**2015-03-08[[1]](#footnote-1): Congregational Gathering at Zion Menn. Ch., Elbing, KS**

**re Conference / Denominational Polity**

**Pastor Ray Reimer**

**I. Opening / Introduction**

*open with prayer, song…*

Rosie and I (in consultation with the Deacons and Governing Board) for some time have been planning some meetings/gatherings pertaining to agenda that's been swirling in our denomination and area conference; I touched on this in our report in Zion's 2014 Annual Report. We somewhat intentionally held off scheduling anything, having learned that it's best to have these sorts of sessions/discussions when there's something specific to decide… and we didn't have that… although we thought we might. But the ways of the church have churned on, even after we scheduled *this* gathering. It's been a moving target, so to speak, to prepare for this meeting, to know what to say, how to organize it.

At one point a key goal was to have significant discussion that our delegates to this summer's Mennonite Church USA convention in Kansas City might listen to, so that they (well, myself and […]—we're the ones you elected) might have a sense of the congregation in knowing how to act on any resolutions that might come before us. But in the last several weeks the press releases from MC USA's Executive Board have indicated that there may not *be* any resolutions forthcoming… at least not from *them*. Which doesn't mean there won't be any; individual congregations and area conferences and constituency groups can submit their own. I think the official deadline for doing so is now past (although there are some exceptions); the denomination has been a bit close-mouthed in my opinion as to whether they've received any. Hopefully we'll hear something soon.

**A. Overview**

In any case, there's a cluster of interconnected issues which are associated with the agenda I noted earlier:

• topics related to what's technically called "polity", regardless of what the content or subject matter is;

• topics related to sexuality, and specifically same sex unions and credentialing leaders of same sex orientation.

While it's impossible to fully separate these, there's some utility in at least *trying* to do so. And that's how I propose we go about it in our discernment here at Zion. Today I'm going to talk— and hopefully you'll talk *some*—just about the "polity" side of things. Later in spring or early summer we'll have another gathering to discuss some of those sexuality issues. Actually there *is* a specific resolution about that, but it's directed to our specific area conference, Western District. We may even wait until after the MC USA convention to address it, to see what (if any) action ensues there… or perhaps we'll have a couple gatherings. No promises. That's a moving target, too. Today, though our agenda is… "polity."

The outline for our gathering today is on tables…

**B. Background**

But before we get to that, let me offer a bit more background on how we got to this place. We could start way, *way* back, with creation, I suppose—God calling a people into being. But we'll leave that for sermons on some Sundays. We could start with Jesus and the earliest church, but that's maybe for other Sundays. We could look at the early Anabaptist movement in the 16th century. Actually, there's a fair bit of utility in being aware that both for the early church and the first Anabaptists, they spent quite a bit of time talking about the very same sorts of things we're talking about today—not only the content of decisions, but how to *make* decisions, who had authority, how accountability was understood, etc. As we proceed through Mennonite history, we see those coming from the highlands—south Germany and Switzerland and Alsace-Lorraine—going about things in a bit different way than the lowlanders (those in Holland and Belgium and north Germany) did… even if they all could agree on the same articles within a confession of faith, like the Schleitheim Confession. As time marched along, those obstreperous lowlanders who'd been thrown together in Prussia found that those of Friesian and Flemish extraction even had somewhat different emphases.

Various of us rowed across the ocean at one point or another and found ourselves living together, and united into groups like the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church. But then there were all sorts of other groups, too… the Amish and Hutterites and Mennonite Brethren, and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren. Oh, but those categories were way too confining, so we started refining ourselves into black bumper Mennonites and Holderman and… Oh, this can get way too detailed and confusing. Why were we "refining" ourselves over and over again, splitting into smaller and smaller groups?

In the aftermath of World War II—when lots of young men had been thrown together into CPS camps, and lots of folks from different backgrounds had found they *could* work together in projects like MCC and MDS, if they chose— various efforts to work together in *other* venues also started to percolate. Educational projects like an Associated Seminary. Mission projects like Africa Inter-Mennonite Missions. Joint Sunday School curriculum. Etc.

And in the waning decades of the twentieth century some started proposing that two of the main bodies which held very similar abstract beliefs—the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church—consider merging. It was considered. At length. And despite some fairly different histories and cultures, it happened, with approval for the process to proceed being cast at separate conventions occurring simultaneously in Wichita in 1995, with actual merger happening in 2001.

And then we tried to live together. In some places that's worked fairly well: Central Plains Mennonite Conference is sometimes held out as a model where two area conferences (the former Northern District of the GCMC and Iowa/Nebraska Conference of the MC) merged and have managed to live together with some degree of effectiveness. Having been up there through all that process Rosie and I can each testify that it certainly hasn't been perfect, and there have been some significant problems. But some success as well. I think it fair to say people own their new identity by now. In other places—including around here—folks like WDC and SC considered merging and decided, nope, ain't gonna happen. And so we have overlapping area conferences purportedly sharing the same vision… but going about it in slightly different ways.

Beyond that, merger brought downsizing… which perhaps resulted in enhanced efficiency, but also lost jobs, and lost access to centers of power, and lost prestige, and lost… well, *lots* of sense of loss. We used to have lots of floor debate at General Conference assemblies: every last (?-nitwit-?) could get up and spew off for 90 seconds. And then you'd have a definitive vote… and stuff it down those loser's throats with yer 53% majority! Ah, wasn't it grand![[2]](#footnote-2) These days there doesn't seem to hardly be any real debate, and votes about anything substantive seem rare, too. But if you talk to folks from former MC congregations and conferences, *they* aren't real happy, either. Most everyone feels like they've been forced to do things in somewhat new ways in this concoction called Mennonite Church USA, ways which don't feel… well, quite right. The way things are being done often just seems sorta murky.

And then there's all the sexuality stuff. Although I said just a few minutes ago that we'd wait for some months to discuss it in more depth, it's certainly been part of the mix. Pastors have led same-sex covenanting ceremonies… or even marriages. Individuals who clearly identify themselves as gay or lesbian have been put forward for credentialing. And although area conferences have *done* things in response (including here in Western District)… they've clearly done *different* things, sometimes almost instantly withdrawing credentials or firing individuals, sometimes a more muted response, sometimes essentially saying "that's fine with us." And those corporate responses have led to more confusion, and more upset feelings… on just about every side. How are we doing things around here? How *should* we be doing things around here? What's our polity, anyway?

**II. Polity Primer[[3]](#footnote-3)**

**A. Introductory *Exercise***

So just what *is* "polity"? Pretty obviously it's *not* a word most of us use every day. Any of us. Not even me. And yet there *are* ways we *use* polity pretty often, almost every week if not every day, without really being aware of it, even if we don't use that word to describe it.

Let's do a little exercise to demonstrate. Tomorrow the Governing Council meets. Now—this isn't on the agenda, and it's not going to happen… *it's not real!!!*, be real clear about that. But suppose our church treasurer, Jeremy, came to council tomorrow night, and announced that henceforth he'd be taking our Sunday offerings and "investing" them at the KS Star Casino down at Mulvane each Sunday evening, trying to double our money, make it possible to do more good things. OK, remember what I said? *This isn't real!!! It's not what Jeremy's doing!!!* But for the purpose of an exercise, I want you to turn to 2 or 3 people next to you and talk for about 3 minutes about what our response as individual members and a congregation as a whole might be if Jeremy would in fact propose this—how would the rest of us respond? Specifically, what people would get involved, what structures would be involved, what policies would be invoked. Note well: I don't want to hear *any* discussion about gambling, or about Jeremy's character, or about whether the bottom line of the last financial report was up or down. Talk about the people, structures, and policies you'd turn to in order to address this *completely hypothetical situation*.

So… what did you come up with?

Did everyone say the same things? In the same order? Did we all mention the same people, structures and policies? …

It sounds like there was *some* convergence, but some difference as well. Folks, what we were just talking about was polity. A very simple definition is, "The way we do things around here." And we all have some perspectives on that, and some of them are the same, and some differ, and it's not always real easy to say which is the best, much less the right, way.

**B. Basic Definition**

Some generic commentary on "polity." The word comes from a Greek word, "polis"… which refers to a city/town… or more generically to the people in a particular location who identify together. It's where we get English words like "politics" and "police"… but also words like "policy" and "polite" (how we properly act). It has to do with citizenship and governance structures: how people with a common identity are called to behave, act, function for the good of the whole.

It boils down to the mutually understood and agreed upon (whether formally or informally) "way we do things around here." So how *do* we do things in the church, and specifically in the Mennonite Church USA and its constituent area conferences?

**C. Models**

Within Christendom at large there's an enormous multiplicity of approaches, but analysts and historians have often grouped or clustered them into 3 basic models (none of them being "pure"): Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational

Episcopal Model

Decisions are made by one person or very few people and are passed down to the rest of the community.

Presbyterian Model

Extensive consultation between members of the congregation and those who have a leadership role in the denomination.

Congregational Model

Decisions are made by the whole community meeting to discern together, or by as many as choose to be involved.

Each of these models has both strengths and weaknesses. There's a natural tendency to compare the best of our preferred model with the worst of the others… or, conversely, if or when we're feeling cynical about how things are going in our model, we're then tempted to compare the best of other models to the worst of ours. The reality is that when things are going well in a system, with the right people in the right position doing the right things, most any structure will work. We'll do things, and things will get done, regardless of the structure. Still, structure matters, and can help things get done smoother, with less sand in the gears.

**1. Strengths of Each Model**

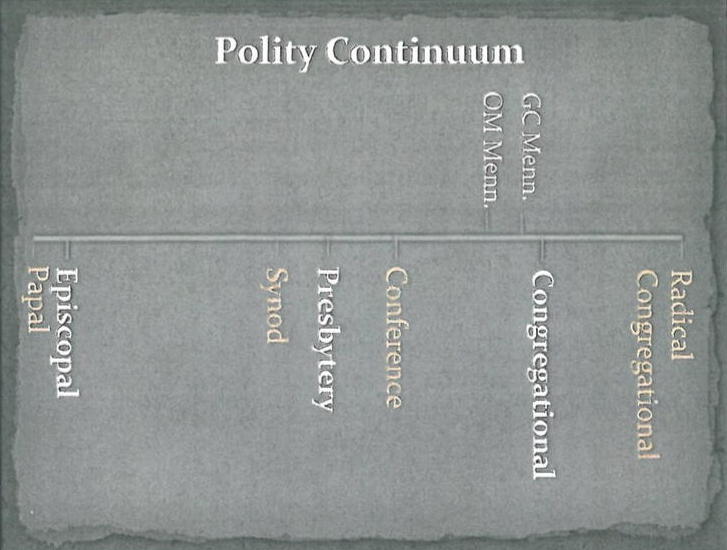
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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Episcopal** | **Presbyterian** | **Congregational** |
| • clear and decisive  • allows gifted leaders to exercise their gifts  • embodies trust in those chosen to lead  • quick decisions  • releases others for other things | • strong on consultation and ownership  • recognizes that different decisions may be required for different situations and communities | • allows everyone to participate in decision-making, and thus…  • allows everyone have "ownership" in the organization |

**2. Weakness of Each Model**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Episcopal | Presbyterian | Congregational |
| • high expectations on leaders  • susceptible to abuse by unscrupulous or insecure leaders  • draws on experiences/ insights of a limited group  • the community may not "own" the decision | • prone to becoming bureaucratic and cumbersome  • can be disempowering to the local context | • connections with other churches are limited  • limited binding influence from the "outside"  • so limited checks & balances  • forceful individuals can hijack the group away from God's intent |

**3. Continuum of Models**

So: how's this apply to our "experience of church"? It's possible to create a polity continuum from centralized to decentralized structures and processes:



Now, in our memories of our former denominations, we tend to spend a fair amount of time contrasting "the way we used to do things" with "the way we do things now"… or, are at least trying to do them. And taken out of the context of larger church polity, we can start making—or, at least, feeling like—the former MC and GC groups are the extreme poles of the continuum, when in fact they're very close to one another in the broader scheme of things. Beyond that, we're not above comparing the best of one with the worst of another, often relying upon folk history and anecdotes that don't accurately represent the whole (e.g., Lancaster = all MC experience; or …)

In retrospect, despite a fair bit of careful planning, the merger that created Mennonite Church USA wasn't fully prepared for some realities that have now been experienced:

• losses of power when two unevenly sized bodies merge

• shifts in geographical influence of "power centers"

• focus on what's preserved/lost from what we'd been familiar with ("the way we used to do things")

And so we end up attending to what is not / no longer… and never get around to what is now / could be.

Why the focus on polity now? Societal complexity has increased; our internal diversity has increased. The need to be explicit about who we are and how we do things increases proportionally.

As I've noted before, revised/improved polity isn't going to "save us" in any way. Even the best processes/structures won't help if we have low trust and bad relationships. Conversely, groups can survive (sometimes even thrive) deeply flawed structures and inconsistent processes if relationships are strong and the level of trust is high.

**D. Foundational Documents for Polity**

What constitutes polity? Generally shared understandings that are spelled out—the way we all agree that we do things around here… or hope to, or should at least try to. And that means documents.

Over the last 15 years several key documents have emerged which have significant impact upon how we do things as a gathered community of faith. In the last several years they've started to be called "foundational documents." Beyond a few legal papers—things like articles of incorporation and 501(c)3 declarations and bylaws—that have to be filed with the government, 5 have floated to the top:

**1. Vision:** the brief *Vision: Healing and Hope* statement, which was first adopted at the joint 1995 conferences just prior to formal merger: "God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world" (with a few more sentences of application). The document which seeks to put this vision into practice is known the *Purposeful Plan*.

**2. Belief:** the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (which Rosie and I very cursorily preached about, and we looked at in a bit more depth in Wed. eve Bible studies, a year ago). There are several ways it can be considered, from a brief reading about a page-long theoretically recitable by a group in worship, to the collection of summary statements of the articles (above 5 pages long), to the full Confession with application of each summary statement, scriptural citations and commentary, making up a volume that's about 110 pages long. Initial work on this document started in the early 1980s, drafts were tested and revised over the next decade; it was also adopted at that joint 1995 convention.

**3. Process:** a statement on "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love" which was adopted at the same 1995 gathering, noting our shared commitments in times of disagreements, suggesting how we might best communicate and process matters when we don't have full unity. It's a fine document, everyone pretty well agrees on that; the problem is living it out, which is considerably harder.

**4. Structure:** a some-what less well-known document referred to as "Membership Guidelines" for the formation of the Mennonite Church USA, which was approved by the delegates at the 2001 assembly in Nashville and basically describes how congregations and area conferences come together to make up a denomination: what we covenant with each other, are accountable to each other, and live together with through a mix of unity and diversity. Much of the four pages deal with the fine points of decision-making, authority, and understandings of membership. The last page goes a different direction, spelling out in detail certain understandings pertaining to sexuality. Two sentences—which have been the core of considerable controversy since— specify that "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." My understanding is that this entire section was included in the Membership Guidelines to— I guess the term is— placate the Lancaster Conference and convince them to join MC USA as a full constituent conference. This "Membership Guidelines" document was re-distributed as an "administrative update" to the MC USA delegate assembly last summer (2013) in Phoenix.

**5. Leadership:**

**a.** Finally, a document formerly known *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, which most lay members of the Mennonite church are probably barely aware of—it largely spells out how credentialed leaders (pastors, missionaries, etc.) are called out, examined, credentialed; what authority they have, what are the ethical standards to which they should abide and to which they are held accountable. Interestingly, as best I can tell, this document was never voted on by the full delegate body of the Mennonite Church USA (or its predecessor entities); it was tested and reviewed by various gatherings of conference ministers, and "approved" approved by the general boards of both the MC and GCMC churches just prior to the merger of our denominations.

**b.** In view of various developments in various directions, it was revised over the last couple years, with a new version released about 6 months ago under the title *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership: Polity Manual for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. Working Document*. But its release has provoked even more discussion: Does it simply become "official" because some leaders in hierarchy cooked it up, and an Executive Board approved it? Essentially all the other "foundational documents" were voted on, affirmed by representatives of the full constituency… delegates to an assembly, in other words. Shouldn't they do that for this as well? But that would mean it might need to be debated… and might end up being amended. But it's a document that's already published, and was developed in collaboration with *another* denomination (Mennonite Church Canada), so it's difficult to alter it… oh, it's sort of a mess right now.

**6. Chart/diagram** of how MCUSA "fits together" [*displayed in presentation*][[4]](#footnote-4)

**III. History / Calendar of Events[[5]](#footnote-5)**

Let me quickly sketch a sort of calendar of events swirling in our broader church and our area conference that have brought us to today.

?– June, 2014: I noted above the swirl of polity problems that cropped over the last 14 years, whether arising out of structure, or sexuality agenda or whatever. To focus on the last 9 months:

June 2014: The MCUSA Executive Board approved 8 recommendations they hoped would help us find unity in the midst of diversity across the church in a time of polarization and disagreement, especially during this current year. I'm going to quickly review them, because they've set the direction for a lot that follows:

1) We're rooted in scripture; and our foundational documents guide us;

2) Mountain States Menn. Conference is called to renew its commitment to these foundations, and their relational covenant with other area conferences;

3) MCUSA will not recognize MSMC's licensing of Theda Good unless the MCUSA delegate assembly changes its current stated polity re same-sex marriage;

4) MSMC is asked not to ordain Theda Good unless the MCUSA delegate assembly changes its current stated polity re same-sex marriage;

5) MCUSA will not recognize credentialing of same-sex individuals, and requests that no area conference credential such persons unless the MCUSA delegate assembly changes its current stated polity re same-sex marriage;

6) Study resources re sexuality will be recommended;

7) MCUSA will develop new processes (and explore new possible structural models) that will pursue healthier ways to promote our unity in Christ in the midst of diversity;

8) Credentialed leaders will be surveyed in order to better discern our common commitments; the next biennial assembly (July 2015) could include articulating a covenant that best expresses the commitment between and among the denomination and area conferences.

July 2014: Rainbow Mennonite Church (KS) submitted a resolution to Western District Conference, essentially requesting that individual congregations be allowed to discern how homosexuality will be subject to Biblical interpretation, and furthermore, that pastors with the affirmation of their congregations may officiate (or refuse to officiate) ceremonies that unite individuals regardless of sexual orientation without fear of censure.

WDC recommended congregations consider this resolution prior to acting upon it at the next (2015) area conference assembly.

August 2014: A month of surveys. The Western District invited *all* members to respond to a survey addressing both implications of polity and sexuality; many found it somewhat confusing. Essentially simultaneously, MCUSA surveyed credentialed leaders about similar issues (although not exactly the same), including asking for response to possible alternative organizational arrangements for the denomination. In addition, MCUSA asked that WDC defer acting upon its pending resolution from Rainbow Church until after the July 2015 MCUSA assembly. In response, WDC rescheduled its 2015 gathering for fall.

September-November 2014: There was strong response to both of the surveys (well over 50%); they were compiled and analyzed. Certain groups (Executive Board, Constituency Leaders Council, Conference Ministers gathering) received preliminary responses of the MCUSA survey.

October 2014: A list of Biblical and theological resources on sexual and gender identity was distributed by MCUSA, representing a variety of perspectives. At Zion we started gathering some of these we didn't already have.

Late November 2014: WDC held its fall "Reference Council," a fair bit of what I'm presenting today is a summary of that meeting, offering historical background, perspective on current developments within both the area conference and denomination, and discussion of alternative polity approaches… especially differing expressions of congregationalism (which we'll spend a bit more time with in a few minutes).

At this gathering the "results" of the WDC survey were also shared. The full report is a *lengthy* document, nearly 50 pages… but it can be summed up quite concisely: we're an area conference with a lot of variety of perspective, much of it quite strongly held.

To wit: Conservatives who'd hoped to find that it was only a handful of hotheads stirring things up were perhaps distressed to find that there were quite a large number of folks who believed "that other way." Liberals who'd hoped to hear that they carried the day in a landslide were perhaps distressed to find that that wasn't the case. There's simply much diversity in many areas. We're split enough that simply putting things to a flat vote isn't going to solve much.

December 2014: The MCUSA survey of credentialed leaders, analyzed by Conrad Kanagy, was released… another lengthy, detailed report. Guess what? We're a denomination in which the leaders demonstrate a wide of variety of perspective, much of it quite strongly held.

February 2015: After hearing from an ad hoc committee on structure that their interpretation of the Kanagy survey was that no structural change existed that would resolve the current tensions within MCUSA, the Executive Board decided that they would recommend no changes—that the eight guidelines they had established in June 2014 continue, e.g., that the Membership Guidelines continue to serve as the foundational denominational document that guides the work of MCUSA and that any area conference that credentials persons in same-sex relationships would continue to be found at variance… unless the Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly changes the stated policy on same-sex relationships.

In addition, the Executive Board determined have another survey, this time of all *delegates* that register for KC 2015, to test whether they approve of this "holding the course" approach.

In addition, the EB approved the revised ministerial polity handbook (The *Shared Understanding of Church Leadership*) for current implementation as a "working document," but also recommended it to MCUSA delegates for study over the next two years, allowing initial feedback this summer, with the prospect that it might be revised (in consultation with Mennonite Church Canada) at the *subsequent* biennial assembly in 2017.

In addition, the EB met with representatives from various groups seeking renewal and revival within MCUSA, as well as from a new network of churches that is forming, composed largely of congregations who have left or are considering leaving Mennonite Church USA.

February-March 2015: A survey is being placed before appointed delegates of KC 2015 (Sharon Regier and myself, at Zion).

March 27, 2015: KC delegates (and others interested) will meet with Ervin Stutzman in Newton area to share his vision for the future of Mennonite Church USA; provide a guide outlining delegates' responsibilities; explain how the results from the delegate survey (will?) shape agenda; distribute an agenda for the delegate sessions, and note the specific decisions which delegates will be invited to make; provide handouts delegates can use in congregational study groups; and have some time of feedback and discussion.

April 11, 2l915: WDC spring Reference council, Hope Menn. Ch. (Wichita): hear the latest developments from Mennonite Church USA and continue our ongoing discernment regarding the resolution from Rainbow Menn. Ch. that will come before the Western District delegate assembly in October.

March-June 2015: … will there be resolutions? A CLC/EB meeting later in spring will consider the delegate survey and any resolutions submitted from other groups and…

**IV. Specific Polity Agenda: Rubs and Delights**

**A. Nov. 2014 WDC Reference Council[[6]](#footnote-6)**

Last November's Western District Conference Reference Council shared the results of the summer survey of all WDC members who chose to participate (described above), as well as offered historical background, perspective on current developments within both the area conference and denomination, and discussion of alternative polity approaches… especially differing expressions of congregationalism. We'll recap some of those, as they set the stage for further discernment…

**1. Approaches to Congregationalism**

“As our discernment moves forward the first question appears to be not whether WDC will maintain a basic polity of congregationalism, but rather what kind of congregationalism it will be,” said Jim Schrag, WDC’s Discernment Task Force chair in his opening remarks.

Top 5 Strengths of Congregationalism

1. The more local the decision-making body, the more likely the decision "fits" the congregation.

2. Diversity among congregations is to be preferred rather than any kind of imposed uniformity.

3. The congregation has more flexibility in responding to God's activity in their setting. This is a more missional posture as it facilitates congruence between the congregation and its community.

4. Congregationalism invites, perhaps requires, the local congregation as the body of Christ, to engage in discussion, study of scripture and other materials, to discern the path of faithfulness to Christ.

5. The accountability congregationalism provides to one another in the congregation has a "flesh and blood" reality in personal relationships.

Top 5 Weaknesses of Congregationalism

1. A congregation by itself often lacks the resources it needs to fully carry out its mission, including, (but not limited to) such tasks as engaging in theological reflection, calling new pastoral leadership or dealing with conflict within the congregation.

2. Congregationalism may allow the abuse of power from local leaders.

3. Congregations lack the wisdom of the whole church, beyond themselves.

4. Congregationalism can lack intellectual and spiritual "checks and balances" producing an insular or myopic view of issues, practices, and understanding of the Gospel.

5. Congregationalism can produce so much variety that commonly-held goals are difficult to agree upon, or carry out among churches, resulting in a lack of "brand" clarity to those outside the conference and denomination.

**2. *Exercise:* Straw Poll**

For the three statements below, indicate to what degree you agree or disagree with each one

using the following choices on a scale of 1 - 10 (circle only one number between 1 - 10):

1. I fully support this statement.

2. I can live with this statement. It's OK with me.

3. I am lukewarm about this statement, but I can go along with it.

4. I think there are major problems with the statement, but I won't oppose it.

5. It may be best not to take the direction of the statement, but I will reluctantly do so if others want to.

6. It may be best to take the direction of the statement, but I will reluctantly refuse to do so even if others want to.

7. I think there are some good things about the statement, but I won't support it.

8. I am lukewarm about opposing this statement, but I still cannot go along with it.

9. I cannot live with this statement. It's not OK with me.

10. I fully oppose this statement.

Statement #1: Each WDC congregation has the unrestricted privilege of local discernment regardless of previous understandings or decisions by the congregation or conference.

Statement #2: The WDC delegate body may ask a congregation to practice consultation (to be defined by the leadership of WDC) when a congregation is making a decision that affects others.

Statement #3: The WDC delegate body may name certain issues about which they do not recognize the privilege of congregations to make decisions on their own.

*What does this look like to us?*

Closing note: The sticky dot exercise at the Nov. 2015 WDC Reference Council revealed that participants favored a congregationalism of relational accountability. “The WDC delegate body may ask a congregation to practice consultation (to be defined by the leadership of WDC) when a congregation is making a decision that affects others.”

**3. Declaration of Hispanic Pastors** regarding Human Sexuality

Included a variety of declarations regarding humanity sexuality, the essence being: “The Bible says sexual relations should be between a man and a woman within the sanctity of marriage. We are concerned that so much time is spent discussing this issue. Our position has not changed.”

But a key declaration addressed polity as well: “Our position about homosexuality has not changed. However, we will respect congregations that perceive homosexuality differently, and we want to be respected in turn.”

[signed by 10 Hispanic pastors]

**B. 2015 MCUSA Delegate Survey[[7]](#footnote-7) and Rainbow Menn. Ch. resolution[[8]](#footnote-8)**

24 questions, 11 of which are demographic. Of the remaining 13, I've selected several key ones…

**1. Your input on selected questions**

[*see separate document; these extracts were handed out, and briefly summarized—congregation members were given a week to offer their own input and return them (if they chose), so that Zion's KC 2015 delegates would have a "sense of the congregation" as they filled out their own survey's for that assembly.*]

**V. Looking Ahead…**

**A. Options / Hypotheses / Prospects**

• As noted above, there may— or may not— be any resolutions addressing these matters at KC 2015 (whether they come from "official" denominational entities or some other group). Hopefully we'll hear more within the next couple months.

• Revisit how denomination is structured overall…

• … a looser association, more of a network, where we work together on projects where we find common ground but not much more? Simply fraternal ties?

• … or tighter connections, more specificity about expectations (e.g., "review" of credentials means "x y z"), spelling out consequences for ministerial committees/area conferences if they choose to do something other than that which stipulated.

• Establish a new system of leadership credentialing and accountability, with perhaps more focus on area conferences, allowing more autonomy.

• But anything looser is much more complex; how do we "recognize" each other (move back and forth). Is there any accountability beyond the area conference? Should there be?

• Revise foundational documents slightly; esp. move key sentences from the Membership Guidelines to the Polity Manual (where they more naturally reside).

• Study/amend polity manual over the next two years (it's already announced this will be happening).

• Address the "over-emphasis" on sexuality, and especially sexual abuses/misconduct/alternative behaviors… more focus on "healthy sexuality" of whatever form;

• Drop connection with Mennonite Church Canada, which adds an extra layer of complexity.

• Many small points (model for ministry draws almost entirely on Jesus with little attention given to Paul or Pauline congregations; what is included in "non-discrimination" clauses; the complexity of recognizing varying "educational tracks" for preparation for ministry; the extent to which misconduct is addressed, offering more attention to other varieties [financial integrity, misuse of power, etc.]; clearer guidance regarding the use of technology/social media; etc.).

• Then, the whole issue of the approval of this revised polity manual (presumably with yet further amendments); how best should it occur, to become a "foundational document"? It would seem that a full delegate vote would be required, not simply approval of CLC/EB.

• Consider revising the key sentences re pastors and homosexuality (*wherever* they reside); the "Eight Recommendations" offered by the Executive Board in June 2014 inferred that this was a possibility… although no path by which it might occur was spelled out.

• Possible revision of *Confession of Faith* overall; it's now *c*.20 years old.

• Some assume that regardless of what happens, some area conferences (certain specific congregations) will continue to withdraw from MCUSA, perhaps in significant numbers if this new "network" thrives. As most of these have tended to be of more conservative perspective (regardless of whether from MC or GC background), what remains will be more at least a bit more "open." But then it would be a smaller group (more staff layoffs, tight finances, reductions in MMN/MPN/etc.)…

**B. Conclusion**

We'll schedule another meeting—or a couple—to talk further about some of these issues, focusing upon especially the sexuality aspects in the future. At present the thought is to schedule this sometime in May or early June (as part of or instead of our summer business meeting? Unknown how much internal agenda we'll have to address). Perhaps another in the aftermath of KC 2015 prior to WDC in October; there may be some new parameters coming out of KC which alter how we'd address the Rainbow resolution at this point.

In any case, I encourage you to continue to follow the church news, to study various of the resources we've gathered pertaining to sexuality, either individually or as small groups. My recommendation is always to read materials which challenge your prevailing perspective; of limited utility to simply go over the points you already hold and with which you agree. Even if you don't change your mind, worthwhile to understand why others view things differently. And pray!

1. We met from app. 9:15—10:40, starting a bit earlier than usual, and utilizing our usual education hour. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Presumably all who hear or read this realize this is sarcasm… [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Much of this section is drawn—with minor adaptation—from Terry Shue's presentation on "Mennonite Polity," offered at WDC's 2013 annual assembly; see <http://mennowdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Terry-Shue-Mennonite-Polity.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Org\_Chart\_of\_MCUSA\_Eng.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Adapted from the "Timeline" posted when Conrad Kanagy's final report of the MCUSA survey of credentialed leaders was released in Jan. 2015; see <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/survey-of-credentialed-leaders/>, expanded with other blogs posted in the *Mennonite*, resources for KC 2015 delegates, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Adapted from handouts/presentations at the Nov. 2014 WDC Reference Council. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Extracted questions from this survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. N.B.: as this particular congregational gathering on polity per se, we chose to adapt Rainbow Menn. Ch.'s resolution to focus specifically on that topic alone. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)