

Peer Review Report  
CLC Meetings  
Oct 17, 2016  
Doug Luginbill, Lisa Weaver, Arman Habegger, Ron Adams

## I. **Intro: Arman**

Peaceful greetings to all of you in the name of Christ. My name is Arman Habegger, and I currently serve as the President-Elect of the Central District Conference Board. Our report this afternoon will have three sections. First, Lisa Weaver, President of our Board, will describe who we are as Central District, our polity and structure. Next, Ron Adams, Chair of the Ministerial Committee, will describe the credentialing process within Central District. Finally, our new Conference Minister, Doug Luginbill, will offer some reflections on the Peer Review process and his first two months with Central District. Along the way, I will share brief glimpses of the breadth and depth of Central District congregations. Many of these stories were offered by various members of our Leadership Council when we convened a couple weeks ago for our semi-annual board meetings. Our Central District biennial theme is “*Abounding in love. . . abiding in grace*”, and so many of these brief descriptions are in response to the question: “*How is your congregation abounding in love?*” Here are two such stories, as examples:

Story 1: Eighth Street Mennonite in Goshen, Indiana, is neighbor to an elementary school in which about 70 percent of the students are on free or reduced lunch cost. For a number of years the congregation has been providing food for the children to take with them on Friday afternoons so they have good, nutritious food for the weekend.

Story 2: Florence Church of the Brethren-Mennonite, Three Rivers, Michigan, spent the summer months getting to know their watershed -- including geography, ecologies, and history. They learned about First Nations peoples, how the Underground Railroad was established in that vicinity, land and water use, how Mennonites and Brethren settled in the area, and identified other life forms with whom they share an ecology.

[Lisa will now continue with our report.](#)

## **II. Polity / Structure of CDC: Lisa**

Good afternoon. As Arman explained, in this first section of the report, I will briefly describe our conference polity, and the mechanisms in place for relationship building, information sharing, and decision making.

Central District currently lists 39 member-congregations, with the largest geographic concentration of churches in Indiana, Illinois and Ohio. However, we do have several congregations located at some distance from this center, including Covenant Mennonite in Sarasota, Florida, Atlanta Mennonite in Georgia, Shalom Mennonite Congregation, Harrisonburg, VA and St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship in Minnesota. A significant number of our congregations are in urban locations, and also a significant number of our congregations are dually-affiliated, belonging to another area conference as well. Of our 47 credentialed pastors (as of August 2016), 19 are women and 28 are men. We have one full-time Conference Minister, and one full-time Administrator.

Our Central District Conference polity statement, written by a task force and approved by the Conference Board in 1999, states that: *Conference is congregations working together, it is not a separate body over congregations.*

Beginning under the heading: WHY WE NEED AND WANT TO BE A CONFERENCE, the text is as follows: *Conference for the congregations in Central District is something like a family of adult sisters and brothers. We love each other and are concerned about each other. We want to help each other but we do not feel a need to control each other. We share a common faith heritage and commitment, as well as a desire for common mission. Being together helps us strengthen those commitments, continue discovering God in significant ways, and define what it means for our walk as Jesus' disciples and Anabaptist Mennonites today.*

*Although our conference is part of what church is and does, it is not analogous to or a substitute for our congregations. It is in our congregations that we commit ourselves to participation as members of the body of Christ, a commitment which encompasses our total lives.*

In the same document, under THE CONFERENCE ROLE IN PASTORAL LEADERSHIP are these words: *We consider the role of conference in the selection and credentialing of pastoral leadership to be very important. Our conference ministers and Ministerial Committee play a vital role in the call, credentialing, and ongoing accountability (and discipline, when necessary) of pastoral leadership. We recognize the heavy responsibility this places upon the Ministerial Committee and conference ministers.*

Finally, the CONCLUSION of the polity statement says: *Every person in Central District Conference is called upon to actively seek God's will, to listen to the Holy Spirit, and to share what we have heard with our brothers and sisters in our congregations and the wider conference. In Central District we are not passive followers. We are all called and invited to take responsibility, together with our sisters and brothers, to seek God's will on what it means concretely for us to be disciples of Jesus today.*

It therefore follows, when a conference has a polity such as this, that members of the conference need ample opportunity to access information, and time to come together for relationship building, information sharing and decision making throughout the year. This takes many different forms, but includes the following:

- Regular meetings of the Board, the Ministerial Committee, the Missional Church Committee, the Gifts Discernment Committee, and the Stewardship Committee
- Regular pastor-peer group meetings

- Fall and spring Leadership Council meetings
- Regional Gatherings - which are days of fellowship, worship and learning held in three different locations in early spring, and
- An Annual Meeting held every June, which includes three days of workshops, delegate sessions and worship

At times, task forces are appointed to explore specific topics and create resources as requested. The task force which created the polity statement is one such example. Reign of God grants, given by the Missional Church committee, encourage the deepening of congregational relationships creation of new channels of communication within Central District by requiring that two or more congregations *together* need to develop a project or venture to apply for the funds.

A general answer as to how Central District reached a decision to license Mark Rupp, an individual who identifies as LGBTQ, would be this: When the request for licensing came to the Ministerial Committee, that Committee accessed paths and called-upon relationships already established within Central District to process a decision that would take Central District into new territory. In other words, the Ministerial Committee worked at its own discernment, but also brought the question to the Board for discussion and participated as well in a joint gathering of the Board, Ministerial Committee, Missional Church Committee and staff members (totaling around 25 people). The Ministerial Committee wrote a statement of *Theological Foundations for Credentialing* that was available for discussion at this broader committee level, for discussion within Central District congregations, and for any individuals or entities outside of Central District.

As part of conference-wide information sharing, relationship building and discussion, the Board appointed a Human Sexuality and Faithful Relationships task force. The work of this committee resulted in materials (first the original document, and later, a re-shaped Study Guide)

that, along with the Ministerial Committee document, were used for workshops and discussion at two rounds of Regional Gatherings and Annual Meetings. Neither the original document nor the Study Guide was ever intended to be a resolution upon which a vote was cast; rather, the two documents were -- and are -- intended to be conversation starters and study material for individuals, small groups or congregations. We are aware that not every congregation in Central District, and not every individual within the congregations of Central District, reaches the same conclusions. We do not seek uniformity of thought; rather, we invite conversations in which members can give and receive counsel, and in which members are treated with compassion and respect.

Finally, I want to share segments of a resolution that Central District delegates passed in June of 2014:

*As Mennonite disciples, we believe we have been called by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live in unity. We believe that our unity is in Christ, brought about through his life, death and resurrection. We believe that God has promised that all things will be gathered into Christ Jesus, and that God is at work in the church to bring that promise to fruition.*

*We believe that Christian unity is not ours to create, but is a gift from God already given. We are aware that we often lack faith in that promised and already-given unity. We are aware of our human tendency instead to seek uniformity of belief and practice through the setting of boundaries and the creation of rules. We are aware that this tendency is most evident in times of disagreement and stress. We are aware that we are currently living in such times.*

*It is our hope that we will continue to grow in faith, and so learn how to inhabit the unity that is ours in Christ Jesus. It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit will be poured out on our congregations, conferences and denomination, making that growth possible. We pray that we will love one another as Christ loved us, and that we will be known to the world by that love.*

Here are two more descriptions of Central District congregations, highlighting projects on which they worked:

Story 3: Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship (OH) hosts a biennial Mennonite Arts Weekend, a congregational effort that is an extension of that outreach focusing on welcoming artists near and far, and nurturing the artist within each one of us.

Story 4: Silverwood Mennonite of Goshen, Indiana participates in Interfaith Hospitality Network, an ecumenical organization that provides shelter for families without permanent residences. Silverwood also has a sister congregation in Congo.

### **III. The Credentialing Process (Ron)**

My name is Ron Adams. I'm pastor of Madison Mennonite Church, and am here today because I serve as the chair of Central District's Ministerial Committee. I'll walk you through the process we followed that resulted in the decision to license Mark Rupp to serve as a pastor at Columbus Mennonite Church.

Seeking a Pastor of Christian Formation, the Columbus Mennonite Search Committee learned of interest in the role on the part of Mark Rupp, a member of the congregation who was attending a Methodist seminary. Mark completed an MLI and it was submitted to the Columbus Mennonite search committee. The committee reviewed Mark's MLI and references, and then invited him to meet with them.

After their meeting with Mark, search committee members noted how well his gifts matched what they were looking for. Columbus Mennonite's Leadership Team began planning a process to determine whether the congregation's welcome to LGBTQ persons included calling them into ministry roles. In June 2014 the congregation affirmed its willingness to consider an LGBTQ candidate to fill the role. In July, Mark Rupp candidated and, after a near unanimous vote, the congregation called him to serve as their Pastor of Christian Formation.

At that point, the CDC Ministerial Committee entered the process. According to our committee's job description, the CDC Ministerial Committee "shall counsel with congregations seeking pastoral leadership with pastors called to serve congregations in the District. In cooperation with congregations they shall examine candidates for pastoral, chaplaincy, and missionary service, grant licenses, and perform ordinations and assist in a service marking the beginning of a person's ministry."

I point this out to highlight the fact that we on the committee understand our work as being in response to the call given to a candidate from a congregation. That call is two-fold: the call from the congregation to the candidate to come and serve among them, and, the call from the congregation to the Ministerial Committee to examine their called candidate for credentialing within CDC. So, when Columbus Mennonite made the decision to call Mark Rupp to pastoral ministry, and then called us to examine him for a ministerial credential, we responded according to our role within the Conference.

In preparing for and interviewing Mark Rupp, the Ministerial Committee followed our normal pattern of prayerfully reading the MLI and reflecting on the written responses through the lens of the MC USA Six Core Competencies (Biblical story, Anabaptist/Mennonite distinctives, Christian spirituality/discipleship, self-awareness/emotional intelligence, contextual awareness, and Leadership) as we prepared questions in advance. The interview began, as usual, with a prayer for the Spirit's guidance and ended with a prayer of blessing for Mark.

After the interview, the committee wrestled with the challenge of the situation: a person with

strong pastoral leadership gifts and a clear sense of call to ministry in response to God's work in his life, and the denominational restriction against credentialing for LGBTQs. The dilemma led the committee to re-affirm its primary task, which is to "examine candidates" for ministry assignments, assessing both an inner and outer call, as well as the core competencies established by MC USA. The strength of that assessment and the Spirit's nudging toward readiness to test a new more inclusive direction, led the committee to recommend Mark Rupp's licensing toward ordination. This recommendation included the assignment of a pastoral mentor, and mandated that Mark fulfill an educational requirement in Anabaptist history and theology.

In recognition that a decision to license Mark Rupp would likely cause MC USA's Executive Board to consider us to be 'at variance', the committee invited the CDC Board to join in our discernment, since they hold primary responsibility for our mutual accountability within MC USA. Which meant that every step in our process was taken under consideration and prompted much discussion between the CDC Board and Ministerial Committee. And we worked hard to do our work as transparently as possible within the bounds of committee and Board confidentiality.

That transparency included communications from our Conference Minister to the pastors and congregations of CDC, other Conference Ministers across the denomination, Nancy Kauffmann in the denominational office, the Executive Board of MC USA, and this body. Many of those communications have been made available to you. In addition, counsel was requested of all of the above. Our hope was not to single Mark out for special scrutiny, but rather invite counsel regarding our decision as a committee to proceed with Mark's credentialing.

Mark was installed at Columbus Mennonite Church in September of 2014. However, out of respect for a plea from MC USA's Executive Board, we decided to withhold Mark's license for ministry until after the 2015 MC USA Convention in Kansas City. Mark's licensing ceremony took place on July 26, 2015.



Since then, Pastor Mark Rupp has served Columbus Mennonite Church well. His calling and gifts for ministry have been affirmed by his congregation, and they have benefitted from his presence and work among them. He has done the same within CDC, serving as one of the preachers at our annual meeting this past June. In our estimation Pastor Rupp is as well-qualified for ministerial credentials as any other credentialed leader within our conference.

In closing, I'd like to highlight two documents. The first is in your materials (document #4) and is called CDC Ministerial Committee Theological Foundations for Credentialing. This document is the result of continued discussion and discernment on the part of the Ministerial Committee following the decision to credential Mark Rupp. It began at the October 2014, CDC Leadership Council meeting at Camp Friedenswald. Over the next 14 days, 33 email exchanges, and five drafts, we arrived at the draft document you have before you. It is an accurate reflection of our discernment going back to June 2014, when we were first approached by Columbus Mennonite to credential Mark Rupp, a gay man whom they believed was led to them by the Holy Spirit. It was later made available to all CDC pastors and congregations, and served as a discussion piece at regional meetings in 2015. The essence of the document is to make clear our intention as a Ministerial Committee to fulfill the mandate of our job description by using the same process of discernment and examination with every candidate brought to us by a CDC congregation for credentialing.

And the second is the study guide on human sexuality already mentioned by Lisa Weaver in her part of this report. That document reflects our desire to keep discerning and walking together as a conference, listening together for the voice of the Spirit as we seek to be faithful in responding to the many questions before us.

[Here are two brief descriptions of Reign of God grants, which are awarded when two Central District congregations work together on a venture:](#)

Story 5: Hively Avenue Mennonite and Southside Fellowship (both in Elkhart, Indiana) used a “Reign of God” grant to enable some members of both congregations to participate in a week-long, 75 mile trek through the desert in southwest Arizona, to identify with the migrants who make this journey seeking to leave life in Central America for improved life in the United States. The trip provides transformative power of personal exposure and experience.

Story 6: Madison Mennonite Church and Milwaukee Mennonite Fellowship, both of Wisconsin, together received a “Reign of God” grant to focus on celebrating our MC USA denominational periodical, *The Mennonite*. The congregations have invited Hannah Heinzekehr, Executive Director of *The Mennonite*, to visit for a weekend in April, to raise awareness of *The Mennonite* within their faith communities.

#### **IV. Reflections of a new Conference Minister (Doug)**

So, on August 15, two months ago on a Monday, I started as Conference Minister. On August 19 (Friday of that same week), I participated in the Pilot Peer Review. I considered the Pilot Peer Review a continuation of my orientation. I understood my role to be that of listener and learner. On one hand, what better way to learn about the context and process of decision-making in the Central District Conference than by hearing first-hand, a case study. On the other hand, I recognized that certain stories become “case-studies” because these stories are often difficult, painful, unusual and offer opportunities for learning.

Throughout our four hours together, the three members of the Peer Review Team and the nine members of the Central District Conference worshipped together, laughed, cried, reflected, disagreed, engaged and prayed. From the perspective of someone new, I saw the church of Jesus Christ at work. What I found most helpful and, at the same time, most uncomfortable was that we were talking not only about theology and polity. We were talking about a specific individual's call to ministry and his moral fitness to share his gifts in ministry; and he was in the room with us. I'm grateful he had the courage to be in the room with us. But,

what felt like a fairly upbeat, warm and positive experience to most of us, felt rather awkward and uncomfortable, bordering on moral judgment, to Pastor Mark Rupp.

I do want to express my gratitude to the Peer Review Team for making space for Mark as well as a member of our Human Sexuality Task Group who also identifies as gay. At our Annual Meeting in Columbus in June, there was expressed a strong desire that there be representation from the LGBTQ community at the Peer Review. It was a gift to be able to talk with rather than about the individual whose licensing decision was being reviewed.

I also want to acknowledge that there has been pain and loss all along this journey for Central District Conference. Like most (likely all) of us in this room, the decisions made and the decisions not made regarding human sexuality in the church have created division, dissent, exodus and realignment. For various reasons over the years, congregations have chosen other affiliations. Since 2003, five CDC churches left MC USA. Six dually affiliated congregations decided to affiliate only with one conference and chose a non-CDC conference. Five CDC-only congregations joined other MC USA conferences. We have not been unified in the trajectory we are taking. We have experienced pain and loss along the way. But we have also given freedom to and blessed these congregations as they chose other affiliations.

We have also experienced a strong sense of God's leading us in our discernment. Knowing that theology shapes polity and polity shapes theology, we are seeking to live faithfully into both our tradition and into a new season of God's church in faithfulness. For some, our trajectory is a sign of faithfulness. For others it is a symbol of failure. It is not our place to help others decide which path it seems to be. It is our desire and our place to invite others to watch the journey we are on and share with us what you observe. We hope we have enough grace and humility to receive your observations; both what seems faithful and what feels unfaithful.

What gives us considerable hope in this new season is that we believe CDC is moving beyond the polarizing debates and painful discourses that have been with us all for over 30

years. We hear friends on both poles lamenting the energy, time and pain this continued discernment has drained from us and our churches. We all wonder what the church might become if and when our conversations ring more loudly with Isaiah's and Christ's invitation to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, offer sight to the blind and set the oppressed free. This long discernment has afforded congregational membership to LGBTQ persons in many MC USA congregations. This has felt like good news and justice to many.

You have been hearing some of the stories that demonstrate how our congregations are fulfilling our biennial theme "Abounding in Love...Abiding in Grace." Many are finding creative ways to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, heal the sick, proclaim good news and visit the prisoner. It is these stories that bring joy and energize our leadership meetings, regional gatherings and annual meetings.

We recognize that discernment is not over; not for CDC or MC USA. We know that we continue to have much to learn from one another. We acknowledge that realignments are happening again and again throughout the denomination. We lament the pain that may yet come. We confess as sin our desire to listen only to voices that sound like ours.

We also desire relationships built on trust and a mutual recognition that we all are seeking to be faithful to our God. We desire the love we find in Christ Jesus, our Lord, who welcomed the stranger and gave us the new commandment to love one another. We desire an anointing of the Holy Spirit as we are empowered to live faithfully in the world today.

Whenever an individual, a small group, a congregation, a conference or a denomination embark on a path that is "at variance" with the dominant trajectory, the one who is "at variance" can appear arrogant or give the impression that it doesn't matter what actions are taken by the "variant" individual or group. We know that it matters what we do. We are followers of Jesus; our lives, our words and our actions are a reflection of our Christian commitment. Our desire throughout our process of discernment regarding the licensing of Pastor Rupp has been to maintain relationships through:

- ~following established processes
- ~communicating clearly and broadly
- ~receiving feedback and council
- ~doing Biblical study
- ~seeking theological clarity
- ~bathing the process in prayer
- ~following the Spirit's leading

This journey has led us to be “at variance.” We didn’t choose this in order to be difficult or to thumb our theological noses at anyone. In some ways, the decision chose us, having walked through the process carefully. Some wear this mantle of “variance” with pride; claiming prophetic imagination. Some wear it with protest; claiming legal faithfulness to the spirit of the Kansas City resolution on Forbearance. All wear it with trepidation; fearing loss of relationship.

At Central District Conference we don’t presume to know the way forward on this particular journey. But we do believe we have found a way forward that is faithful to Christ and honors the unique gifts for ministry that God has given to God’s beautiful and diverse people.

As much as a Peer Review can help us articulate our faith perspectives, share our journeys and test together the discerned leading of the Spirit, such a process can help us grow.

As much as a Peer Review might create a defensive posture, squelch the Spirit and threaten to cut-off part of the body, such a process can cause more pain and loss.

At a recent CDC Leadership Council meeting, it was suggested that perhaps Peer Reviews could be requested by conferences themselves that are testing a new way forward. A Peer Review could be a “come and see tour” of what a conference is doing. It could be an invitation for suggestions, reflection and ideas from an outside set of eyes and ears to help them test a sense of God’s Spirit. It could also begin with a conference that is in a dry place, struggling to find its way forward. It could create mutual accountability and counsel, devoid of fear and anxiety.

It is a privilege to be part of this Council. I look forward to getting to know you as fellow servants of God and of this small but visible community of Christ's universal church known as Mennonite Church USA.

My final three descriptions of Central District congregations:

Story 7: A hallmark of Faith Mennonite Church in Goshen, IN, is the weekly Sunday meal, begun more than 20 years ago when the congregation numbered under 25. Now the meal and fellowship serve 70-80 persons each week. Everyone takes ownership in meal preparation, serving or cleaning up.

Story 8: Grace Mennonite, Pandora, OH, provides all new babies in the congregation a comforter made by members in the congregation, as a symbol of the hands of the congregation surrounding the newborn infant.

Story 9: Pictured on the screen is the sanctuary of Columbus Mennonite Church, in Columbus, Ohio. Worship attendance at Columbus Mennonite has grown by about 30 in the last couple years. This photo was taken during our Central District Annual Meeting in June. The pews are adorned with the nearly 200 comforters made by members of Columbus Mennonite who call themselves the "Piecemakers"; these comforters are then donated to Mennonite Central Committee. A congregation member writes: "From our "Black Lives Matter" theme, to an adopted refugee family, from our monthly dinners for the homeless, to our annual rummage sale to support Christian Peacemaker Teams, Columbus Mennonite Church is abounding in love."