

On Friday, August 19th 3 members of the peer review team met with members of Central District Conference (CDC) leadership. In attendance were:

Lisa Weaver, CDC Board President
Arman Habegger, CDC Board President-elect
Ron Adams, CDC Ministerial Committee Chair
Joel Miller, Pastor at Columbus Mennonite Church and previous CDC Ministerial Committee member
Michael Miller, Human Sexuality & Faithful Relationships Task Force committee member
Mark Rupp, Pastor at Columbus Mennonite Church
Lois Kaufmann, Retired CDC Conference Minister
Doug Luginbill, CDC Conference Minister
Emma Hartman, CDC Administrator
Elizabeth Troyer-Miller, Peer Review Team
Mary Etta King, Peer Review Team
Terry Zehr, Peer Review Team

Overall, the spirit of our "Peer Review" was very good. We initially encountered skepticism from some regarding the peer review process. However, as our time together continued, we were able to have good faith conversations that allowed us to hear the concerns raised by CDC leadership. This was a very personal process of deep sharing by CDC and we thank their leadership for their willingness to participate and their willingness to share openly with us. We listened in love and heard with clarity how CDC came to their decision to give credentials to Mark Rupp.

Our time together began with an introduction to the Peer Review Process, within which were quite a number of specific questions. As a team, we attempted to answer the questions to the best of our ability, while recognizing that this 'Pilot' process is still in formation. It was at this point in the process that members of CDC raised their concern regarding the peer review process itself. We heard a clear call from a few people asking that future peer reviews be abandoned.

We spent time in prayer and reflection on Psalm 105 as a means of centering ourselves. We then turned our attention on the three focus areas that we had asked CDC leadership to respond to. Throughout our conversation we invited further reflection on the written words they had offered as we sought understanding. As we listened, we noticed the common thread that CDC has been on this path for a long time. They spent time praying and seeking God's will together. They have listened to each other, without always agreeing. They continue to keep working on discernment by creating a

document entitled, *Human Sexuality from a Biblical Perspective*, and an accompanying study guide for group discussion and discernment; both are available in Spanish.

According to CDC, since 2003, 5 churches have left CDC and MC USA; 7 have closed; 6 dually-affiliated congregations decided to affiliate only with their non-CDC conference; 5 joined with other MC USA conferences. Also since 2003, 8 congregations have joined CDC. Our impression is that CDC is becoming an affinity conference.

During our time, we had the opportunity to hear directly from Mark Rupp, pastor at Columbus Mennonite Church. He shared from his story of call into ministry, reflecting on the pain that he experienced in the church. We heard that before Mark became open about his sexual orientation he was experiencing both an inner and an outer call into ministry. Once he became true to himself and to those around him about his sexual orientation the church offered a much more complicated recognition of and limited support of his gifts in ministry. This was painful.

We offer the following additions, observations and questions for reflection as the CLC engages and offers input on the way forward. Generally these will be found within the categories we asked CDC to speak into.

FOCUS AREA 1: Seek to understand the context

- General Conference practices, such as congregational autonomy, still informs how Central District Conference (CDC) functions. We know they are not the only Conference still functioning in ways that align with the old MC/GC traditions.
- Demographics tell part of the story, since CDC is increasingly more urban. Even so, urban/progressive isn't the full story. It's more personal than that. Persons in the LGBTQ continuum emerge in all human populations. A move to urban areas may be the result of not feeling safe in other settings. Finding a place of belonging is highly important.
- More traditional congregations have left the Conference over the last number of years.
- There is a tension felt within MC USA as well as CDC that for LGBTQ individuals, change is not happening fast enough and more traditional voices feel as though their voices/concerns are being ignored.
- Some of the leadership within CDC see the review process as punitive, designed to address Conferences who have taken a similar position.
- CDC puts a high value on relationships within their member congregations. Paradoxically, we heard questions that seem to ask 'why does a conference 1,000 miles from here care what we do in CDC?'. It is not clear what

relational accountability means both within their conference or when applied denominationally. Part of this may be reflected in the decision of many traditional congregations to leave CDC.

- The leadership of CDC does not speak in unison; they speak as a chorus. Each carrying similar vision but there are contradictions in the details.

FOCUS AREA 2: Examine the Decision Making Process:

- CDC gathers as a worshipping body to do their work. They use Biblical discernment and seek Spirit guidance as they make their way forward.
- The working document, *Human Sexuality in Biblical Perspective: A Study Guide*, which will be published this fall, involved many people and congregations in its formation. This document will help CDC congregations continue to study and discern.
- They expect that the authentic leading of the Holy Spirit will manifest in the increasing fruits of love, joy, peace, etc. as they discern both the inner and outer call of pastors. There is freedom in watching how congregations grow in the Spirit of Christ.
- In Central District Conference relational accountability is highly valued in sharing stories and confessing sins.
- CDC was willing to defer their actions to license Mark Rupp until after Kansas City, and moved forward with licensing after the Kansas City delegate sessions.
- CDC's decision making process sought input from member congregations through regional meetings.
- CDC sought to be transparent and relational in communicating their decision to congregations/pastors not in support of the final decision.
- The decision making process was communicated to denominational leadership along the way. We understand that while CDC was in communication with denominational leadership, their decision regarding their way forward was made.

FOCUS AREA 3: Impact Reflections

- The metaphor that CDC uses to describe their congregational relationships is that of adult siblings as a polity.
- Though their decision has impacted other congregations and conferences, CDC leadership expressed a perspective that it should not matter what they do. What should matter more is that relationships are maintained.
- The work of CDC to create the study guide for their conference, has the potential of being a resource for other conferences.

- Their process was slow but they sought to allowing space for all. They did not intentionally hurt/harm others.
- CDC believes MCUSA has failed and really hurt LGBTQ members who feel called into ministry, who have felt an outer affirmation to ministry and who have been denied an opportunity live into their call.
- How does this review process impact LGBTQ members within congregations of MCUSA, not just CDC. How are the voices of LGBTQ members being heard?
- When asked what they would request of other conferences:
 - Do not be afraid
 - Help keep the conversation on human sexuality going, but in a wider, more holistic way
 - Can we continue to be listened to?
 - We're following Jesus the best we can.
 - We take responsibility for our decision, but not for the other's reactions.
 - Wait and see. What is the fruit?

Questions/Additional Observations:

- There are two issues on the table, and while they influence each other, they both warrant individual attention:
 - Polity
 - Human sexuality
- The situation we are in as a church is not going to go away, and we need make some serious decisions about our next steps. This particular issue of marriage and supporting in leadership Mennonite Church USA LGBTQ members who are in committed relationships is taking a lot of energy away from other work of the church.
 - We need to decide, can we live in conflict together? This is not an issue that can be solved or will go away. This is an enduring conflict that is value based, theologically based and relationally based.
 - If we can live in conflict together (agree that we can continue on without 100% agreement on these issues), we must be turning our energy to how do we live in conflict with one another?
 - Finally, we need to refocus our attention on how we witness to the power of God in the way that we live in conflict together. The way we handle this situation is observed by others, this is part of our testimony.
- Questions for living in tension:

- What are ways to build trust between denominational leadership and people in the pews?
- Are there ways of implementing regional meetings to connect more people to denominational leadership?
- How do we create space for members from differing perspectives to continue to work together and share their stories of God's faithfulness with one another?
- How do we structure ourselves, how do we handle ourselves in meetings, how do we hold each other accountable in such a way that holds the paradoxical tensions of Psalm 85:10? (Mercy and truth are met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other -ASV)
- Is polarity management a tool to apply to this situation?
 - The Polarity Management™ model and set of principles are a user-friendly way to deal with all polarities in life. Polarities are ongoing, chronic issues that are unavoidable and unsolvable. Attempting to address them with traditional problem solving skills only makes things worse.
- How does the fact the MC/GC divide is still alive (and seems to be one of the primary lenses that people view this conflict) impact the way we approach peer reviews and decision making on this (and other) issues?
- Can we trust that God is leading all of us?
 - Our lack of trust that God can be leading people who have different perspectives on this issue seems to demonstrate our humanity and lack of ability to see the whole of what God is doing in the world.
 - Can we believe that God can call and lead someone into ministry who is LGBTQ?
- Knowing that a review process will likely not change the decisions of any particular conference, how can they be used for strengthening relationships, encouraging mutual reflection and learning together?
 - Or do review processes fuel the flames of our disagreements with each other?
 - How should they be structured?
- Do we need to spend time pondering relationship emphasis over agreement?
 - It seems that for some relationship emphasis is refreshing, for others it is alienating.
- We need to spend more time sharing with each other our stories and the ways God is acting and moving in our lives and our conferences.
 - Hearing Mark's call into ministry was very powerful, this changed us.

Mercy and truth are met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other
Psalm 85:10