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April 11, 2012

Dear Pastors and Church Leaders

The Western District Conference Assembly is gathering in Oklahoma City, July 6-8, with the theme, "Becoming One to Be Sent in Christ" with John 17 as our key text.

In this email we are forwarding two resolutions that have been submitted for our business session on Saturday afternoon, July 7. We are making these resolutions available to you now so that delegates will be informed and prepared for entering into discussion, discernment and decision at Assembly. Pastors may want to meet with delegates or you may wish to have discussion as a whole congregation in order to provide guidance for your delegates.

One resolution comes from Bethel Mennonite Church, Inman, Kansas, asking that Pastor Joanna Harader be suspended for performing a same-sex service in 2010.

Another resolution comes from some of the churches and pastors in Oklahoma asking the Western District Conference leadership to recognize Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective as the "official position" of WDC and that the leadership "conduct their functions and business in accordance with that Confession of Faith."

A third attachment gives you background to the Leadership Commission's responsibilities and also the written decision and rationale of the Leadership Commission in finding Pastor Joanna Harader's credentials in order.

A fourth attachment gives you the motion at national conference in 1995 for the adoption of Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective and also the section of the bylaws of Western District Conference pertaining to Confession of Faith.

If you would like additional help from Western District Conference for conducting a congregational conversation or need additional information, contact Doug Penner, Moderator of WDC, at dougpenner@sbcglobal.net, 785-228-9208 or Clarence Rempel, Conference Minister at the information below.

I ask that you pray that we will conduct our business at Assembly in the spirit of Ephesians 4:2-3, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Joy in Christ

Clarence Rempel

From: Bethel Mennonite Church, Inman Kansas
To: Western District Conference Pastor Clarence Rempel
Date: 4-2-2012

A motion to be presented to the Western District Conference Delegate Body on July 6, 2012.

Bethel Mennonite Church, Inman Kansas wishes to present the following motion:

We move that the Leadership Commission reverse their decision in which they stated "We find Joanna Harader's credentials to be in order" and instead suspend the credentials of Joanna Harader.

What does this mean?

1. This means that The Leadership Commission will need to reconvene to suspend the credentials of Joanna Harader.
2. Joanna Harader will no longer be holding credentials from WDC.
3. The normal process of discipline and future reinstatement should be followed.

Rationale for this motion:

1. On Sept 18, 2010 Pastor Joanna Harader performed a same-sex marriage covenant ceremony. Joanna had full knowledge of the consequences of her actions and recognized that the WDC might remove her credentials.
2. We believe that all Pastors need to act in accordance with stated WDC guidelines and beliefs.
3. We agree with and affirm the statements of faith that have been adopted by the WDC and MCUSA.
 - a. The Mennonite Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective
"God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life."
 - b. A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership
 - c. Resolution on human sexuality. (Saskatoon)
 - d. A Call to Affirmation, Confession, and Covenant Regarding Human Sexuality.
4. We, along with the Leadership Commission, recognize the authority of the 2001 Membership Guidelines for Mennonite Church USA stating that pastors holding credentials in a conference of MCUSA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony.
5. We believe the Leadership Commission did not give enough consideration to the views and beliefs of the majority of the churches in the WDC, nor the stated policies of the WDC and MCUSA.
6. Credentialing clergy is one of the few activities where the conference has authority over individual member congregations. When congregations join the WDC they accept this authority. Consequently, credentialing issues have a greater reflection upon all member congregations in the WDC than issues that traditionally have been decided at the congregational level.
7. All boards and Commissions work at the pleasure of the Delegate Body, we (delegate body) have given them authority to make decisions and do the business of the WDC. We expect the Boards and Commissions to work within the guidelines that have been established. When a Board or Commission makes a decision that is clearly outside these guidelines then it is appropriate for the Delegate Body to respond by making a correction to the error.

Background to Leadership Commission Duties and Action

Constitution of Western District Conference

Bylaw 3. Commissions

Section A. – Leadership Commission

The Leadership Commission helps congregations find and sustain pastoral leadership and serves the unique needs of pastors, youth ministers and church planters through encouragement, support, accountability and credentialing. The Leadership Commission resources congregational elders and deacons as part of the ministry team with pastors.

1. Duties

- a. Credential by commissioning, licensing and ordaining candidates for ministry.
- b. Serve as a consultative body to the conference minister in ministerial placement.
- c. Support personal and spiritual growth for pastoral leadership through counsel, personal evaluation, continuing education, and professional assistance.
- d. Provide leadership and resources for church-planting initiatives.
- e. Support a code of ministerial ethics in keeping with *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*.
- f. Function in a consultative role for the resolution of tensions between pastors and congregations.
- g. Give attention to ministerial salary issues and assist congregations in developing adequate salary levels for their pastors using MC USA guidelines.
- h. Resource ministry teams that include pastors and deacons through workshops, retreats, and other appropriate events.
- i. Encourage and promote a congregational and WDC culture of calling persons to leadership in the church.
- j. Relate to the Mennonite Church USA Office of Congregational and Ministerial Leadership as needed.

Review of Joanna Harader's Credentials

Western District Conference, Mennonite Church USA

Leadership Commission Action and Accompanying Statements

April 6, 2011

We, the Leadership Commission of Western District Conference, recognize that the Church, the body of Christ, that we represent, is not of one mind with regard to how God desires us to be in relationship with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer (LGBTQ) people or the pastors who feel called to officiate services blessing their unions. And in fact, going back to its inception, voices within MCUSA have been struggling with how to respond to LGBTQ people in our midst.

We, the Leadership Commission, recognize the authority of the 2001 Membership Guidelines for Mennonite Church USA, Section Three, which states that “pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony,” and that “such action would be grounds for review of their

credentials by their area conference's credentialing body.” We recognize that we are that body for Western District Conference.

We also acknowledge that the latest word from MCUSA regarding how to be in relationship with LGBTQ people came on July 4, 2009, when the delegate body passed a resolution that recognizes that “current and ongoing debate exists over issues surrounding human sexuality and conference response to congregations at variance,” and asked our denominational leadership to “provide and encourage the use of resources which assist conferences and congregations to engage in this discernment.” We believe this resolution acknowledges that a diversity of beliefs exists within MCUSA conferences and congregations about this issue today.

We on the Leadership Commission spent significant time in holy struggle of discernment through prayer, discussion, listening to how various responses by our commission would be received by differing congregations throughout our district. In the end, however, we could not come to consensus on the appropriate response to Joanna Harader's actions of officiating a same-sex union. Opinions varied from a two-year suspension of credentials, to probation, to confirmation that the pastoral credentials remain in order. We did reach consensus that it would be both irresponsible on our part and unfair to all parties to not reach a final decision regarding Joanna Harader's WDC credentials if at all possible.

May God grant grace to the people of Western District Conference.

ACTION on March 4, 2011: By a 4-2 vote, “We find Joanna Harader's credentials to be in order.”

Leadership Commission: Janet Kaufman, Gene Thiesen-chairperson, Robert Kaufman, Garland Robertson, Kathy Neufeld Dunn, Phil Waite

Response by Majority:

Our decision is based on the knowledge that Joanna spent time seriously engaged with God's word in this issue and was able to articulate what she heard through that discernment process to us. She then went to her congregational leadership for counsel, and then to the entire congregation, where Peace Mennonite Church gave consensus approval for her to minister in the way she did. We believe these are the two crucially important components of an Anabaptist expression of Christian faith.

Therefore, within her specific circumstances, we believe that having faithfully based her decision to do this upon a legitimate interpretation of Scripture and having it blessed through the discernment of her local faith community, Joanna's action did not violate her credentials. We do not expect this vote to be precedent-setting in Western District Conference nor MCUSA. Our decision should not be construed as attempting to force theological change. Nor should it be understood to be a blanket affirmation of the action of any and every WDC pastor who would choose to officiate at a same-sex union.

Dissenting Opinion

I believe Joanna Harader should be placed on a two-year probation for performing a same sex covenant ceremony as part of her ministry at Peace Mennonite Church, Lawrence. I am opposed to revoking Joanna's credentials, and am in favor of creating

space for dialogue on this issue with Joanna and within the wider church. I believe Joanna crossed an important line discerned by the church, and overstepped her authority. The authority of the pastoral office has limits placed upon it by the church, and Joanna acted outside the authority of the pastoral office.

While I am in favor of disciplinary action, my sympathies on issues related to homosexuality are squarely with those advocating for inclusion, so I engage this conversation as someone who is inclined toward Joanna's perspective on the issue. I believe that a compelling case can be made that same-sex covenanted relationships are an authentic moral expression of Christian faith. I believe deeply that the church must make room for dissenting voices, even when it has spent much energy in discernment already. Joanna's voice is essential to the health and well being of the church.

But I find more involved here than opinions related to homosexuality. The wider culture in which we live values personal choice and individual integrity. From this cultural perspective Joanna's choice to perform a same-sex covenant ceremony expresses a high level of morality. But the moral measure of Joanna's action within the Christian community is not whether it has personal integrity or is authentic to who she is, but whether it has integrity within the cultural framework of that community and is authentic to its values and tradition. I believe within the Christian community, dissent is necessary to the discernment process of the church, and I welcome Joanna's voice. But I also believe neither she nor I possess the responsibility, obligation, or authority to decide whether or not to bless a same-sex covenanted union. That responsibility, obligation and authority belongs to the wider Christian community, which we call the church. In our case, this means not only Peace Mennonite Church, but also Mennonite Church USA and Western District Conference.

These bodies, of which we are a part, and on which we also make claims, bear the burden of discernment. Critical to me is that Joanna undermined the process of discernment when she chose to do something which these bodies had discerned was not consistent with Christian practice. Joanna disagrees. Joanna discerned that performing a same-sex covenant ceremony is part of her call to ministry, and she is willing to risk her status within the church in order to remain faithful to that call. Since we hold the reasoning capacity of each individual in high esteem, our culture values such choices, and it follows that acting out of that reasoning capacity is a moral obligation. I wonder if these values have found too comfortable a home in the church.

I see the issue of officiating at same-sex weddings to be a different matter than issues related to sexuality and church membership. First of all MCUSA has no clarity regarding congregational standards of membership. Nor is it an expectation that all members or all pastors believe 100 percent with denominational documents. The Ministerial Leadership Information Form assumes pastors will have areas of disagreement or uncertainty regarding the confession of faith. Most MCUSA congregations have members whose lives are comfortably at variance with some teaching or other found in our documents. So it is the proper place for discernment on questions of membership is the local congregation. One of the justice issues we are dealing with here is that one issue, and one set of people, has been singled out for special focus and attention.

Finally, WDC and MCUSA need to create processes and avenues of dissent, where minority voices can be spoken and heard. We have failed to do this, and for this reason the wider church shares responsibility for a failure of discernment process. Joanna has few, if any, options for expressing her conscience within the wider church. Whatever we decided as a Leadership Commission, we need to call on our conference and our denomination to take steps to facilitate process that gives voice to multiple perspectives.

Homophobia within the church also undermines healthy processes of discernment related to issues of sexuality. Why have we as Leadership Commission (and our brothers and sisters in other conferences) spent so much energy discussing this topic, energy that could well be used elsewhere to strengthen our body? Why have conferences spent so much energy policing congregations on this issue? Why have congregations who included same-sex couples as members been singled out for discipline or examination, when many of our congregations welcome members who are at variance with our teaching in other (I would say more significant) ways?

Resistance in the church to genuine dialogue and discernment is strong. To be sure, activism and advocacy is part of discernment. But so is listening. And our refusal to listen to each other means we trot out our most strident (and sometimes meanest) arguments, in our efforts to be heard. Unfortunately our most strident arguments are not our best ones. Joanna is not responsible for this situation. We are as a church. And I am concerned that this process of credential review, whatever the outcome, enables the church to avoid the work and responsibility to discern, to dialogue, to listen, that belongs to all of us.

Dissenting Opinion

One of the primary roles of the WDC Leadership Commission is to act as the credentialing body for our area conference. It is our responsibility, by God's grace and to the best of our ability, to ascertain that persons seeking licensing/ordination for pastoral ministry are grounded in the Holy Scriptures; are committed to be guided by the *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* (1995) as they interpret and teach the Holy Scriptures in their congregations; and agree to serve in accordance with the *Polity for Ministerial Leadership* (1996) and *Membership Guidelines for the Formation of Mennonite Church USA* (2001). When a serving pastor's actions are not in harmony with this guidance, it is also our very difficult and holy responsibility to call for accountability. The *Membership Guidelines* do not allow credentialed pastors to perform same-sex covenant services, and since Joanna Harader has done so, the WDC Leadership Commission has completed a review of her credentials. In the process of sharing her rationale during that review Joanna indicated that, when choosing to perform a same-sex covenant ceremony, she was fully aware that her action would be at variance with our *Confession of Faith* and *Membership Guidelines* and would likely respond to similar circumstances in a similar fashion.

Recognizing that there is diversity of belief on this particular issue within the WDC/MCUSA constituency, it is also essential to the health of our fellowship of congregations that credentialed pastors submit themselves to the discernment of the entire community. Significant changes in theology, polity and practice that affect the whole church are not to be made without the discernment and testing of the whole church (*Confession of Faith, Article 4*). While Joanna tested her discernment in her local

congregation before acting, at the same time her action circumvented the ongoing discernment process in the larger district and denominational faith community.

It is therefore my conclusion that Joanna Harader's action to perform a same-sex covenant ceremony calls for discipline: specifically suspension of her ministerial credential for a two-year period so that by further discernment the Leadership Commission may decide whether to restore her credential to active status or to withdraw it.

Resolution from Some Churches in Oklahoma

March 10, 2012

RESOLVED:

That the leadership of Western District Conference, including the Executive Board, the Commissions, Committees and District Ministers, acknowledge as official position the current **Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective**

That those in the above leadership positions, pastors, and or congregations conduct their functions and business in accordance with that Confession of Faith

and

That those who cannot do so according to their conscience resign their positions of leadership and influence in the Western District Conference

Rationale for Resolution:

- There is a crises within the WDC over the positions of belief and practice which threatens to split the conference apart
- This crises is fostered by the difference in understanding regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture
- The current direction of the WDC has resulted in a lack of unity which is disruptive to the mission of the Church and is leading to a number of district churches to consider leaving the district

Pastors

Norman and Linda Berry
Dave Gerbrandt
Clifford Koehn
Bob Sprunger
Eugene Thieszen
David Wiens

Churches

Bethel Mennonite, Hydro
Eden Mennonite, Inola
Herold Mennonite, Bessie

Background to Confession of Faith Resolution

MCUSA Action on Confession of Faith

Adopted by the delegates of Mennonite Church General Assembly, and of the General Conference Mennonite Church Triennial Session, July 28, 1995, Wichita, Kansas. Mennonite Church USA, formed by the merger of these two groups, has adopted this confession as its statement of faith. Copyright © 1995 by Herald Press Scottdale PA 15683. Used by permission. Order print copies of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, and *Summary Statement, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, From Herald Press, Scottdale, Pa. Worship resources based on this confession, and translations are also available.

Mennonite Church General Assembly action: "To approve the articles and summary statement of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and commend them to areas conferences, congregations and denominational ministries as their statement of faith for teaching and nurture in the life of the church; we further endorse the commentary as helpful clarification and illustrative application of the articles in the confession. We ask the Committee* and the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church General Boards to consider the counsel given and to approve a final draft of the confession for the church." (*Proceedings*, pp 27-28.)

*Members of the Inter-Mennonite Confession of Faith Committee: Marlin E. Miller (co-chair), S. David Garber, Beulah Hostetler, Samuel Lopez, Ann Weber-Becker, Helmut Harder (co-chair), Lois Barrett, Heinz Janzen, Jake Tiltzky and Ted VanderEnde.

From WDC Constitution

Article II. Our Common Faith and Mission

The center of our convictions is Jesus, the Christ.

For no one can lay any foundation than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:11)

The Western District Conference accepts the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective as its guide to faith and practice and commends this confession to each member congregation as a statement of faith for teaching and nurture in the life of the congregation and as a tool in discussions with inquirers, Christians of other traditions and people of other faiths.