 13% of respondents offered comments. Whether those who commented were representative of the spectrum of responses is not known at this time.

Most comments seemed to key on the word “advisory.” Many of those comments took a hard line and reacted negatively to the word.

- “Sounds like a noodle for a back bone again.”
- “Advisory authority means nothing. I have strongly advised my 8 year to not eat candy, but guess what, he still eats candy. Only when I have a rule of not eating candy and have consequences to his actions will he not eat candy.”
- “If the conference does not take a solid stand on issues then the advising will be ‘whatever you think is best’ attitude to each church. This whole thing is making me lose respect for the conference. Lukewarm is not good.”
- “‘Advisory’ is too weak a term - implies not taken seriously.”
- “I struggle with this one. I think with some revised statements I would like to think that the congregations should be accountable. I am not sure what all the consequences would be if it would actually only be ‘advisory’.”
- “There is no point of having guidelines if they are only for ‘advisory’ authority.”

Ironically, the word “authority” also prompted some comments, primarily from those who thought it was too hard:

- “I think I would prefer the word ‘guidance’ to ‘authority.’”

Some commenters sought something between “advisory” and “absolute”:

- “I think the ‘teachings’ are above ‘advisory,’ yet there is a lot between ‘absolute’ and ‘advisory.’ I would put it below ‘absolute,’ yet above ‘advisory.’”
- “My concern is with the word ‘only.’ The teachings should carry advisory authority, yes, but even more than that, the teachings also have other kinds of authority because they represent the discernment of the larger body of believers. For example, congregations would do well to be advised, encouraged, and strengthened by the teachings of the broader conference and denomination. That being said, I still do not believe that such teachings should have ‘binding’ authority. I believe that there is a middle ground between ‘advisory’ and ‘binding’ authority.”
- “I think there must be something between ‘only advisory’ and ‘binding’.”
- “Need something between an authoritarian authority and an ‘advisory’ authority.”
- “I see them as guidelines. This implies more than ‘just’ advisory but not binding.”

Meanwhile, others found the phrase “advisory authority” to be an oxymoron and viewed “advisory” and “authority” as mutually exclusive:

- “Advisory and Authority cannot coexist. Either the teachings are advisory and ‘recommended’ or they are authoritative.”
- “Confusing question: By definition ‘advisory’ is not ‘authority’, it’s advice giving. Authority means to have ‘control’.”
- “Advising has nothing to do with authority.”
- “‘Advisory’ Authority is an oxymoron. And why the quotation marks?”
- “‘Advisory authority’ is also vague and unclear. It would be more helpful to talk about ‘the convictions of the majority of MC USA members’.”

A number of commenters noted that teachings change over time and that Mennonites are inconsistent in the application of current teachings.

- “The teachings are important and they have been carefully selected and worded. These teachings are our beliefs and values, however they cannot be set in stone forever and ever. I recall when divorce was totally forbidden, and then situations came that caused our understandings of divorce to change. We were not being loose or unfaithful, but there were situations where divorce was less destructive than staying in the marriage situation.”
- “I think the Mennonite church in hind site has not always seen things clearly - we did not always do the right thing or speak out in the case of slavery or racial discrimination. In another generation will this be clear about our stance on how we look at sexuality? By the way, we turn our back on the ‘sin’ of living together before marriage, sex outside of marriage. Heterosexual behavior isn’t scrutinized the way homosexual behavior is.”

A number of other commenters called for adherence or accountability to the teachings of the Bible, which they did not consider “advisory”:

- “Why have a district if there is no adherence to the teachings of the Bible and asking the churches who are in our district to do the same?”
- “We must hold our congregations accountable to Biblical teachings always.”

- “Some things are not negotiable. If only ‘advisory’ authority, you have weakened the power of the Gospel. You can’t have a strong church when members are given the freedom to do as they please.”
- “They should have a major influence, however the scripture is the ultimate authority.”

Some commenters talked about the teachings in terms of membership in the conference:

- “If the statements are so offensive, become independent so you can set your own principles and structure.”
- “The beliefs & practices agreed to upon becoming a member of WDC & Mennonite Church USA must be followed as a condition of remaining a member. If the beliefs & practices aren’t followed then what is the meaning of membership?”
- “Although if a congregation finds themselves at odds with most of the conference/denominational positions, they should consider their membership.”

Finally, there were many questions about what this statement means, and the quotation marks used in the statement were problematic for some.

- “I am not sure what that means.”
- “I am not clear on how ‘teachings’ are distinct from the ‘statements of belief and practice’. As a result I can’t answer this question.”
- “I don’t even understand what this is asking.”
- “I almost said ‘don’t know’ because the quotation marks inserted into this sentence seem to reflect a sarcastic tone, as if ‘teachings’ that are only ‘advisory’ are somehow flawed or tainted. Imagine the effect in item 13 of using quote marks to set off ‘belief and practice’ and ‘binding’. That would create confusion, would it not?”
- “I agree if by the word ‘teachings’ you mean statements of belief and practice and that the ‘advisory’ word is being used instead of binding. Thus I am reading that statement #14 is rewording statement #13. If this is not what you were meaning, I have no opinion because I do not understand the question.”
- “A flip of the previous question. The quotations are off-putting, but I agree that even the highest of (human) rules needs to be interpreted by the ones making the decision to best determine what is the ‘right’ thing to do.”

15 Western District Conference needs fellowship with and counsel from other conferences in Mennonite Church USA.

Answered: 1525 Skipped: 171

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	23%
Agree	61%
No Opinion/Don’t Know	12%
Disagree	04%
Strongly Disagree	01%

Comments: 176, 12% offered comments

Eighty-four percent agree with this statement, 5 percent disagree. This is a fairly broad affirmation of the need for WDC to have a wider network for fellowship and counsel. Perhaps there is significant agreement with this statement because “fellowship with and counsel from” are more relational terms and carry less political and judicatory weight.

- “This is an important systemic value. CLC is the primary tool for this transparent, regular and Spirit-led counsel. WDC is not an island; other area conferences have wisdom and ways to be faithful.
 - “We need to be a part of a larger body. We need each other in order to survive. It is not good to become too homogeneous; and we can certainly learn and be inspired by each other along our way.”
 - “The purpose of our denomination, as well as our area conferences, should be to provide for fellowship, the building of relationships, mutual inspiration, and encouragement toward mission in its many forms.”
 - “Yes, and with other Mennonites around the world where and when possible.”
 - “Every conference needs this, not just WDC.”
- However, the words “need” and “counsel” generated a few comments and cautions. Some thought “need” was too strong. Some wondered what “counsel” really meant.
- “I don't appreciate the mandating tone of the word "needs".”
 - “What does counsel mean? Accept judgments from another church or group?”
 - “Counsel only to review other opinions.”
 - “Yes, fellowship and counsel, but not discipline.”

16 Unity in the congregation, the WDC and Mennonite Church USA does not depend upon uniformity in belief and practice.

Answered: 1519 Skipped: 178

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	31%
Agree	34%
No Opinion/Don't Know	09%
Disagree	19%
Strongly Disagree	07%

Comments: 250, 16% offered comments

There is strong belief, 65%, that unity does not depend on uniformity with 26% disagreeing. There was a general acceptance among comments that every congregation is different than another, so in that regard unity is achievable in the midst of diverse congregations. There seemed to be both hope and skepticism that unity could be achieved.

Maybe the most significant and most referenced comment in the responses was the need for a certain amount of uniformity. Many people acknowledged that uniformity in our “core beliefs” was necessary but that “secondary” beliefs could be diverse. Some people tried to define what the core beliefs were, but most left that ambiguous. Some people wanted highly uniform beliefs while others wanted very little. A certain level of uniformity is needed, the debate was, “how much?”

For some reason this was my favorite answer:

I answered "disagree" with this simply because in truth our conference is held together by uniformity or at least a guise of that. When a certain amount of uniformity is broken, churches leave, leaving churches that agree intact, thus creating even more uniformity. I see that happening in WDC. As churches have left to seek other conferences that they can find uniformity, WDC remaining churches are more uniform. So in a way uniformity does keep us together whether we like it or not.

17 Scripture and church documents (Confession of Faith, Membership Guidelines, etc.) provide clear guidance to the church concerning human sexuality in light of modern and scientific thinking.

Answered: 1483 Skipped: 213

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	16%
Agree	18%
No Opinion/Don't Know	12%
Disagree	32%
Strongly Disagree	22%

Comments: 321, 22%

The largest majority felt that "no" was the best response but based on the comments, there is a wide range of why folks answered that way.

- "They do not give clear guidance. They have brought about much havoc and kept us from more important things."
- "I do not believe that these documents took into consideration any scientific thinking."
- "No, they're pretty awful actually."
- "We are in the dark ages in these documents and will lose the next generation of our church over this."
- "I don't think the church should be using "modern and scientific thinking" as a reason to question the current church guidance. Instead, past church documents may need to be updated to reflect recent interpretations of scripture and to align with a more humble and restorative method to address our sinful nature."

Multiple comments focused on the interpretation of "in light of modern and scientific thinking":

- "I wonder if it is not true that 'current thinking' influences our understanding of Scripture rather than the other way around."
- "Modern/Scientific thinking also supports abortion and evolution."
- "Much insight and scientific knowledge has been gained since these documents were developed."

Several responses shared confusion about the question:

- "I don't think I understand the statement. If scripture and church documents 'provide such clear guidance' – why can't we find more unity? Law versus Grace?"
- "Actually, the guidance IS clear, but it's WRONG."

- “Modern and scientific thinking should not even be a consideration of our COF. Wish your committees would study how many gay partners stay together. I think it is only 3-5%. How do you handle their ‘divorces’ which also would not be legal? Give us statistics.”
- “And the church has no business doing this.”

There is also a strong call for looking at scripture:

- “We are guided by scripture and not by modern or scientific thinking. Throughout history, science has consistently been proven wrong. We know now that the earth isn’t flat, though there are old science books that will tell you it is. God’s Word to us in the Bible is slowly revealing truth to us, and that truth is slowly being proven scientifically to be true. Let us not rely on our own understanding and think that we know more than what has been revealed to us.”
- “Scripture, was, is, and shall remain the ONLY standard. Times and ideas seem to change, but God’s standard are timeless.”
- “We must remain in the scripture and in the world but be careful not to become of the world. I do believe there is a very fine line here, but we much remain steadfast....yes, I said STEADFAST.”
- “Scripture is very clear”

Summary statements:

- “The documents are intended to provide clear guidance. Despite the intent, there is significant confusion as to where the denomination stands in light of modern and scientific thinking.”
- “Very sincere Christians are understanding Scripture and church documents in different ways, so it must not be ‘clear’ in the same way for everyone.”
- “I think the church is way behind in its discussions on sexuality in general...not just on homosexuality. I sometimes wonder if we talk about homosexuality as a way of avoiding talking about more common heterosexual issues that would make us uncomfortable.”

18 The issue of affirming same-sex marriage covenants is fundamentally different than previous changes of attitude and practice toward slavery, women in church leadership, and divorce.

Answered: 1480 Skipped: 216

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	17%
Agree	18%
No Opinion/Don’t Know	09%
Disagree	29%
Strongly Disagree	27%

Comments: 306, 21% offered comments

Though the majority sees similarity between all these “changes” (56%), a strong minority (35%) agrees that same-sex issues are different from the others. Notably, many wrote lengthy comments illustrating both views as well as offering analysis and commentary pointing to ways in which scripture and church history have struggled, and still struggle, with these issues.

1. Some see the issues as being alike.

- “All of these previous issues have plagued the church at one time and we have been able to work together and go beyond them.”
- “The attitudes and practices toward slavery, women in church leadership, and divorce that merited change all reflected an oppression of our fellow Christians' worth and humanity. It is for this reason that they were changed and I see no difference in the issue of affirming same-sex marriage covenants. Nor in welcoming church leadership from our LGBTQ family and friends.”
- “I think it's exactly the same. I think we are in the midst of yet another change process where God is calling us to do something new.”
- “I truly believe there will come a time in our church culture and practice when we will wonder what all the fuss was about; we may wonder what took the church so long to see God present in the lives and relationships of our LGBT sisters and brothers.”
- “All are things the church has had to take a stance on and continually revise that stance as the world changes. All are things that the Bible can be interpreted to support both sides. All are things that secular opinion has had a hand in shaping church practice.”
- “All of these issues share commonalities. Changes of attitude toward slavery, women in church leadership, and divorce all come after centuries of the human experience leading up to today--the Biblical culture and time proving very different than today; while Jesus example of unconditional love and acceptance transcends time.”

2. Some see the issue of same-sex relationships as being unique and different.

- “I think the big difference on homosexuality (regarding scripture) is that there is not a clear example of scripture saying that it's okay to be in a sexual relationship. There are examples of women in leadership in the Bible as well as challenging the institution of slavery and examples of divorce, but nothing regarding gay relationships, so scripturally this is different (which is why I believe this issues is extremely divisive). I would also say that no two issues are fundamentally the same; all have subtle differences, so to compare same sex marriage to women in leadership is to ignore those differences. In many ways this approach dumbs down the issue.”
- “I believe it is different. The Anabaptist church does not have a history of supporting slavery, at least in the US. The women in leadership is more up for debate, as Deborah was a Judge in the OT. The church does not encourage or condone divorce, which scripture calls sin, even though we do allow divorced people to remarry and be part of our church. Affirming same-sex marriage covenants is the church encouraging and condoning sin. We should be welcoming to sinners, but we should not be condoning their sin. the important nuance and special circumstances that topic has.”
- “The scripture is quite clear on same-sex marriages being wrong. No gray area.”

Finally, some objected to the way the question was posed.

- “Statement 18 is unfortunately muddled in several ways. As a result, I may be compelled to mark "No Opinion when that is decidedly not the case. It is unfair to lump together slavery, women in church leadership, and divorce for a multitude of reasons! Some of us have changed our attitude and practice on one or more of those three but not all. It is perhaps most accurate to say that I am more accepting of same-sex covenanting relationships (let's keep the legal description of marriage out of this) than I am of divorce and re-marriage.

Attitude and practice on slavery and women in church leadership are at totally different places than either of the above.”

19 WDC unity can be maintained even if different congregations adopt different practices toward same-sex relationships and same-sex covenant ceremonies.

Answered: 1491 Skipped: 205

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	26%
Agree	36%
No Opinion/Don't Know	10%
Disagree	12%
Strongly Disagree	16%

Comments: 288, 19% offered comments

Most respondents answered this question. Of those who did, 62% agreed with the statement in some way, and 28% disagreed with it to some extent. Only 19% of respondents offered comments. Whether those who commented were representative of the spectrum of responses is not known at this time.

The comments seemed to fall into three groups. One group agreed with the statement, noting that it reflects the current reality of WDC and that unity with diversity is possible.

- “Persons have ALWAYS worshipped in congregations where they feel most comfortable about issues of race, ethnicity, local culture, interpersonal styles, etc. Mennonites should have choices among different congregations which will be different in style as are urban and rural churches now, for example. This is true of traditional Mennonite churches, those with a long history versus new church plants where the culture and religious history of the newly founded church is accepted by the broader Mennonite denomination. Mennonite churches have never been about signing on to established creeds, have they?”
- “I believe wholeheartedly that this is a choice we could make. A single song can comprise many harmonies.”
- “IF we can come to a shared understanding of unity that celebrates clearly the ways that we are in agreement in matters of faith and practice, and that articulates how it is we are able to allow diversity of practices and still find ourselves in unity.”
- “But unity without homogeneity should be the goal that we're aiming at.”
- “We have maintained a semblance of unity with different practices for some time. Some congregations have left. Speaking for myself, I can live with a variety of theological beliefs and churchly practices, especially when I am at my best in trying to see things from another's point of view.”
- “We already have communities where there are multiple WDC churches so people can choose to attend the one that best expresses their personal Christian & Mennonite beliefs. All congregations do not agree with each other on all issues right now, but we are still unified under WDC.”

- “We have done reasonably well in maintaining unity despite differences on military service.”
- “I believe that over time most churches will come to accept welcoming practices towards same-sex relationships and same-sex covenant ceremonies. We’ve already seen a significant change in the past 10 years towards more openness. As this transition takes place, perhaps the only way to maintain WDC unity will be to allow individual congregations to discern what is appropriate for their situation.”
- “WDC congregations have related to other WDC congregations despite differences in belief and practice throughout the history of WDC. People in my congregation continue to relate to each other, despite their differences on this issue. So I know it is possible. Of course the outcome for WDC depends on each congregation deciding for itself whether it's willing to live with congregations who differ with them on this issue. My congregation is prepared to do this.”
- “I believe congregations already have different beliefs on other issues, such as women in authority in the church, and have still been able to maintain unity. Even if understanding other's points of view can be difficult.”
- “We have a lot to share and learn from one another. We shouldn't be so doctrinally bound that we can't function to do the good that is often affiliated with Mennonites. We can still serve the poor, help others, participate in mutual aid--even if congregations espouse different interpretations of Scripture.”

Many other comments reflect a decidedly negative response to the statement, based primarily on the belief that homosexuality is sin and that no compromise is possible in this regard:

- “More churches will leave. People will leave. This is already happening because of this issue.”
- “This would be changing fundamental beliefs of the conf. plus directly disobeying god’s word. If the conf. allows this blasphemy, god help us all because his wrath will rain on us all at some point.”
- “It is doubtful but believe that we need to stand up for what we say we believe. It will upset some and some will leave but the scripture should be our guide.”
- “Absolutely not. We do not want to be associated with a conference who cannot make a moral stand to uphold what is right. The Bible does not change, only people come along that think they know better than God.”
- “This will self-destruct the whole conference if this practice is allowed.”
- “I agree there can be some variance as noted earlier in response to #16. But when we cross the line of approving what the Bible has defined as sin... and we know is sin based upon article 19 of our confession... how can there be unity except all sin {Rom. 1:32}?”
- “I will leave the church we go to now if this is endorsed in anyway by the local church or WDC.”
- “I would leave the WDC over this issue - I call my sin sin others should also call their sin sin we cannot approve sin under any circumstances.”
- “Sorry, that's not unity. I am a Mennonite for its beliefs on Marriage, Divorce, Peace etc. If churches all "do their own thing" then the word Mennonite is no longer associated with these beliefs and I want my beliefs to be Biblically sound (which by the way doesn't accept every thing the world does.)”
- “No because some of us will not accept Homosexuality as being okay with God. It is a Sin and those in sin must be called out. Romans says those who compromised what they know to be right are subject to punishment as well.”
- “This is not a trivial matter of what color carpet to put in the Sanctuary. This is foundational to the understanding of Biblical authority.”

- “If this change of teaching and practice is accepted, the WDC stands to lose its silent and faithful majority.”
- “If homosexuals so desperately need validation for their wrong behavior, they (and like minded persons) must form their own ‘churches’. That way this issue can be put to rest and both groups can be free to work towards their goals.”
- “This is a deal breaker issue for me. Marriage is between a man and a woman. Period. In Leviticus it says that ‘for a man to lay with another man is an abomination unto the Lord’. The homosexuality lifestyle is a sin, just as having premarital sex or living together outside of marriage is a sin.”
- “There will NEVER be unity if same-sex issues and agendas are condoned and promoted.”
- “I consider myself a Mennonite If the WDC would say that same-sex marriage is OK , then I no longer would consider myself a Mennonite!”
- “Unity in diversity is a tool of the devil. Unity in the church depends on unity in the doctrines and teachings of the Bible. We cannot be unequally yoked.”

Finally, there were miscellaneous other comments, among which were the following of interest:

- “Survey question #21, which asks for a male/female gender designation, is a microcosm of the many ways that LGBTQ people experience exclusion from the Mennonite Church – many queer folks cannot identify with this outdated binary. Clearly, the church cannot fully explore the topics of heterosexism or relevant institutional guidelines until its leadership includes openly queer people. We must welcome and actively listen to all voices in the conversation, particularly those that have historically been silenced, rather than continue allowing heterosexuals to cement unjust policies within the church.”
- “It will take work. Perhaps we could focus on more important issues that are truly detrimental to society (I don't know - things like war and gun violence and acquisition and unsustainable lifestyles....) and realize that as the Body of Christ and as Anabaptists particularly we are called to live as partners in God's ongoing restoration of the world project and live God's will on earth as it is in heaven. Is the current focus on same-sex relationships a distracter to the real issues at hand?”
- “Whatever decisions, some will leave and some will stay. There will be unity (more or less) among those who stay.”
- “If WDC adopts a statement that acknowledged the polity of the congregation as a part of its guidelines, then unity can be maintained.”
- “It seems that part of the division is related to rural vs urban congregations. Members of our own family who live in urban settings know people in same-sex relationships that seem healthy and desire to be part of the church. Those who are in rural areas find basically no same-sex relationships....because people do not feel ‘safe’ to stay there, and they feel unwelcome in most rural area churches. I am concerned about the idea of congregations adopt different practices as stated in this question. Unity perhaps can be maintained, but I wonder if that would really happen??”
- “It will have to do so the same as with divorce.”
- “Those congregations who are against this, are practicing some of their own variations with other topics.”
- “What is problematic is that there are many in the MCUSA who believe we must be like every other denomination, where if one conference recognizes the licensing or ordination of a pastor, then every other conference should recognize them as well. Behind this idea is a hierarchical mindset of uniformity and homogeneity. Let's be honest, it is not the Church that determines

whether someone is married or not--it is the State, who provides licenses, etc. The Church does no such thing. I think a healthy compromise would be to allow every congregation the ability to choose for themselves where they stand on controversial issues such as same sex marriage and ordination, while also allowing for other congregations to do the same even if they disagree with them. We have to coalesce around the majority of things that unite us, not the minority of things that divide us. There are many more things that we agree upon than the things we disagree upon. If we still agree with essential Anabaptist distinctive, but disagree on same sex marriage, then why can't we be at peace with each other?"

- "Change happens at different paces for all people. I believe that over time we will see most if not all of our churches move to a place of acceptance of the LGBT community into our congregations. We can still be the church while allowing some to move a faster or slower pace on this issue."
- "The question implies there is unity now to be maintained. It appears that if we can't adopt different practices - congregations will soon leave on their own. Kicking congregations out is not the way to build unity unless we are working toward a very small but 'pure' WDC."
- "I see a possibly instructive parallel in the issue of military participation. MCUSA and the WDC take a peace position doctrinally but individual congregations can make the decision as to whether to accept members or pastors who are in the military. That is an issue that many Mennonites feel very strongly about and claim a strong scriptural base for. However, we have decided that it is acceptable to live in the same denomination with other congregations that might make a different decision on this issue. We can all be brothers and sisters in Christ, even though we interpret scripture a little differently. Why can't we do the same on same-sex marriage? If we can live with diverse opinion on such a central issue as peace/military participation, surely we can do it for same-sex marriage."
- "A handful of congregations may react negatively, but unity does not mean being held captive by a small minority. Unity should not exclude certain sexual orientations." (Note: Compare this with the "silent and faithful majority" comment above.)
- "Unity can be maintained if we will only begin to put more emphasis on the more basic aspects of our Mennonite faith rather than being concerned about what our brothers or sisters may be doing in the bedroom."
- "A unified focus on Christ, love, pacifism, and believer's baptism is essential to the success of the WDC. More so - acceptance, diversity, and growth is necessary to attract and maintain membership of young people. Keep in mind - most people don't select a church because of the conference it belongs to."
- "Not sure if this will work in Western District. Even less sure if it will work in Mennonite Church USA. Do we really maintain 'unity' if all the people who disagree with our tolerance/practice of same-sex relationships leave our churches and if churches leave our conferences?"
- "It has already split the conference -- how many churches have left by now? All that is left is the churches who are 'welcoming' and 'welcoming/endorsing'. What I'm concerned about is the Hispanic churches -- they don't have a long historical relationship with the Mennonite/Anabaptist way -- and in spite of what was said in Waxahachie about not leaving the WDC if it established 'welcoming' doctrine, I don't think they will tolerate this. Culturally, it is not acceptable to them, and I think those churches (or several of them) might leave. ...and thus, while we were skirmishing on this issue, we missed the big picture and an incredible opportunity."
- "Peace and love are the most important Mennonite values that I can think of. These are not perturbed by acceptance. God may judge us later for tolerating too much, but I rather claim that

I did it for love to my fellow humans, as Christ did with many types of people, than to accept responsibility in wrong attitudes for my fear of the unknown.”

- “Yes, look to the Lutheran ELCA's!”

20 Resolutions such as the pending one offered by Rainbow Mennonite Church, encourage other WDC congregations to become “welcoming” to a broad spectrum of persons who need the church.

Answered: 1471 Skipped: 225

Date: 9/4/14

Strongly Agree	32%
Agree	34%
No Opinion/Don't Know	12%
Disagree	12%
Strongly Disagree	10%

Comments: 352, 24% offered comments

This statement has a lower number of respondents but a higher percentage of comments compared to the other statements. Does that mean folks were tired by the time they got to this last question of the survey or was the wording of the statement confusing to respondents? Putting the word “welcoming” in quotes may have added to the difficulty of how to interpret the overall statement.

- “Are you asking if I am in favor of the resolution or if I am agreeing with the factual statement that it encourages other congregations to become welcoming?”
- “Are you gauging my awareness of the resolution, or my response to what it asks for WDC? This is confusing.”
- “I do not like this question. It tries to make me choose between being welcoming and saying that I agree with letting congregations do whatever they want to...”
- “I feel like I don't know how to answer this question because what does ‘welcoming’ mean in this context? ...”

More than two-thirds of the respondents agreed with this statement, 69 percent. Because of the wording of the statement, it is not clear if this means fairly broad support for the RMC resolution or if it means that respondents wish to be “welcoming” in a general sense, not just with regard to sexual minorities. There were a number of comments, many of them wrestling with wanting the church to be welcoming but not accepting of same sex unions.

- “I think we can be welcoming to gay people, but I also don't think we have to change our views and support their viewpoint...”
- “We need to minister to those involved in same-sex relationships just as with all sinners. We should not condone the practice by acknowledging any such union.”

There were clear statements of support for the RMC resolution.

- “Mennonites are on an extended journey from a closed, ethnic group, to be a place for everyone. This brings challenges, but I believe the Holy Spirit is trying to “open us up” to others.”

- “I think this resolution was written carefully and with the desire to make space for congregations to be faithful in their own contexts...”
- “The Rainbow resolution encourages each congregation to live out their faith as they see fit. It does not encourage any congregation to do anything specific, other than to stay in fellowship with other congregations.”
- “Good for Rainbow Mennonite Church!”
- “I strongly support the Rainbow Mennonite resolution!”

Since this was the last question of the survey several comments were in reference to the entire survey and not just about the last statement. There were a few comments of affirmation and critique.

Demographics statement 5 & 7

5. COF --Marriage is one man and one woman for life

	% of Total	S Agree	Agree	No Op	Disagree	S Disagree	Agree	Disagree
under 30	9	24	8	10	17	41	32	58
30-40	10	28	10	9	20	33	38	53
41-50	10	34	11	13	16	26	38	42
51-65	32	34	16	9	19	21	50	40
66-75	20	41	15	7	22	14	56	36
over 75	19	38	23	10	20	10	61	30
Rural	28	57	14	6	12	11	71	23
Town	46	31	19	11	21	18	50	39
City	26	17	11	10	24	38	28	62
Male	45	38	16	9	17	20	54	37
Female	55	32	15	10	21	21	47	42

7. Pastors may not perform same-sex covenant

under 30	9	16	7	8	18	51	23	69
30-40	11	26	6	8	20	40	32	60
41-50	10	30	11	6	20	33	41	53
51-65	31	26	12	8	22	32	38	52
66-75	20	32	9	8	26	25	41	51
over 75	19	28	12	11	27	22	40	49
Rural	28	48	12	6	17	18	60	35
Town	46	23	12	10	27	28	35	55
City	25	12	6	8	23	52	18	75
Male	45	31	11	7	22	30	42	52
Female	55	25	10	9	24	32	35	56

Demographics: Proportions of Participation

AGE	PERCENT
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Under 30	8.68
30-40	10.45
41-50	9.77
51-65	32.36
66- 75	19.54
Over 75	19.20

RESIDENCY	
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Rural	27.88
Small Town	46.01
Large City	26.11

GENDER	
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Male	44.82
Female	55.18

Comparisons, Contradictions and other General Observations

The following is based on numerical data alone, with a reminder that this data does not claim to come from a “scientific” survey.

Authority:

- An 81% majority affirmed the authority of scripture over confessions (1).
- A 55% majority agrees (and a 33% minority disagrees) that the Confession of Faith is designed as a “standard” for judging faithfulness (2).
- 79% agree that scripture is the “authoritative voice and standard” for discerning truth from error (3).
- However, a majority of 54% questions whether scripture and/or church documents carry reliable authority today in matters of sexuality (17). The scripture and/or documents are reliable in this area to a minority of 34%.

Practice:

- Discipline “rightly understood and practiced” receives a 68% majority support (4).
- However, 80% say that conferences should have the freedom to “apply” principles commonly held (6).
- Furthermore, disciplining pastors who perform same-sex covenants is opposed by a majority of 54% and is supported by a minority of 38% (7)
- 56% view same-sex marriage covenants as the same as previous change of practice, such as divorce, while 34% view same-sex issues as “fundamentally different” from previous issues (18).

Official Church Statements:

- On the definition of marriage, 50% support the Confession of Faith statement while 40% oppose it (5).
- 55% say the Membership Guidelines continue to provide good service while 27% disagree (8).
- But 63% believe that congregations should be free to determine their own belief and practice (while 29% disagree) (10).
- At the same time, there is a 52% (yes)-33% (no) divide on whether everyone should be “subject to” official statements (11).
- Consultation of congregations with WDC is supported by 81% (12).
- But MC USA statements should not be “binding” (50%) while 38% think they should “bind” (13).
- And 58% believe the church’s “teachings” should only be “advisory” to congregations (14).
- 66% say that resolutions like the one offered by Rainbow church encourage other congregations to become more “welcoming” (20).

Unity and Relationship:

- 84% agree that WDC benefits from relationship with other conferences (15).
- But 65% say that unity does not depend upon uniformity (16).
- At the same time, there is a 52% (yes)-37% (no) divide about whether unity depends upon common adherence to statements of belief and practice (9).
- 62% believe WDC unity can be preserved (28% disagree) if congregations are allowed to choose different practices on same-sex relationships (19).

NUMBER OF RESPONSES FROM EACH CHURCH

Churches	# of Responses
Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church Goessel, KS	64
Austin Mennonite Church Austin, TX	17
Beatrice Mennonite Church Beatrice, NE	9
Bethel College Mennonite Church North Newton, KS	120
Buhler Mennonite Church Buhler, KS	25
Burrton Mennonite Church Burrton, KS	0
Calvary Mennonite Church Liberal, KS (no email)	0
Casa Betania Newton, KS (SPANISH)	0
Casa de Dios Garland, TX (SPANISH)	3
Casa del Alfarero Pasadena, TX (SPANISH) (no email)	0
Chin Emmanuel Church Houston, TX	0
Comunidad de Esperanza Dallas, TX (SPANISH)	1
Comunidad de Vida San Antonio, TX (SPANISH)	3
Eden Mennonite Church Moundridge, KS	77
Faith Mennonite Church Newton, KS	69
First Mennonite Church Beatrice, NE	58
First Mennonite Church Clinton, OK	1
First Mennonite Church Halstead, KS	18
First Mennonite Church Hillsboro, KS	19
First Mennonite Church Hutchinson, KS	23
First Mennonite Church McPherson, KS	14
First Mennonite Church Newton, KS	68

First Mennonite Church Ransom, KS	1
First Mennonite Church of Christian Moundridge, KS	8
Goessel Mennonite Church Goessel, KS	5
Gospel Fellowship Church Montezuma, KS	0
Grace Hill Mennonite Church Whitewater, KS	55
Greenfield Mennonite Church Carnegie, OK (no email)	0
Hanston Mennonite Church Hanston, KS	1
Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church Inman, KS	18
Hope Mennonite Church Waco, TX (SPANISH)	0
Hope Mennonite Church Wichita, KS	42
Houston Mennonite Church Houston, TX	21
Inman Mennonite Church Inman, KS	20
Joy Mennonite Church Spencer, OK	6
Kingman Mennonite Church Kingman, KS	25
Koinonia Mennonite Church Clinton, OK (no email)	0
Lorraine Avenue Menn. Church Wichita, KS	65
Luz Del Evangelio Dallas, TX (SPANISH)	2
Manhattan Mennonite Church Manhattan, KS	23
Mennonite Church of the Servant Wichita, KS	0
Mennonite Indian Church Seiling, OK (no email)	0
Mi Redentor Ferris, TX (SPANISH)	2
Monte Horeb Dallas, TX (SPANISH)	6
New Creation Fellowship Newton, KS	18
Peace Mennonite Church Dallas, TX	18

Peace Mennonite Church Lawrence, KS	8
Rainbow Mennonite Church Kansas City, KS	73
Salina Mennonite Church Salina, KS	6
San Antonio Mennonite Church San Antonio, TX	22
Shalom Mennonite Church Newton, KS	76
Southern Hills Mennonite Church Topeka, KS	72
Tabor Mennonite Church Newton, KS	71
Trinity Mennonite Church Hillsboro, KS	28
Turpin Mennonite Church Turpin, OK	9
West Zion Mennonite Church Moundridge, KS	28
Zion Mennonite Church Elbing, KS	40
Church Plants	
Camino de Santidad Liberal, KS (SPANISH)	0
Grace Mennonite Fellowship Gladewater, TX	3
Iglesia Menonita Aposento Alto Wichita, KS	1
Nueva Jerusalen Houston, TX (SPANISH) (no email)	0
Incomplete Information	17
No Church Identification	317
TOTAL RESPONSES	1696

DECLARATION OF HISPANIC PASTORS

Western District Conference of Mennonite Church USA

November 15, 2014

Regarding Human Sexuality

We consider sexuality as a gift of God granted to all living creatures. We, human creatures as rational beings, express our sexuality conditioned by a large number of human, physiological, cultural or religious factors.

We do not consider ourselves experts about human sexuality. We recognize that this issue is by its very nature a matter that touches each person very closely no matter one's sexual preferences.

In our conversation we agreed about four essential points according to our Christian understanding:

1. Sexuality concerns us all, emotionally, spiritually and physically. Therefore, we cannot separate it from our reality and existence without endangering our spiritual integrity.
2. In this conversation about sexuality among Mennonite Church USA in general and WDC in particular, we believe it is clear that there are two ways to interpret the matter of homosexual and lesbian relations: one that openly declares that the Bible does not endorse that behavior and another one that affirms that the Bible does not legislate about this issue.
3. We recognize that presently at the pastoral leadership level, some men and women pastors have decided that a way to show the love of Christ is to bless monogamous relations between same sex persons, thus contradicting the guidelines for membership of Mennonite Church USA and the Confession of Faith of the church. Some churches have declared themselves open as communities that welcome homosexual persons and have written documents affirming that.
4. Western District Conference has experienced divisions, separations and heated discussions, and so far it is not clear if we aim to reach a healthy conclusion for all, or if this is just a long exercise to discover who gets tired first.

We, Hispanic Mennonite Christians, committed to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and members of Western District Conference (WDC), in view of the situation described, affirm the following:

In our view, we agree that the Bible gives us enough scriptural basis for saying that sexual relations should be expressed between a man and a woman within the sanctity of marriage. This agrees with our Confession of Faith:

We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. (p. 72 in English)

It is of great spiritual and emotional concern for us that the church in general and in particular WDC is spending so much time discussing this issue as if it were all that has to do with the life of the church. We do not mind the conversation about homosexuality. What disturbs us is the great investment of energy just to keep the issue "on the table" without showing signs of improvement or advancement.

Because we Hispanics have made it clear for some time what is our feeling is, we decided to express the following:

In the spirit of Christ we confess:

That our position about homosexuality has not changed. However, knowing that God has called us to live in peace and unity, we declare with fear and respect that if people, pastoral leaders or individual congregations, perceive homosexuality differently and in consequence declare solidarity with or minister covenant ceremonies between same sex persons, we will respect what they decide and will not impose an obligation to change or criticize their decisions, let alone question their Christian values. At the same time, we hope that our position will be respected and that we always will be considered as valid partners when it comes to talk about the mission of the church, the witness of Christ and the celebration of brotherhood.

In the love of Christ this is our word and we offer it as a fraternal contribution.

In Christ, Lord of all,

Antonio Caceros, Iglesia Menonita Monte Horeb
Jaime Cazares, Iglesia Menonita Casa Betania
Isabel Hernandez, Iglesia Menonita Casa de Dios
J. Natividad Hernandez, Iglesia Menonita Casa de Dios
Juan Limones, Iglesia Luz del Evangelio
Byron Pellecer, Iglesia Menonita Aposento Alto
Jorge Quintanilla, Iglesia Cristiana Menonita Mi Redentor
Damian Rodriguez, Iglesia Menonita Comunidad de Esperanza
Moises Romero, Iglesia Camino de Santidad
Blanca Varga, Iglesia Menonita Comunidad de Vida