

**To:** Ed Diller and the MC USA Executive Board  
**From:** Karl Shelly (President, Central District Conference)  
**Date:** January 2, 2010  
**RE:** Conference response to MC USA EB assumptions and questions

Per your request, the Central District Conference staff, Board of Directors, Ministerial Committee, Stewardship Committee, and Missional Church Committee discussed the questions we received from you at our October 3, 2009, Leadership Group meeting. There were twenty-two persons in CDC leadership present at this meeting. As a diverse conference in a diverse denomination, we had a diversity of views expressed in our discussion. We did not try to quantify the range of opinions offered at this meeting; instead, we simply noted the various responses, and I have summarized them below.

**1. Do you agree with the following assumptions?**

- In 1995, the church adopted three pivotal documents that continue to guide our life and work together – *Vision: Healing and Hope*, *Mennonite Church USA Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and the *Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love* statement.
- Referring to the Purdue and Saskatoon statements on human sexuality, the church has generally been faithful in teaching our beliefs about sexual relations and homosexuality but our follow through on keeping our commitment to ongoing conversation and dialogue has been uneven.
- The 2009 delegate resolution asks the Executive Board to work with area conferences to provide and encourage the use of resources which assist conferences and congregations to engage in conversation about our disagreements on homosexuality and help conferences respond in love to congregations at variance with the teaching position of Mennonite Church USA.
- For this discussion to happen on a churchwide level it is important for area conferences to share how they are experiencing and understanding issues relating to human sexuality, including homosexuality.

There was neither complete agreement nor disagreement with the assumptions. Instead, the following points were noted.

On the first assumption regarding the three documents, some noted that the Confession of Faith is used in many different ways, not all of which were intended. It is an important document when used correctly as a guiding document. Additionally, some underscored the importance of the Agreeing/Disagreeing document while some others thought that it undermines the church's faithful defense of its teaching positions. While many acknowledged the ongoing importance of these three documents, it was noted that we are not the same church we were in 1995 when these documents were adopted.

On the second assumption regarding the Purdue and Saskatoon statements, many noted that the reference to "uneven" dialogue seems to skirt around the real issue – that conference-imposed discipline has made dialogue on human sexuality unsafe.

On the third assumption regarding the 2009 delegate resolution, the confusing wording of the resolution was noted. The assumption indicates that the focus is on homosexuality, but the resolution itself is less clear. Is it on homosexuality, human sexuality, on how we disagree in love? It was also noted by some that we need discernment on a new teaching position rather than continue to rely on the dated statements of our two predecessor denominations.

On the fourth assumption regarding the role of conferences, some noted that perhaps the important issue to address isn't sexuality but biblical interpretation. The latter seems to be the root of much of our differences. It was also noted that for a churchwide discussion to be meaningful it must include not only area conference leaders but congregations.

## **2. What is happening in your conference and congregations with respect to issues relating to human sexuality and homosexuality?**

Depending where you look in CDC, either many things are happening or nothing is happening with respect to these issues. We are aware of congregations who have held Sunday school classes on the problem of pornography, who have had sermon series on human sexuality, who have invited resource persons to speak from a variety of perspectives on homosexuality, whose youth groups have studied what makes for healthy and moral human sexuality, have gone through a sex education curriculum, and who have had a congregational process of sharing stories and perspectives on homosexuality. We have congregations who have responded negatively to the Pink Menno witness at the Columbus assembly and who have worked to articulate their support of the traditional, biblical understanding of homosexuality. Some of these congregations have vocalized their frustration that the conference and the denomination aren't more proactive in defending or enforcing such a position. We also have congregations who have moved toward becoming "welcoming congregations," and others who are active in their community witnessing to a biblically-based position of compassion and inclusion.

At the conference level, we are holding five regional meetings to address issues around our polity, how the conference responds to theological diversity among congregations, and our criteria for inviting new congregations into the conference. We have had conversations with congregations who want to join CDC because of our respect for congregational discernment, and we have had conversations with congregations who are considering leaving CDC because they long for more conference accountability when congregations deviate from traditional understandings on homosexuality.

## **3. Are there conflicts in your conference and congregations with respect to these issues, and if so, what are these conflicts?**

Yes, as a result of our diversity mentioned above, there are various conflicts at various intensity levels. There are conflicts about biblical interpretation, about whether one's sexuality is a choice or inherent to who one is, about whether our differences are theological or cultural, about whether there is need for more discussion on these issues, about whether the impact of Mennonite advocacy groups for inclusion has been positive or negative, and about the proper role of conference leadership in responding to this diversity. Some congregations within and outside CDC have responded positively to how we are responding to this diversity, and some congregations have left CDC because of it. The latter has been particularly painful for us.

## **4. What resources would be helpful to your conference and congregations in dealing with these issues to engage in conversation about our differences?**

- We brainstormed a host of ideas, some general some specific. They include:
- \*Resources on biblical interpretation, i.e., Mary Schertz's workshop at CDC's 2009 annual assembly.
  - \*Resources on healthy processes for discussion so that we can hear and listen to one another.
  - \* Examples of MC USA leadership, executive board, and staff working together as brothers/sisters in Christ despite differences on hot-button issues. Invite the Executive Board to model the diversity among them and how they talk about the issue via workshops and other venues.
  - \* A bibliography of books, literature, movies, teachings, etc.  
(could include Loren Johns' website, a diverse list of speakers, Moody Bible: *Living on the Edge* by Chip Ingram, information from Mennonite conflict transformation programs, ...)
  - \* Models of intergenerational ways to hold congregational discussions, i.e., model used at Columbus Mennonite
  - \* Training in conflict transformation for conference and congregational leaders

**5. Mennonite Church USA is a missional-driven church centered on Christ, rather than an issue-driven church. What suggestions do you have for how conferences, congregations and the denomination can work together on these matters?**

Some noted the false dichotomy in your question between issues and mission. Is not our focus on immigration, anti-racism, peace, etc. both issue and mission? Others were unclear what you meant by “these matters.”

Many saw hope for the church working together constructively when such work grows out of relationship and mutual respect – not necessarily out of uniformity of belief. How can we foster this? Perhaps by meeting face-to-face, by providing safe space for conversation, and by focusing on the core of our beliefs which we hold in common rather than on boundary maintenance. Perhaps we need to acknowledge different capacities among us for ambiguity. Perhaps we need to acknowledge the integrity of more than one mode of biblical interpretation.

**6. What other questions or comments would you like to share with the Executive Board and other conferences about these issues?**

Various individuals raised the following questions and comments:

\*What is the desired outcome/purpose of the dialogue you are organizing? Certainly we are already aware of the diversity of opinion in the church on homosexuality. How are you planning to respond to that?

\*Talk more openly about all aspects of human sexuality: pornography, sexual abuse, divorce, singleness, etc.

\* Despite our claim to being a peace church, we have not done well at conflict transformation. Perhaps our focus should be here. What resources do we have about congregational decision-making and discernment?

\*Make sure the voice of youth is welcomed and affirmed

\* Some congregations have discussed issues of sexuality long and hard. Others haven't. Not all of our groups even know where members of their own congregation stand.

\*MC Canada's "Being a Faithful Church: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment" by Jack Suderman.

\*In the heaviness of these issues and differences, we need to find ways to use humor in a positive way. We need to be a people of love and joy.

Please return this form by January 8, 2010 to Shelley Buller at Mennonite Church USA Executive Leadership at 722 N. Main Street, Newton, KS 67114-1819  
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