

PROCEDURAL GUIDELINES FOR SUSPENSION OF VMC MINISTERIAL CREDENTIALS IN EVENT OF CONDUCTING A COVENANTING CEREMONY FOR SAME SEX COUPLE,

Faith and Life Commission of Virginia Mennonite Conference

The Occasion

As co-members of the body of Christ, we continue to navigate the challenges of our cultural and spiritual settings, including issues surrounding same gender relationships. Prompted by recent inquiries as to how the March 16, 2013 statement by VMC's Faith and Life Commission might be implemented in event of violation, the FLC is now offering these additional procedural guidelines.

The FLC Statement

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.*

Broader Context

While the assignment arises from particular current issues, we sense that procedures for suspending credentials of ministerial leaders in the Virginia Conference may be similar to other issues which could cause ministerial leadership credentials to be challenged.

For example, *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership*, the 2014 polity manual for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA, identifies a dozen "breaches of trust by a credentialed person" which could trigger a review process, all under the section entitled, "When Covenant Relationships Are Broken." The non-exhaustive list of possible breach of trust situations includes [pp. 69-70]:

- a. violations of confidentiality
- b. use of technology for illegal or immoral purposes
- c. pornography
- d. intentional deceptions or dishonesty, including misrepresentation of self in training or past records
- e. acts of physical, emotional, or spiritual violence

- f. gross neglect of ministerial responsibilities
- g. financial irresponsibility or irregularities
- h. sexual abuse, sexual violence, or sexual harassment
- i. failure to be accountable to the area conference that holds the credential
- j. major theological deviation from Christian and Anabaptist/Mennonite understandings.
- k. effort to harm the leadership of another pastor
- l. behaviors that undermine the congregation, another congregation, or the relationship with the wider Mennonite church.

Breach of trust by a credentialed minister in conducting a same sex covenanting ceremony would relate at least to items i, j, and l. on the preceding list. The primary measure for comparing compliance with or “deviation from Christian and Anabaptist/Mennonite understandings (j)” is the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995). Particular guidelines relating to ministerial credentials are established by each conference.

Meaning and Implications of Credentialed Ministry

Should suspension of credentials need to be considered, as mandated by the 2013 FLC statement, it is vital to review our understanding of credentialed ministry. The following quotations from *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership* are pertinent.

The offices of ministry are a great treasure of the church. Through careful and prayerful discernment, the church joins God in calling people to leadership ministry. Ordination, then, is an act of the church that confirms those whom God and the church have called to particular roles of leadership ministry—both to build up the local body and to further engage the congregation in the mission of God. By ordaining these persons to leadership ministry, the church declares them caretakers of the gospel, shepherds of God’s people, and agents of healing and hope for the world. ... [p. 18]

This leadership polity understands the relationship between a congregation and its leaders—and also the relationships between congregations within the area conference and the national church—to be a covenant before God. The relationship, built on promises made, is one of interdependence and mutuality. ... [p. 31]

Ordination is a long-term, leadership-ministry credential granted by the church. Ordination may follow a period of licensing. Ordination is the appropriate credential for all pastors, area conference ministry staff, chaplains, missionaries, evangelists, those serving as the national-office ministers, and those determined by the church to have a continuing ministerial-leadership role in, and on behalf of, the church. Ordination to the church’s office of ministry grants to the person the full range of ministerial privileges and responsibilities. [p. 38]

There are times when a credentialed person [may abuse] the trust placed in him or her by the congregation [and/or conference]. Such abuse damages the covenant relationship between the congregation, its leaders, the credentialed person, and the wider church. Individuals who become aware of misconduct by a credentialed person will contact the area conference office. ... [p. 69]

Paradigm for Credentials Review Process

The *Manual: Ministerial Sexual Misconduct Policy and Procedure*, was provided by the denomination at the turn of the century for adaptation and use by Mennonite conferences and congregations. Book #1 was signed by VMC conference leaders in 2001, while Book #2 and Book #3 were additionally adopted by the Conference Council in 2005. The latter section was specifically tied to organizational offices recognized within the VMC context. The manual has been distributed to all VMC credentialed leaders since that time.

Book #3 [pp. 19-22] offers a paradigm for a review process which could be used in other cases of alleged misconduct by leaders credentialed by VMC, including present inquiries. Nine steps outlined in those pages are as follows:

1. Complaint
2. Preliminary Investigation
3. Charge
4. Accused's Response
5. Fact-Finding Meeting
6. Fact-Finding Report
7. Judgment and Sanctions
8. Appeal
9. Appeal Hearing

The following procedures seek to embrace the above steps in a more condensed fashion, applied specifically to cases where a “credentialed person conducts a covenanting ceremony for a same sex couple.”

IF A CREDENTIALLED MINISTER CONDUCTS A SAME SEX CEREMONY

1. Awareness

A person or persons with knowledge that a Credentialed Minister has conducted a covenanting ceremony for a same sex couple, in contradiction of Virginia Mennonite Conference Policy, shall report the alleged breach of trust to at least one of the following: the respective District Minister/Overseer, an officer of the Faith and Life Commission, or the Executive Conference Minister. The one so notified shall inform the others in this triad.

2. Confirmation.

Upon receiving the report, the FLC Chair shall review the VMC file of the minister in question and lead the FLC officers in appointing a three-person Investigating Team, including the District Minister/Overseer who serves as chair, and one of whom may be a member of the Minister's congregation. The Executive Conference Minister may not be a member of this group.

- a. The Investigating Team shall meet with the Minister to discuss the alleged misconduct and also with the person(s) who communicated the original concern. If it is determined by these conversations and/or other pertinent sources that there was no breach of trust, the Team Chair shall report said finding to the FLC Officers, and further investigation shall cease. The FLC Officers shall so inform both the challenged Minister and the initial Challenger, and any other who has a need to know.

- b. If the misconduct is confirmed, the Team Chair shall communicate to the Minister that his/her credentials are suspended immediately on the basis of the Minister's breach of trust with the conference, pending further disposition. The Chair shall report in writing all findings of the Investigating Team, including the Minister's signed response to the findings, to the FLC Chair. As in step a. above, both the challenged Minister and Challenger(s) shall be kept informed.

3. Further Review and Sanctions

Upon receiving the findings of the Investigating Team, the FLC Officers shall determine specific sanctions appropriate to the findings. Sanctions may include the following:

- a. Suspension of Credentials would mean that "the full range of ministerial privileges and responsibilities" granted previously by the conference credentialing process, are put on hold for a stated period of time. Privileges and responsibilities suspended during this time would include service as a credentialed delegate to VMC Assemblies. It is suggested that suspension would continue for a year, although it may be extended longer if FLC Officers believe such is warranted. Involvement in church responsibilities outside of VMC would be subject to determination by the pertinent agency which should be informed of any action to suspend by VMC.
- b. Goal for the time that credentials are suspended is healing of the breach of trust which occasioned the suspension. During this time, an Accountability/Support Group will meet with the Minister periodically to facilitate healing. Led by the respective District Minister/Overseer, the committee will include two additional persons, one named by the District Minister and one by the suspended Minister. The District Minister will keep the FLC Officers and Executive Conference Minister informed, including support group recommendations for restoration of credentials.
- c. Restoration of Credentials may be considered near the end of the established time of suspension, with conditions such as:
 - Acknowledgement by the Minister that there has been a breach of trust occasioned by his/her misuse of ministerial privileges and responsibilities.
 - A year of probation following resumption of ministerial service, to confirm that the breach of trust has been healed and that mutual understandings of credentialed expectations are agreed. The Accountability/Support Group will continue to function and recommend whether the time of probation may be concluded or extended.
- d. A subsequent breach of trust would instigate a repetition of the above procedures. Such event would diminish the likely restoration of credentials and could lead to their withdrawal.
- e. The congregation where said Minister is serving will need to determine whether the Minister is able to continue ministry for them while under suspension, and with what restrictions.

- f. Termination of Credentials may be the appropriate action in cases where the suspended Minister is not carrying a current ministerial assignment.

4. Appeals

The Credentialed Minister involved in these processes has the right to appeal any of the judgments reached during the procedures described above. In such event, the Executive Conference Minister will appoint a three-member Appeals Panel, which may include himself. However, none of the Investigation Team, or FLC Officers, or Accountability/Support Group members, or members of the Minister's congregation may participate on the panel.

Such panel is encouraged to use appeal procedures and materials noted on pages 21-22 of VMC's *Manual: Ministerial Sexual Misconduct Policy and Procedures*.

Approved by VMC Faith and Life Commission
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