

To: Ohio Conference Credentialed Ministers and Delegates
From: Ohio Conference Leadership Team
Subject: MC USA's *Membership Guidelines* and *Repentance and Transformation* resolutions
Date: October 19, 2021

Background

In 2017 the Ohio Conference delegate body made the decision to continue our affiliation with Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) with the caveat that we would review our ongoing affiliation in the event that there were substantive changes to MC USA's *Membership Guidelines*, the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, or requirements to how Ohio Conference credentials its ministers. That resolution also stated that as a conference we would put our best energies into being and becoming missional congregations together and minimizing the effort spent on the same-sex marriage issue.

Since that time we feel that as a conference we have been able to live into that resolution. In the past couple of years the Leadership Team of Ohio Conference has spent time and energy clarifying our own identity as a conference of Mennonite churches across Ohio and the surrounding states and created a new mission statement —*To Gather, Equip and Send our congregations by the power of the Holy Spirit to Love God, Love Others, and make disciples of Jesus Christ*. The Leadership Team also has focused our attention on initiatives which we believe God has called us to during this time —Gathered & Sent, Leadership Development, Immigration, Church Planting and Anti-racism.

Membership Guidelines Resolution

In March 2021, MC USA's Constituency Leaders Council (CLC — identified by MC USA as "the elders of the church") was presented with several proposed resolutions to discern and offer feedback to MC USA's Resolutions Committee and Executive Board. One of the resolutions is to retire MC USA's *Membership Guidelines*. This resolution was presented after feedback from an advisory group appointed by MC USA and discussions at several CLC meetings. After further discussion and discernment, the majority of CLC recommended that the resolution to retire the *Membership Guidelines* be forwarded to MC USA's next in-person delegate assembly to be voted on.

Since that time Ohio Conference leadership has spent significant time and energy communicating to our pastors and delegates the history of the *Membership Guidelines* and the minimal effect retiring the *Guidelines* document, by itself, would have on Ohio Conference beliefs and practices, and how we credential our ministers. While we have pastors and congregational members in different places on many issues, including our membership with MC USA, we felt our pastors were united in moving forward as a group. We were prepared to issue a statement on Oct. 1, 2021, to our delegates in preparation for our upcoming regional cluster meetings where we would solicit feedback to further discern that resolution as a conference through Annual Conference Assembly on March 4-5, 2022.

Repentance and Transformation Resolution

On Sept. 30, 2021, the day before we were to issue our statement to our delegates, we received word from MC USA that its Executive Board had recently made a decision to forward another resolution that had been considered by the Constituency Leaders Council at its March 2021 meeting. That resolution, titled *A Resolution for Repentance and Transformation*, was discerned by CLC in break-out groups in which seven out of the eight groups could not recommend it moving to MC USA's next delegate assembly to be voted on. Three groups recommended that it not move forward at all, three groups recommended that it be forwarded as a study resolution, one group could not reach consensus, and one group recommended it be moved forward to be voted on.

MC USA has reported that the feedback from CLC was given to its Resolutions Committee for their discernment and that their five members were at an impasse. (Two felt it should be forwarded to the Delegate Assembly, two did not, and one abstained). That Resolutions Committee finished its work for the 2019-2021 biennium. A new Resolutions Committee (2021-2023 biennium) was appointed by the Executive Board at its most recent meeting. The Executive Board made the decision to take action on the *Resolution for Repentance and Transformation* at the request of its authors, Inclusive Mennonite Pastors, after the authors declined to have it presented as a study resolution.

The Executive Board made the decision to present it to the Delegate Assembly in May of 2022 in **two steps**: **The first step** will be to have the Delegate Assembly decide whether or not to vote on the resolution. **The second step** will be that if the Delegate Assembly affirms it to be voted on, it will be discussed, discerned and voted on later in that same Assembly. If the delegates decide not to take up the resolution, following the first step, then the resolution will not be acted upon. The Executive Board has stated that they have no position on the resolution and that they are forwarding it to the delegate body in order to decide if it should be considered by the delegate body.

Our Response

The Leadership Team of Ohio Conference is concerned and disappointed at MC USA's Executive Board's decision and have communicated that to them in a letter dated Oct. 8, 2021 (letter to EB attached). One of our concerns is with the process and the timing of their decision. While they have made clear that the resolution to retire their *Membership Guidelines* was to be presented at the Delegate Assembly in May 2022, there was no indication from MC USA that the *Resolution for Repentance* would be. In fact, all their communications seemed to suggest otherwise. While MC USA's Executive Board does have the authority at any time to bring a resolution to the Delegate Assembly, this is the first time that they have exercised their authority to forward a resolution directly to delegates in order to decide if it should be considered by the delegate body.

Next Steps

Through our work with delegates and congregational pastors at our recent cluster meetings, our 2021 Annual Conference Assembly, and pastor gatherings, the Leadership Team of Ohio Conference has felt that the majority of our member congregations have willingly committed to staying in relationship with one another and with MC USA (as long as those congregations that desire to not affiliate directly with MC USA can opt out), even if the resolution to retire the *Membership Guidelines* was to pass. The Executive Board's decision to now bring forth the *Repentance and Transformation* resolution has us pausing to discern what this means for us as a conference in the months ahead. How does the Executive Board's action of allowing delegates to decide whether to act on the *Repentance and Transformation* resolution and the possibility of it moving forward for a vote impact Ohio Conference's 2017 resolution? Should a decision to review our affiliation with MC USA hinge on the passing or failing of specific resolutions? If we were to review our affiliation with MC USA, what would the process be, and what would be the timeline? Those are just a few of the questions we have at this time.

In the coming months we will be engaging our pastors, delegates and congregational leaders in discussion and seeking feedback trying to answer those questions. We will also continue to clarify our own identity as a conference, living into our new mission statement, *Loving God, Loving Others, and making disciples of Jesus Christ*. Our prayer is that we can stay engaged with one another as we discern future steps, united under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and overflowing with love for one another.