

Membership Guidelines for the formation of Mennonite Church USA

(Approved by the Nashville 2001 Delegate Assembly July 5, 2001)

I. Basis for membership

The Mennonite Church USA desires to be a people of God characterized by a commitment to biblical foundations and to Anabaptist perspectives. While the integrating churches are of various backgrounds and formations, we believe the Holy Spirit has called us to unite in faith and mission (Acts 1, 2).

Membership signifies a mutual commitment to build on the true foundation, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11); to become “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22); to be “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” (Matthew 5:13,14).

Covenant

Membership is a voluntary covenant between and among four inter-related communities of faith: congregations, area conferences (including GCMC district conferences), country church bodies, and international fellowships. Congregations are formed of individual members; area conferences are constituted by member congregations; area conferences with their member congregations join to form country church bodies; country church bodies join for international affiliations. Once made, a covenant of membership is nurtured in a spirit of mutual commitment to Jesus Christ and to the body of Christ, the church.

Accountability

Membership assumes accountability before God and toward one another. Accountability has an inward and an outward dimension, with a biblical commission supporting both aspects. Looking inward, the church is commissioned to be a “binding and loosing” fellowship (Matthew 16:13-20; 18:15-20; John 20:23; Ephesians 4:15-16). The joyful obligation of membership includes the calling to build up the body of Christ through mutual discernment of the will of God. Looking outward, the church is commissioned to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 10; Acts 1:8). Membership includes the invitation to become a community engaged in mission and service.

Unity

Members are called to unity in Spirit, “so that the world may believe that [the Father] has sent [the Son]” (John 17:21; see also Ephesians 2:14-22). The church is called to practice humility, gentleness, patience, and love, as it strives to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-6).

As witness to God who is one, and to Jesus Christ who was sent to reveal the will of God, Mennonite Church USA desires that members give faithful expression to their unity as the body of Christ. The Mennonite churches have heard this call to unity ever more clearly in recent years.

Diversity

Within the context of unity, Mennonite Church USA celebrates the rich diversity among its constituent entities (Ephesians 4:7; 1 Corinthians 12). The church is an interdependent and diverse body of believers who together form the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12; Galatians 3:25-29; Colossians 3:11; 1 Peter 2:9-10). This body includes people “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Revelation 7:9), creating a colorful multicultural family of God.

“No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11).

II. Policy and practice of membership

1. The foundation for Mennonite Church USA as a new denomination will be the following:
 - our common vision statement (currently “Vision: Healing and Hope”)
 - our common mission statement
 - our common *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) as the “statement of faith for teaching and nurture in the life of the church.” (COF, introduction, p. 9)
 - a commitment “to seek to understand and interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as we are led by the Holy Spirit in the church.” (COF, article 4)
 - a commitment to participate in discerning and living out statements of Christian faith and life made by Mennonite Church USA
 - a commitment to participate in the denomination's life and mission through delegate representation and financial support

We expect member area conferences to share the vision and commitments listed here, and to ask the same of their member congregations.

2. Where area conferences with their congregations are committed to the vision, mission, and teaching positions of the denomination, they have the freedom to seek God's wisdom and discernment as to how to apply these principles in a life-giving way in the many chaotic, broken and/or sinful situations which present themselves to the church. This should be done in consultation with the broader church, in a spirit of mutual accountability.
3. Congregations have the authority to determine the criteria and the responsibility to implement the process for membership of persons joining their congregation. They do so in consultation with their area conference and in consideration of expectations for membership in Mennonite Church USA.
4. Area conferences have the authority to determine the criteria and the responsibility to implement the process for membership of congregations within their area conference. They do so in consideration of expectations for membership in Mennonite Church USA.
5. Mennonite Church USA has the authority to determine the criteria and the responsibility to implement the process whereby area conferences become members of Mennonite Church USA. They do so in consideration of the expectations for membership in Mennonite Church USA (see II.1).
6. In the event the Plan of Merger is approved, membership of Mennonite Church USA as of the effective date of its Bylaws (February 1, 2002) will include all members of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church who have not withdrawn prior to February 1, 2002.

After the merger, the direct membership of individual General Conference congregations to the denomination will cease. Henceforth all membership of congregations will be through area conferences.
7. Charter membership in Mennonite Church USA
 - a) For Mennonite Church Area Conferences:
Charter membership will be open to all member area conferences and congregations from the time both delegate bodies approve the Plan of Merger in July, 2001 to February 1, 2002, the effective date of the Bylaws. Current member area conferences wanting to participate will be invited to indicate their decision to join, either by their vote on the Plan of Merger or by a reaffirmation of their commitment to be part of Mennonite Church USA before February 1, 2002.
 - b) For General Conference Mennonite Church Congregations:
Charter membership in Mennonite Church USA will be open to all member congregations from the time both delegate bodies approve the Plan of Merger in July, 2001 to February 1, 2002, the effective date of the Bylaws. Current member congregations will be part of Mennonite Church USA by virtue of their membership in an area conference which continues with membership in Mennonite Church USA.
8. In recognition of the differences in how area conferences process issues, we offer the option of provisional membership to area conferences that are not ready for full membership. This permits participation as such area conferences continue to evaluate their membership status. Provisional membership is available through January 31, 2007.
9. New area conferences attain membership in Mennonite Church USA through action of the Delegate Assembly upon recommendation from the Executive Board. New area conferences may apply for membership through the Constituency Leaders Council. Such application for membership will be reviewed by the Constituency Leaders Council and forwarded to the Executive Board along with their counsel.
10. New congregations attain membership in Mennonite Church USA through their membership in an area conference. Congregations that currently are members only of the General Conference Mennonite Church but not of an area conference need to take steps to join an area conference. They shall do so by no later than February 1, 2004. Also, congregations that are presently members of an area conference only but not of the Mennonite Church or the General Conference Mennonite Church will become members of Mennonite Church USA through their membership in their area conference.
11. Congregations will hold membership in only one area conference. Where dual affiliation of a congregation with more than one area conference already exists and is perceived to serve the best interests of the congregation and their conferences at this time, dual conference membership may be retained as long as mutually agreed upon. We also recognize that certain congregations may find it beneficial to maintain ties to other denominational bodies.

12. We recognize the possibility that from time to time a congregation may seek a new area conference relationship. Out of mutual respect for one another, no congregation shall separate or be separated from one area conference and subsequently be accepted by another area conference without consultation among the area conferences and congregations involved, according to criteria established by the Executive Board.
13. A congregation or area conference that is currently a member of one of the integrating church bodies, but is hesitant about becoming a member of Mennonite Church USA, should process its concerns with the church body in which it presently holds membership. Given the voluntary nature of Mennonite Church USA, area conferences and congregations that choose not to join Mennonite Church USA are free to sever their current connections and unite with a church body of their choice. It is hoped this would take place in a cordial spirit, by mutual agreement of the groups involved, and only as a last resort.
14. Our vision for Mennonite Church USA includes the invitation to Christian church bodies of common faith and mission to affiliate with Mennonite Church USA in order to support and strengthen the fellowship and mission of an Anabaptist witness in North America and around the world.

III. Clarification on some issues related to homosexuality and membership

Introduction

For the last several years, issues of same-sex orientation and lifestyle have been the source of deep controversy in our nation and in the church. More particularly, the process of bringing together our two denominations has been complicated by differing responses to congregations who have accepted persons in same sex relationships as members. There are several congregations, formerly members of two conferences, who have been removed from membership by one of the conferences while retaining membership in the other. In various and significant ways, these disciplinary actions touch other congregations, area conferences, and the entire church. Many people are asking for clarification regarding the beliefs and practice of the Mennonite Church USA regarding the matter of homosexuality, particularly as it touches on issues of church membership. Therefore, as we complete the transformation/ integration process during the next six years (to be reviewed with other structures in 2007), the following commitments and polity will guide our discernment and practice:

Commitments

Our hearts belong to God, God's word and God's church. We will follow Jesus.

We know what it is like to be misunderstood and misjudged. We have within our own history misunderstood and misjudged others, resulting in alienation and exclusion. Nevertheless, we hold the church as God's gift; and we hold the church's teaching as our best human understanding of God's way.

We hold the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) to be the teaching position of the 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 the Mennonite Church USA.

We hold the Saskatoon and Purdue statements calling for the church to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views to be the teaching position of the Mennonite Church USA.

We hold the abuse of power, in its many forms, to be against the teaching position of the Mennonite Church USA.

Our passion for the church remains undiminished. Our search for the truth finds answer in the scriptures. Our love for God through Christ lifts us up. Our vision for God's people is healing and hope.

Polity

1. 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. (See *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, p. 125)
2. Each congregation which has been expelled or placed under discipline by one conference and not another is asked to state support of the vision and commitments of Mennonite Church USA (see II.1). Within two years of the adoption of these guidelines, the two conferences of which each such congregation is or was formerly a member must work together with the congregation to determine the future membership status of the congregation. (We encourage conferences to work with the principles outlined in "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love," 1995). If the two conferences cannot agree, or if their agreement is challenged by another conference, the Executive Board may appoint a group (with at least some of its members from the Constituency Leaders Council) to work with the conferences and congregations to resolve the matter.