

Dear Virginia Mennonite Conference pastors, leaders and delegates,

Grace, joy and peace to you this beautiful fall day, from our loving God, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the animating, sustaining Holy Spirit.

Conference leaders from the Faith & Life Commission (FLC), Conference Council (CC) and the interim Conference Leadership team (iCLT) met together on September 10, 2022 in the fellowship hall at Harrisonburg Mennonite Church. For several years now, **we have made it a goal to meet jointly, in-person, at least once a year.** This meeting, scheduled months ago, was an opportunity for all of us to hear directly from the iCLT, who began as a newly configured team August 1. We also heard reports from all the districts and ministry clusters across the conference. What emerged from that meeting was **a strong sense from the gathered group that a joint statement from the FLC, CC and iCLT would be helpful** given the many questions and concerns circling through our VMC family in the wake of the MC USA special delegate assembly in May 2022. Several of us agreed to draft a statement, which was then offered to the FLC, CC and iCLT members for feedback and improvement.

We are now prepared to offer you this brief, one-page FLC, CC, iCLT Joint Statement (below) in which we seek to name the concerns and affirmations we've heard, and to share our hopefulness for leading into God's future. While there are those among us who would have preferred a different emphasis here or there, **we're grateful that 100% of FLC, CC and the iCLT agreed that the attached Joint Statement captures much of what we each believe is important to say to the VMC church family at this time.** We hope if you find this statement helpful, you will **freely share it** with your church elders, council, or even your congregation if that seems good to you.

We also want to let you know that the Gilliam & Associates listening/learning process mentioned at the end of the statement will seek to include many of you in listening circles designed to hear your perspective on what will help us move through these anxious times and who we can be at our best for effective ministry. We are hopeful that the information gathering the Gilliam facilitators will do this fall and winter will be **ready to report at our Winter delegate assembly, February 4, 2022.**

We are grateful for the ways each of you serve your local congregations and model God's love for one another, forbearing with one another and encouraging each other as we give ourselves to the costly work of God's reconciling mission in the world.

May the peace of Christ be with us all,
Sara Wenger Shenk
VMC moderator



For Immediate Release

Harrisonburg, VA, September 23, 2022, | Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) leaders from the Faith & Life Commission (FLC), Conference Council (CC) and the interim Conference Leadership Team (iCLT) met in a joint session on September 10, 2022. We listened carefully to questions and perspectives brought by

representatives from across the conference prompted by Mennonite Church USA's May 2022 Special Delegate Assembly and action on the [Repentance & Transformation \(R & T\) resolution](#) in particular. Based on our shared work, we jointly offer this discerning and visionary guidance:

From discerning persons throughout the conference, we hear these concerns:

- The process that brought the Repentance & Transformation resolution to the delegates for discussion and a vote is perceived as not representing the best of what we anticipate from denominational leadership, causing widespread consternation in VMC.
- The resolution seemed one-sided, suggesting a lack of forbearance. It did not seem to leave a place for those in the denomination who hold a traditional view of marriage while genuinely loving and seeking the best for LGBTQIA persons.
- The resolution lacked crucial theological orientation (other than naming the harm of exclusion) and failed to offer sexual ethical guidelines within a convincing biblical theological framework.
- The resolution refers to LGBTQIA as a generic identity without acknowledging the distinct ethical challenges associated with these varied identities.
- The resolution does not affirm Christian ideals of reserving sexual intimacy for marriage (or lifelong covenant), sexual fidelity in marriage, or lifelong monogamy, seeming to embrace a secular sexual ethic that has no expectation for celibacy outside of commitment.
- The resolution was supported by some in VMC, who also feel conflicted and grieved by church divisions in its wake.

As VMC leaders (FLC, CC, iCLT) we offer these visionary affirmations for guiding VMC forward:

- We hear a strong desire that people want to stay together in VMC and don't want to leave the conference. This desire comes with the hope that leaders will provide visionary direction that holds together the rich diversity of the conference by focusing on what we have in common rather than what divides us.
- While many feel dismay about some aspects of the R&T resolution, there is also broad agreement that in attempts to be faithful, some of us have contributed to pain, abuse, and traumatization for LGBTQIA persons and families. This recognition leads us to seek ways to genuinely repent, apologize and change our hearts and congregations to more fully reflect God's love.
- [The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective](#) has and will function as a normative guide for faith and practice in VMC, as will [the FLC 2013 polity statement \(Guiding Principles for Suspension of Ministerial Credentials in Event of Conducting a Same-Sex Ceremony\)](#) regarding ministerial credentials and covenanting ceremonies for same sex couples. We also know that God's Spirit actively speaks and so anticipate that as leaders sense tension between the spirit and letter of the law, we will together seek to discern a Spirit-guided, faithful way forward.
- We regret that many people are leaving the church, disillusioned by un-Christlike fighting and division about many matters (including sexuality), and that the church has often failed to speak convincingly about God-honoring sexuality. Seeking to be guided by Scripture and Spirit, we commit to hold together the best of the tradition with the best ethical guidelines we can discern to love and care for all God's children.

In the coming months, we will engage in a patient, conference-wide process guided by Gilliam & Associates, to listen and learn about who VMC can be at our best. We believe we have an historic opportunity to find a path forward together that is attuned to where the Spirit of God is calling us as a distinct, diverse and gifted church body—to follow Jesus in our day.