

## **Assessment of MCUSA's 2015 'FORBEARANCE' Resolution and Prospects**

***“The ways in which we have engaged the decades-long conflict in the church over issues related to human sexuality have diverted us from our central mission, divided us from each other and damaged the name of Christ in the world. While acknowledging different interpretations, we affirm the centrality of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture as an essential part of our collective discernment. We also affirm the goodness of marriage, singleness, celibacy, sexual intimacy within a marriage covenant, and fidelity for all people, and we acknowledge that there is currently not consensus within Mennonite Church USA on whether it is appropriate to bless Christians who are in same-sex covenanted unions. Because God has called us to seek peace and unity as together we discern and seek wisdom on these matters, we call on all those in Mennonite Church USA to offer grace, love and forbearance toward conferences, congregations and pastors in our body who, in different ways, seek to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ on matters related to same-sex covenanted unions.”***

1. POSITIVE – The posture of this resolution recognizes grey area between Children of Light and Children of Darkness; after 500 years, the absolute difference and separation of the kingdom of God and kingdom of the world asserted by Schleithem has to be qualified. While there are at times absolute differences (status confessionis) and confrontation of the world by church as colony of God's kingdom, often the difference is partial and agreement is partial among believers seeking authentic faithfulness. We can often recognize our adversaries are partly right, and a faithful forbearance inculcates in us and opens us to that recognition and capacity for learning.

The challenge is readiness to qualify and name and prioritize shades of grey, to name both unity and disunity, to recognize that some diversities in shades of grey can be borne with commitment to the Light (different interpretations of Genesis 1, different disciplines in use of technology, different understandings of Christ's presence at the Lord's Table, different understandings of atonement), and others lead to separation due to incompatible practices and identifications (observance of community's Sabbath on a different day, ordination requirements, governance by bishop or council or congregation, baptism on one's own profession of faith or acceptance of a parent's profession at baptism, separation or relationship of faith and discipleship). This challenge involves recognizing that such qualification may not be so much of degree (Matthew 23:23) but type. The difference between what divides and what is to be forborne may not be assessing degrees of importance (“weightier” matters), but recognizing whether and when we are saying and meaning not merely diverse and divergent things, but substantively contradictory things using the same words, and whether and when we are doing and meaning substantively contradictory things in the same or similar activity. And even in such substantive contradictions, between unity and disunity, communion and schism, faithfulness and heresy, light and darkness, there are grey places of impaired communion, damaged fellowship, diminished and weakened unity, defective proclamation, compromised discipleship, combinations of valid ministry with illicit practice, places for forbearance with charity where mutual counsel and shared mission may still be possible. I've appreciated the recognition of complexity on a spectrum of disagreement that forbearance requires.

From 25 years in ecumenical ministry, I am familiar with the experience of seeking unity in spite of disagreement. I am familiar and accustomed to knowing authentic disciples in Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, Episcopal and Methodist churches, with whom I work daily in common mission, even while wrestling with the differences constituted by our diverse

convictions and confessions. I've found there is learning and gifts to receive in our grey areas of forbearance with one another, so adopting that in our relationships among VMC and MCUSA congregations has not felt unfamiliar. Listening to and learning from others and growing in ministry through relationships of forbearance is valid and fruitful; the Spirit works more than we know in spite of our respective errors and hardness of heart.

2. CONCERNS: As I said, from years in ecumenical ministry and conversation, I have some feeling and appreciation for the call to forbearance. Just so:
  - a. Forbearance is not a facile, "let's just get along." It is not "our disagreements are just silly and not about anything that matters." That is not forbearance, but spiritual laziness, akin to the cancer patient who is careless about seeking treatment and asserts "I'm not going to let this issue affect my life or interfere with the things that matter." Courageous attitude should not be confused with the actual work of healing and unity, and slow-working division should not be underestimated for its cancerous fatality to unity. Forbearance for coexistence and comity is not sufficient for unity.
  - b. Forbearance will not in itself create ground for unity. Reflecting on how lessons learned from shared dialogue and ministry with Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians and others could strengthen and inform our work of internal unity in the midst of disagreement also has revealed how serious and deep our disagreements are. I believe wisdom and experience from ecumenical relations are resources for addressing our situation, but that reflection is also indicating that our disagreements about the essence and meaning of marriage, the relationship of Word and Spirit in biblical interpretation, the relationships and roles among scriptural authority and ethics and scientific knowledge, the nature of accountability to one another among congregations within the larger church, have been growing toward church-dividing contradictions. The nature of the relationship between some of our Mennonite churches on this matter has entered the relationship they would have with the Lutheran or Reformed parish down the street – or an Amish community. As much as I love brothers and sisters across these divisions and continue to learn from them and serve with them, the shallow dismissal of those divisions with clichéd affirmations that "unity doesn't require uniformity," denies the real substance of communal identities, contradictions in our visions of discipleship, and very different grammars of faith. Those who minimize the significance of such relational divisions are mistaking cancer for indigestion.
  - c. To the extent that traditionalists believe and speak about same-sex sexual intimacy as immoral or unfaithful to Christian discipleship, and to the extent that inclusivists believe and speak about traditionalist convictions and teaching on same-sex sexual intimacy as sustaining sinful injustice on par with racism and slavery, I cannot see how this division will be recognized as a Romans 14 matter of personal conscience bearable in common unity. Because as practical matters of walking together, I do not see how together we would be able to:
    1. Sponsor publications satisfactorily and freely teaching the meaning of scriptures from the Pentateuch, the Gospels and the Epistles.
    2. Endorse missionaries for discipling new Christians according to differing convictions.
    3. Credential ministers in common for teaching scripture and training disciples together, generating leadership on Faith & Life and CLC for shaping ecclesial identity.

4. Recognize delegates in same-sex marriages, or advocates for heterosexual marriage only. Wouldn't refusal to consider addressing in conference discussion be simply agreement to disagree (as we do with Quakers and Anglicans in CPT)?

Forbearance is the necessary but not sufficient ground for working at unity, and will not itself create that ground. The trajectory of inertia is toward division. The experience of recovering unity is that described in 12-step recovery groups, of "walking up a down escalator." Forbearance is readiness to walk; unity requires walking up a downward escalator. And more and more of us are getting tired. We do not seem to be "forbearing" to re-shape our convictions any more, or no more than we would be open to re-shaping our convictions about participation in war being incompatible with discipleship, or abortion, or keeping a handgun for protection, or voting for the death penalty on a jury. And our congregations' members have diverse positions on these matters in different respects. But we're not talking about endorsing contradictory teaching on each of those by ordained shepherds of the church, or about the church blessing any of those with its ordinances or sacraments. These latter ecclesial actions are what we're asked to forbear. So we must approach dialogue across this division with the forbearance, patience, and expectation of work that we would dialogue with Catholics on the Eucharist or Lutherans on faith and discipleship. This disagreement is already a division; this division is not a cold virus, but cancer. We cannot come to this forbearance work with vitamins and chicken soup; we must suit up for surgery or stay out of the operating room.

Present season of church as Good Friday and Holy Saturday. No singing alleluia when we gather together this season, only songs of grief and lament.