



Moving Forward

A statement from the [Executive Board](#)

February 17, 2014

Vision: Healing and Hope

"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."

In December 2013, Mountain States Mennonite Conference took action to approve the request from their ministerial leadership board to grant a ministerial license to Theda Good, a pastor in a committed same-sex relationship. Theda was licensed on Feb. 2, 2014. The widespread news reports of the conference action have generated a significant amount of correspondence to Mennonite Church USA leaders, partly in response to a call to prayer issued by Ervin Stutzman, executive director. Many asked the Executive Board to respond to the action by Mountain States.

In January, representatives of the Executive Board met with leaders of Mountain States Mennonite Conference to hear about the background and process for the credentialing decision. The area conference representatives shared their understanding that their actions might affect their relationship with other area conferences or their status within Mennonite Church USA. In its meeting on Feb. 13-15, 2014, the Executive Board considered their perspective, along with a summary of the widely varied concerns expressed in correspondence to the staff. The board's deliberations led to the following announcement to the church:

We value the leaders of Mountain States Mennonite Conference, their active participation in the life of Mennonite Church USA and their sincere desire to follow Christ. Further, we acknowledge their work to discern the voice of the Spirit in their deliberations, as evident in the announcement of their decision.

At the same time, the board has been entrusted to assure the integrity of the church's organizational structure and official agreements. The conference made a decision which they knew to be directly at variance with several denominational statements regarding theological and organizational agreements, illustrated by the following:

"We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life."
p. 72, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*

"Where area conferences, with their congregations, are committed to the vision, mission and teaching positions of the denomination, they have the freedom to seek God's wisdom and discernment as to how to apply these principles in a life-giving way in the many chaotic, broken and/or sinful situations which present themselves to the church. This should be done in consultation with the broader church, in a spirit of mutual accountability."

p. 2, *Mennonite Church USA Membership Guidelines*

Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony."

p. 4, *Membership Guidelines*

"A Mennonite polity respects and takes seriously the congregation, but understands church to include area conferences and the denomination in North America. Authority is shared and exercised at the various levels. Such a polity is intended to serve not only in ordering the ministerial leadership of the congregation, but also the polity for ministerial leadership in area conferences and in an integrated Mennonite denomination in North America, as well."

p. 75, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*

“New area conferences members may be admitted, or existing area conference members terminated, through action of the Delegate Assembly. Prior to such action, and following counsel by the Constituency Leaders Council to the Executive Board, the Executive Board must recommend the action of admission or termination to the Delegate Assembly and written notice of the recommendation must be given to the members six (6) months in advance of the meeting of the Delegate Assembly. Any action of admission or termination must be approved by two-thirds majority of those delegates present and eligible to vote at the Delegate Assembly.”

p. 7, Article IV: 5 Admission/Termination, Bylaws of Mennonite Church USA

“The conference and denomination validate the [ministerial] call by considering the relational integrity of the individual to the conference and denomination.”
p. 103, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*

Mountain States’ actions expressed the hope of many across the church who desire full inclusion for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. Yet the area conference’s decision has exacerbated the polarities within our church and frayed the fragile strands of accountability that hold our church together in an emotionally-charged political atmosphere. This begs the larger question of the best ways to tend the relationships between congregations, area conferences and the denomination.

Because a ministry credential leading to ordination is potentially transferable to any other area conference, we believe Mountain States Mennonite Conference acted without sufficient counsel from the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) and the Conference Ministers’ group. Therefore, we request that First Mennonite Church of Denver and the area conference seek such counsel before moving from the licensing process into the next step of ordination.

Further, we have appointed a task force comprising members of the CLC and the Executive Board to review the actions of Mountain States Mennonite Conference as they bear on our life together. The task force will do so in keeping with the bylaws of Mennonite Church USA and the area conference’s stated commitments when it joined Mennonite Church USA in 2005. The members of the task force are Patricia Shelly, moderator-elect and co-chair of the CLC; David Boshart, member of the Executive Board and CLC; and two or three additional

persons to be appointed by the Executive Board. The task force has been asked to focus a question for discussion and a recommendation for a process of decision-making to the CLC at its March meeting. Communication to the task force may be addressed to ShelleyB@MennoniteUSA.org.

The accountability of area conferences to the national conference is explained in the Mennonite Church USA bylaws, as well as the denominational membership guidelines, both of which were adopted in 2001. We request that, after the March 2014 meeting of the CLC, the task force bring the results of their review to the June 2014 Executive Board meeting, along with specific recommendations for action. If the CLC perceives that the church’s 2001 guidelines for membership of area conferences no longer serve the whole church well, the task force may propose a different covenanting process by which the national conference can express our unity in Christ and our commitments to one another.

Given the strong emotions in our church fellowship, many are wondering whether or not we can all stay together within Mennonite Church USA. The complexity and diversity of our church yields a spectrum of opinions, often expressed as matters of conscience, so that discernment for a mutually satisfactory way forward seems elusive. Yet the Executive Board prays that the missional commitments expressed in the Purposeful Plan will be able to unify us all under the Lordship of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and covenants of mutual accountability. We pray that we may remain in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance. In this vein, the board is willing to explore more satisfactory arrangements for our common life together. We invite the broader church to prayerfully engage this question as well, seeking God’s Spirit for the best way to live under God’s reign.