**A Way Forward for Virginia Mennonite Conference**

**Forbearance and Membership Resolutions**

**Conference Council**

**December 17, 2015**

**Introduction.** In Kansas City (July 2015), the delegates of Mennonite Church USA passed two resolutions: *Forbearance in the Midst of Difference*, and *Status of Membership Guidelines*. Virginia Mennonite Conference as a conference within MC USA has the opportunity to provide clarity about how these two resolutions will be lived out as part of our life together.

In keeping with the spirit of our conference polity, Conference Council, the Faith and Life Commission and the delegate body have a role. Conference Council provides governance to the conference and provides clarity about membership understandings for congregations to be a member of the conference. Faith and Life Commission is tasked with providing leadership to the faith and life of the conference. The delegate assembly engages in the giving and receiving of counsel. In order that all three entities are involved in this discussion, it seems important to provide a document that provides clarity to credentialed leaders, congregational leaders, and members of congregations living in the tension of these two statements with the purpose of maintaining unity in Virginia Mennonite Conference.

**Overview of the Two Resolutions**.

The two MC USA resolutions have a background component describing the circumstances for which a resolution is necessary and the resolution which highlights the commitments that the resolution places on the constituency of MC USA. The resolution is provided below for each of the statements.

***The Resolution on Forbearance***

*Resolution: 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.*

***The Membership Guidelines***

*Resolution Therefore, be it resolved:*

***• The Membership Guidelines, adopted by the delegates in 2001 and updated in 2013, shall continue to serve Mennonite Church USA as the guiding document for questions regarding church membership and same-sex relationships/marriages, alongside the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective.***

*• In order to exercise forbearance on matters that divide us and to focus attention on the missional vision that unites us, the delegate assembly will not entertain changes to the Membership Guidelines for the next four years.*

***• We look to area conferences to interpret and implement these documents in mutual accountability with other area conferences, particularly through the CLC.***

***• We presume area conferences will grant ministerial credentials consistent with the guidelines in A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership, as seems best in their context.***

*• We call on the CLC to take seriously its role as “elders” for the denomination, “discerning and advising the Executive Board, the Delegate Assembly, and the Mennonite Church USA on issues confronting each of them relative to faith and life,” as well as their other functions named in the bylaws (Article IX). We also call on the CLC to exercise mutual accountability by engaging in conference-to-conference peer review when area conferences make decisions that are not aligned with the documents named above, and to make recommendations to the Executive Board if necessary.*

*• We join hands for the work that binds us together—proclaiming Jesus’ gospel of peace, evangelizing the world and growing as missional Mennonite communities. We desire all people who are inspired by the Anabaptist vision laid out in the Purposeful Plan of Mennonite Church USA to join us in this work.*

**Living In Hopeful Missional Community**

The Virginia Mennonite Conference seeking to live into the spirit of the resolutions of *Forbearance* and *Membership Guidelines* provides the following guidance:

1. The mission of Virginia Mennonite Conference continues to embrace the missional vision of MC USA and seeks to live out the Purposeful Plan in keeping with MC USA’s direction to area conferences. Conference Council and the Faith and Life Commission will continue to focus and implement ways to live into the missional vision as described in the Purposeful Plan.
2. The Conference Council of Virginia Mennonite Conference acknowledges the covenants that are made between the local congregation and the Conference are essential agreements for our health as a body of believers. This includes:
   1. The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Persective (1995) as the teaching position of MC USA and Virginia Mennonite Conference on matters that it addresses.
   2. A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership: Polity Manual for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA (2014)
   3. The Constitution of Virginia Mennonite Conference indicates that “congregational members shall be baptized believers who have made a voluntary commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and who demonstrate their decision to walk in Christian discipleship within the fellowship of the Mennonite Church. Privileges and responsibilities of individual members shall be those accorded by their respective congregations.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This statement acknowledges that a congregation may determine the criteria for membership in their congregation.
   4. In the application process of a group of believers to be a congregation within Virginia Mennonite Conference, the group acknowledges their commitment to “a statement of faith, a statement of acceptance of the principles contained in the documents listed in item 2, and a statement of organization.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The items listed in item 2 are “constitution and bylaws of Virginia Mennonite Conference, the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective and the bylaws of Mennonite Church USA.”[[3]](#footnote-3)
3. The Conference Council encourages the Faith and Life Commission to continue to be diligent in their responsibility of a) providing leadership on matters of spiritual, doctrinal and life issues, b) establishing guidelines for ministers, c) granting, maintaining, and discontinuing ministerial credentials.[[4]](#footnote-4)
4. The Faith and Life Commission embraces as our polity on ministerial leadership practices, A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership and will uphold their discernment of March 2013,[[5]](#footnote-5) which states:

*With particular attention to the unity within VMC, the FLC affirms the following:*

*a. We affirm the call to all to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior and we affirm pastoral care for all persons regardless of sexual orientation.*

*b. We hold the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) to be the teaching position of the Mennonite Church USA. Thus "We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life." (Article 19)*

*c. Given the membership guidelines of the Mennonite Church USA, if a credentialed person conducts a covenanting ceremony for a same sex couple, their credentials will be immediately suspended while a review is underway. The suspension would be implemented by the FLC officers based upon fact-finding carried out by the respective overseer.*

The Faith and Life Commission continues to affirm this framework for the continued unity of Virginia Mennonite Conference.

**Summary.** Virginia Mennonite Conference is living within the tension of clarity about our covenant together expressed in the Status of Membership Resolution and the way in which space is opening up in congregational life for persons that self identify as having a same gender orientation expressed in the Forbearance Resolution. At the same time, we continue to engage in constructive dialogue about the social realities of our culture, and seek to live out of our biblical-theological understandings that reflect our commitments to the discernments by the body of Christ represented in MC USA and Virginia Mennonite Conference.

1. Constitution, Article 5 Membership, Virginia Mennonite Conference, February 5, 2011 amended edition. (Note: February 5, 2011 amended edition is the last time a correction was added to the Constitution; although the By-Laws were amended July 26, 2014.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 4.3 Application Process, Article 1: Membership, By-Laws, Virginia Mennonite Conference, July 26, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 4.2 Application Process, Article 1: Membership, By-laws, Virginia Mennonite Conference, July 26, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 3:3 Duties, Article IX: Commissions, Section 3 Faith and Life Commission, By-laws, Virginia Mennonite Conference, July 26, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. FLC 13:12 Minutes of Faith and Life Commission, March 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)