

Virginia Mennonite Conference Statement

Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) is called to be centered around the life, teachings, and actions of Jesus Christ. We seek to strengthen our unity as a peace church, empowered by God's Spirit to share Christ's message of hope with all people.

VMC mission statement: *VMC equips pastors, lay leaders, and congregants for worship and service and to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to neighbors near and far.*

The past years have grown increasingly difficult for unity as a conference, as leadership and trust have broken down, theological debates have caused us to clash, political polarization has heightened, and technology has prompted us to have more screen time with less face to face opportunities in the midst of a pandemic that isolated us. Our denomination, Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA), has struggled to have a consensus on human sexuality, as do many other Christian denominations. The struggle for agreement threatens our connectedness, trust, and mission.

Beyond church statements and the struggle to exist corporately and theologically, are real life personal stories. We have many stories of deep pain, causing people to feel excluded from church and religion. We lament the harm and fracturing of our church families and seek to grow as a church community in maintaining the unity God has given us in Christ. As Jesus' disciples and the early church were diverse groups centered in Christ, we also seek to proclaim Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, while living in the Anabaptist way of peace.

Our recent conference-wide listening and learning feedback highlights that, "We create our own echo chambers' tending to surround ourselves with those who see issues and conflicts in the same manner as we do; in so doing, the ability to 'cross pollinate', to share story and experience, to listen to and learn from those who stand at a different place, is lost."¹ We have not always been faithful, authentic, and vulnerable with one another. Persons with traditional beliefs, persons with progressive beliefs, people of color, persons who are LGBTQ+, women in leadership, and others have felt misunderstood, unwelcome and underappreciated. In the past we have navigated theological struggles over instrumental music in the home and church, dress codes, divorce and remarriage, and how to relate with persons in the military. Historically, we are aware of our shortcomings in relating with a variety of people, even when we believed our theology to be right.

Yet each day this conference has an opportunity to treat each person and each church with dignity, respect, hope, and love by keeping the life and teachings of Jesus at the center. We look forward to living more fully into our identity as the body of Christ and partnering together in the mission of the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit. We believe our pursuit of Jesus and our peace with one another testifies to God's grace. The sanctity of marriage is important. We realize our theological perspectives may vary. We seek to honor one another and care for the

¹ Quote from the VMC Listening & Learning Feedback document (page 15) provided to VMC February 4, 2023 at the Winter Delegate Assembly by Gilliam & Associates.

brokenness within traditional marriage that has been long overlooked, and to show our value for persons who are single. While respecting each other's viewpoints, we recognize individual churches may not handle everything the same. Sitting in the same church pew from persons who differ from us and who offer different talents and gifts from our own, makes us a stronger witness to the greater body of Christ and models the peace stance we seek to profess.

May we be faithful to Jesus and to VMC's Vision Statement: *God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.*

As an Anabaptist community, we commit to one another with Jesus at the center of our lives, giving witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and making every effort to maintain the unity God has given us while seeking to trust each other as we minister in our local contexts.

We pledge to support and work together through these commitments:

- We will do our best to practice mutual trust and respect in thought, word and deed, giving each other the benefit of the doubt when we perceive there to be inconsistencies. We will move toward conflict with curiosity, expecting the Holy Spirit to illumine us.
- We will seek to draw from each other's strengths and support each other as we grow together, seeking to publicly and privately support and honor each other.
- We will seek to be in touch with our own feelings and to express them clearly and appropriately, while recognizing the validity of each other's feelings and experiences.
- We will attempt to clearly communicate our own needs and expectations and listen carefully to each other with ears, mind, and heart before speaking critically to an issue. (James 1:19)
- We will do our best to provide a safe and brave place to express differing opinions and ideas, and make space for everyone to contribute. (Ephesians 4:15)
- We will seek to represent the love, grace, and reconciliation of Jesus Christ in all we do.