

Central District Conference -- Ministerial Committee Theological Foundations for Credentialing

Preface

The Ministerial Committee of Central District Conference is providing this statement as our attempt to describe the theological foundations that have informed our work together in recent discussions concerning the credentialing of a man in a committed relationship with another man. We are aware that our recent decisions will be received differently by various individuals and groups within CDC and MC USA. We see this statement as one part of a difficult conversation within the church, and we welcome the response of our Mennonite sisters and brothers as we continue to discern where God is leading us.

Statement

We, the Ministerial Committee of Central District Conference, have been entrusted with the responsibility and privilege of carrying out credentialing processes for the conference. We are guided in this work by our grounding in the biblical story, the theological practices which emerge from the scriptures and take shape in community, and denominational documents which speak to credentialing matters. Among other qualifications, candidates for credentialing must display a commitment to faith in an Anabaptist perspective, a sense of personal and communal calling, and competency for the tasks of ministry. One of the great blessings of our work is to witness the wide variety of gifts, passions, and testimonies of persons moving toward offices of ministry.

After three decades of official denominational dialogue regarding matters of sexuality and the place of LGBTQ persons within the church body, our committee has received a request from a member congregation to credential a pastor they have called, a gay man. This has raised the larger question of whether we are willing to withhold ministry credentials from an otherwise fully qualified individual solely because of their affectional orientation and their openness to covenanting with a partner with whom to share life.

Our grounding in the biblical story and who we understand and have experienced God to be, have led us to conclude that persons who identify as LGBTQ are not disqualified from ministry credentials because of this one part of who they are. We see in the creation accounts of Genesis a God who delights in the diversity of the cosmos, declaring “good” each new form which arises from the created order. We see in the Exodus narrative a God who hears the cries of the oppressed and delivers them out of bondage. We see in the people of Israel and the voice of the prophets the formation of an alternative community based on the practices of covenant faithfulness, mercy and justice. We behold with Isaiah that God does indeed do new things and that it is our task to perceive it when it happens (43:19). We see in Jesus the embodiment of God’s good news, much of his life and ministry confronting and challenging religiously held convictions which kept people from embracing their neighbors as fellow children of Abraham (Luke 13:10-17). We see in Saul’s conversion a revelation that the very people he believed to be violating God’s laws were the very ones God in Christ was claiming as God’s own (“Why do you persecute *me*?” Acts 22:7). We identify with Peter’s vision in Acts and the overturning of his previous notions of the sacred and the

profane (“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Acts 10:15) We agree with Paul that the Holy Spirit shows up in the form of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We see in the early church glimpses of a new creation, a new humanity, in which biological and social classifications are subsumed within the person of Christ (“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28). We do not see in any of the seven biblical passages often referenced as speaking directly to homosexuality any likeness to mutually caring same sex relationships. We hear the call to the ministry of reconciliation as part of the church’s mission. (2 Corinthians 5:18)

A growing number of congregations within Mennonite Church USA are reading scripture in this way and are discerning a welcoming posture toward LGBTQ persons for church membership. The Anabaptist value of all baptized believers having and being encouraged to share their ministry gifts makes credentialing of LGBTQ persons who display gifts for pastoral ministry a natural and important next step in realizing this value. While recognizing that we are at a different place in this discernment than the teaching position of Mennonite Church USA, we feel that we are being faithful to our common agreements as members of the same church body. Our Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership notes that “it should not be viewed as a legalistic code; rather, it establishes a trajectory of change which each congregation and conference can follow, as is befitting to their needs and situations” (p. 8). Our Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective recognizes that it “is subject to the authority of the Bible” and that “confessions give an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times” (p. 8).

Because the Church does not interpret scripture the same, the Church as a whole is not ready to change these and other foundational documents to be LGBTQ inclusive. Yet we do think there is space within these documents to allow for discernment on the individual, congregational, and conference levels which differs from the majority, and we believe the ground up direction of this movement is often how Spirit-led change has come about in the church throughout history – the ordination of women being a recent example.

In light of all these convictions, if congregations within our conference are ready to call LGBTQ persons as pastors, we are open to utilizing the same credentialing process and holding up the same standards we do for straight candidates. We believe there needs to be a place in the Mennonite church to further test an option besides life-long celibacy for LGBTQ followers of Jesus Christ, even those who feel called to ministry. We are ready to bless and credential qualified candidates no matter their sexual identity, and we welcome the counsel of the pastors and delegates of CDC as we seek to be faithful to the example and call of Jesus Christ and of scripture.