

## **A Short History of Mennonite Church USA and Its Current Realignment**

Mennonite Church USA was formed on February 1, 2002, by the joining of two Mennonite denominations: Mennonite Church (organized as Mennonite General Conference in 1898) and the General Conference Mennonite Church (founded in 1860). The intersection of Mennonites in alternative service during World War II led to increasing cooperation of the two Mennonite bodies, most notably in the partnership of Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Goshen Biblical Seminary as Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in 1958. Subsequently, many new urban churches affiliated with both denominations and carried dual memberships. The two denominations held their first joint session in Bethlehem, PA in 1983 and resolved to form an Integration Exploration Committee. To prepare the way, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective was adopted in 1995 in Wichita, KS along with a new 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.

The focus of the new denomination was on being missional – seeing where God is at work and joining God in that redemptive work in your community. “God invites us; Jesus sends us; and the Holy Spirit empowers us to share the message and ministry of reconciliation through Christ’s death and resurrection.” New agencies were created to provide resources for pastors and churches and to extend God’s kingdom across the street and around the world.

- Mennonite Mission Network provides service opportunities for young and old through Mennonite Voluntary Service, Service Adventure, SOOP, Youth Venture and International Ministries.
- MennoMedia produces Christian Education curriculum for all ages, publishes Christian growth resources, and maintains an online witness in ThirdWayCafe.
- Mennonite Education Agency provides resourcing and networking for Mennonite schools from grade school to college.
- Everence provides stewardship training, financial counseling, and mutual aid resources for congregations.
- Mennonite Health Services provides inspiration and guidance for Mennonite hospitals, retirement centers, counseling centers, doctors, nurses, and chaplains.

Some of the SCMC churches have used these resources and participated in these programs extensively. Other churches are hardly aware of or have deliberately chosen resourcing from other agencies and networks. The Ministerial Commission of SCMC and many Search Committees have used the resources, forms, and protocols of Mennonite Church USA in credentialing pastors and securing pastoral candidates.

There were difficulties in conviction and culture in creating this new denomination. Differences over sanctifying same-sex relationships or over the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church resulted in a delay in the merger and in the addition of the following instructions to the membership guidelines in Section III.

“...We hold the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) to be the teaching position of Mennonite Church USA. ‘We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life’ (Article 19). We hold the Saskatoon (1986) and Purdue (1987) statements describing homosexual, extramarital and premarital sexual activity as sin to be the teaching position of Mennonite Church USA.... Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a

same-sex covenant ceremony. Such action would be grounds for review of their credentials by their area conference's ministerial credentialing body."

Those advocating for sanctifying gay and lesbian relationships expected this addition to the Membership Guidelines to be a temporary necessity to make the merger possible. Those who agreed with the description of right sexual behavior in Article 19 of the [Confession of Faith](#) saw this as an essential protection for encouraging right sexual practice in the new denomination. There was some expectation by the latter that violators of this rule of faith would be disciplined. However, the governance structure of Mennonite Church USA gave no such authority to the national Executive Committee apart from cumbersome delegate action. Churches determine the criteria for individual members. Area Conferences determine the criteria for individual churches and their pastors (See Glen's Blog by Glen Guyton, Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA, entitled "Dispelling myths related to the Membership Guidelines of Mennonite Church USA", May 19, 2020, at [mennoniteusa.org](http://mennoniteusa.org) for further explanation).

Subsequently, several pastors performed same-sex covenant ceremonies, but after review by their Area Conference Ministerial Commissions, their credentials were found in good standing. This led to dissension with some churches withdrawing from their Area Conferences. When Mountain States Mennonite Conference credentialed a non-celibate lesbian for the pastorate, conferences began withdrawing from Mennonite Church USA – North Central in 2016, Franklin and Lancaster in 2017, and Southeast in 2018.

At the time of the merger, the denomination was composed of 21 former GCMC and MC area conferences with membership totaling 114,753 in 1,062 congregations. As of 2020 there are 16 Area Conferences, 554 congregations, and 62,023 members. In addition, there is an ongoing realignment of churches moving from one Area Conference to another based on biblical interpretation and theological convictions rather than geography. For example, LGBTQ-affirming congregations have been transferring to Central District Conference, and congregations affirming traditional marriage have affiliated with South Central Mennonite Conference.

Advocacy for legitimizing same sex relationships has been led by several well-organized groups – Brethren Mennonite Council, Inclusive Mennonite Pastors, and Pink Mennos and has become ever more visible at Mennonite Church USA Conventions. As more conservative members, churches, and conferences have left Mennonite Church USA, the faith culture and moral commitments of Mennonite Church USA have shifted in regard to right sexual behavior.

An Advisory Group on Mennonite Church USA Membership Guidelines recommended in their report, January 27, 2020, that the statements regarding homosexuality be removed from the Membership Guidelines. The report says, "...the current policies of MC USA, particularly Section III of the Membership Guidelines have done violence to the personhood of LGBTQ people by forcing them to choose between full acceptance by their denomination and living into the abundant life to which God calls them."

The Executive Board meeting September 11-12, 2020, decided to bring a recommendation to the delegate body of Mennonite Church USA in 2021 to retire Section III of the Membership Guidelines. They also clarified that Mennonite Church USA's current personnel policy affirms that the Mennonite Church USA Executive Board, staff and church-wide program agencies will not use sexual identity, gender orientation or marital status as criteria to restrict a person's full participation in the ministries, activities, roles and committees of our denomination. According to MC USA polity, conferences and congregations are responsible and accountable for discerning their hiring practices and the calling of their leaders.

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