

Conclusion of Ministerial Misconduct process: a message from Conference Council

Pastors, credentialed leaders, retirees, VMC delegates and other VMC leaders,

The Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) family has been experiencing a crisis in leadership for months which some of us have been more aware of than others. A prolonged **nonsexual ministerial misconduct** process involving a complaint filed last summer against VMC's executive conference minister, Clyde Kratz, has now **reached its conclusion**: that Clyde "more likely than not DID engage in ministerial misconduct." Conference Council, the governing board of VMC, approved the following message as a way to share more broadly and with more clarity than seemed advisable in earlier stages of the misconduct process. We speak now out of a place of deep sadness. We grieve for those who've experienced great harm because of Clyde's actions, for Clyde, and for those who are dismayed by this news because they have deeply appreciated Clyde's leadership.

In the summer of 2021, a ministerial misconduct complaint was filed by four persons against Clyde Kratz. VMC's *Ministerial Misconduct Policy* stipulates that when a complaint is against a conference minister, it must be filed with MC USA. MC USA leaders appointed an Investigation Team, who were affirmed by both Clyde and the four persons (called "complainants" in the policy). At the end of December 2021, after four months of an investigation that involved interviews with the complainants, Clyde, and 44 witnesses, an Investigation Report was sent to VMC's Faith & Life Commission (FLC) interim chair, Joe Longacher. As the policy stipulates, Joe and the other two FLC officers, Pearl Hartman, vice chair, and Mike Shenk, secretary, were then responsible to give leadership to the next steps in the process.

The FLC officers determined that the Investigation Report findings were credible, with evidence corroborated by multiple witnesses. They placed Clyde's credential on probation, charged Clyde with five counts of nonsexual ministerial misconduct and, as called for in the policy, conducted a Hearing in which Clyde was invited to dispute the charges and provide additional witnesses. At the conclusion of the Hearing, the FLC officers determined in their judgment that Clyde "more likely than not DID engage in ministerial misconduct" on three charges of misconduct. They identified sanctions to hold Clyde accountable. Conference Council placed Clyde on administrative leave for an indefinite period of time.

Both the four persons who filed the complaint, and Clyde were given opportunity to file an *Appeal* of the FLC officers' judgment, which both parties decided to do. As per policy, the responsibility for selecting an appeal panel belongs to Conference Council leaders. Sara Wenger Shenk, moderator, Jim Hershberger, secretary, and Vivian Stevens-Lyons (serving in place of a moderator elect) chose three persons from outside of VMC to serve; three persons deemed to be impartial by conference leaders and affirmed by both the four complainants, and Clyde. The appeal panelists were two men and one woman. They included a current and a former conference minister. All three currently serve or have served as pastors. To their task, they brought significant background training and experience in clergy abuse investigations, trauma awareness and prevention, clergy misconduct processes, healthy boundaries workshop leadership, intercultural development and sexual abuse prevention.

Two appeal hearings were held March 15. The appeal panel's judgment, as per policy, is **the final word** in the misconduct process. The appeal panel's judgment was reported to Sara Wenger Shenk,

moderator—and to the four complainants and Clyde on March 16. **The Appeal Panel upheld three charges and reinstated two charges of ministerial misconduct** against the executive conference minister: *misuse of power; violation of truth telling; breaking and misusing confidentiality; intentional deception and dishonesty; and harming the leadership of another pastor.* The professional standard used throughout this process to determine ministerial misconduct is *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial leadership: a polity manual for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA.*

Conference Council will soon report next steps to move us forward as a conference through this leadership crisis, toward healing and rebuilding of trust. In the meantime, **Clyde will continue on administrative leave.**

What became evident through this many month long process, is that the responsibility for this crisis in leadership belongs to Clyde, yes, but also to a systemic failure of leadership. The investigators, having interviewed 44 witnesses from diverse theological backgrounds, a wide range of ages and a variety of districts within VMC, reported on widespread distrust, pain and anger in our conference. Conference Council has begun to reflect on why earlier calls for greater accountability from multiple persons, and prior performance requirements that Conference Council had put in place for Clyde, failed to resolve problematic leadership behaviors. A variety of conference leaders have expressed regret that there wasn't effective intervention earlier in ways that might have headed off the painful crisis where we now find ourselves.

As a conference family, we have much healing work to do, and I, along with Conference Council, am eager to do what we can to facilitate processes that will contribute to naming where breakdowns occurred, and how we might together rebuild trust and solidarity throughout our VMC family. We're aware that there are those who are only now learning about the misconduct complaint who may want to report their own experience of harm. VMC provides an opportunity for persons to be able to confidentially report, at this link: <https://virginiacconference.org/ministerial-complaints/>

We invite you to join us in prayer—and for us each to do what we can to promote healing as we seek to move forward in shared mission, together.

In hope,
Sara Wenger Shenk
VMC moderator, on behalf of Conference Council

P.S. I offer again a prayer I shared earlier from one of our VMC pastors, to focus our communal praying:

Lord God, Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, we come to you because we are weak, fearful and grieving, and we need your strength.

We recognize that while there is much we don't know, we do know there is significant hurt and pain throughout our Virginia Conference family.

In the confidence of the empowering Holy Spirit, we join together with Christ's followers from generations gone by, and around the world now to ask Jesus

to bless and comfort those who mourn,

to bless and give courage to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

*to bless those who in meekness become joint heirs of the kingdom,
to bless those who seek to be merciful so we ourselves will be shown mercy,
to bless those who desire to be pure of heart so we may see God at work among us,
to bless those who long to share the peace of Christ throughout our church family.*

As sinful people, we recognize the hurt, pain, and brokenness within ourselves, and within our conference system as a whole. And as we seek to look truthfully, honestly, and openly at what is broken, we fervently cling to the hope and promise that Christ will heal, Christ will restore and Christ will redeem all things.