

ACC Facilitation Team

Discernment and Dialogue at Spring Assembly

Dear ACC Delegate,

During the Spring Assembly, the Facilitation Team will structure a time for delegates to engage in discernment and dialogue about how Scripture speaks to questions of human sexuality and how we relate to each other as churches in ACC. No decisions will be made at this meeting. Instead, we'll devote time to exploring Scripture, listening for God's leading, and sharing our own perspectives.

In preparation for this gathering, we invite you to prayerfully consider how you will approach this process. What are your hopes? What are your fears? Where do you sense God's Spirit leading?

Romans 14 has emerged as a central Biblical text for the Facilitation Team, where Paul writes:

“Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification.”

As we together pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification, we seek to avoid two parallel pitfalls—*politeness* (saying what we think others want us to say rather than naming our true convictions) and *polemic* (saying the same things over and over again to prove our point).

Instead, we pray that this time gives opportunity for each of us to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). This requires a careful balance of candor (speaking the truth) and compassion (in love).

We want to heed the wisdom of James:

“Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.”

Our time together will be structured “dialogue,” defined this way: Dialogue is a process that allows people to share their perspectives about difficult issues—especially those we tend to avoid or dispute in unconstructive ways—and to foster greater understanding through these conversations. As such,

- Dialogue is not about winning an argument but about understanding and learning from others.
- Dialogue can help people to build trust and be open to perspectives that are different from their own.
- Dialogue can, and often does, lead to action—both personal and collaborative—but the purpose of *this* meeting is not to decide on action but rather to build understanding and strengthen relationships, out of which constructive action may emerge.

Above all, this dialogue will invite God's Holy Spirit to speak to us and through us. With that in mind, we will attempt to *listen in ways that invite others to speak* and *speak in ways that invite others to listen*.

As Ervin Stutzman, Executive Director of MCUSA, noted: “The issues that we face cannot be solved by human effort alone. We need the enablement of God's Spirit, and the strength of God's Word.”

Blessings of grace and peace as you prepare to seek God's will together.

The ACC Facilitation Team (Members' Names on final page)

PS - We've included a brief glossary of terms defining some of the common phrases we've heard surface in this dialogue.

Glossary of Terms

When engaging in a dialogue of this nature, we rely on certain words and phrases as shorthand for something with larger meaning. These are some terms that frequently surface in this particular conversation, along with a brief description of each term. This list is far from exhaustive, so if you hear someone use an unfamiliar term or a familiar term in an unfamiliar way, don't hesitate to ask for clarification.

Bylaws – A governing document of Atlantic Coast Conference, last updated in 2011. You can read the full text at <http://atlanticcoastconference.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ACC-Bylaws-approved-Oct-22-2011.pdf>

Confession of Faith In a Mennonite Perspective – A document drafted in 1995 that attempts to summarize what Mennonites believe and practice. Article 19 (Family, Singleness, and Marriage) includes the phrase “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. Christian marriage is a mutual relationship in Christ, a covenant made in the context of the church. According to Scripture, right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship. Marriage is meant for sexual intimacy, companionship, and the birth and nurture of children.” The full document can be found at <http://www.mennolink.org/doc/cof>

Conservative / Traditional / Restrictive and Progressive / Liberal / Inclusive – Common ways to summarize schools of thought about matters of faith and practice. None of these terms fully captures the nuances of a complicated subject, and any of them could be considered offensive or pejorative.

Discernment – In this context, “a means by which people of faith come to understand God’s will” (Ervin Stutzman)

Frazer Mennonite Church – A congregation that requested to transfer membership from Lancaster Mennonite Conference to Atlantic Coast Conference. That request (presented at the 2012 Fall Assembly) led to a period of dialogue and discernment within ACC, followed by a vote to welcome Frazer as an Associate Member congregation (affirmed by delegates at the 2013 Spring Assembly), with an additional period of dialogue and discernment leading up to a review at Fall Assembly 2014. In 2011, the congregation affirmed this statement of their current calling: “We believe that the Spirit of God is calling Frazer Mennonite Church to embody and give witness to practicing our unity in Jesus Christ in the midst of our diversity within the congregation, in our conference/denominational relationships, and in the world.” The congregation also noted in their letter of introduction that “We do not want to be defined by one issue, but seek to continue to extend a welcome to anyone desiring to follow Christ and to grow in the context of the Frazer Mennonite family of faith. We both embrace and teach our Mennonite Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective and allow genuine discussion and discernment of matters of faith to continue.”

Key Advocacy Groups - Several groups and organizations have formed to advocate for churches, conferences, and the denomination to adopt particular positions. Notable groups include the Anabaptist Renewal Circles (<http://anabaptistrenewal.org>), Pink Menno (<http://www.pinkmenno.org>), and Supportive Communities Network (<http://www.bmclgbt.org/scn.shtml>)

LGBT / LGBTQ – A shorthand way to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender individuals. “Q” can alternately stand for “queer” (a term of self-description embraced by some, and rejected by others) or “questioning” (referring to someone with an uncertain sense of gender identity or sexual orientation.) The terms “same-gender relationships,” “homosexuality,” and “sexual minorities” are also used. Any of these terms (including LGBT) can be controversial or offensive.

Membership / Membership Guidelines – An understanding of how individuals are part of a congregation, how congregations are part of a conference, and how conferences are part of a national organization. Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA) views “membership” as “a voluntary covenant between and among four inter-related communities of faith: congregations, area conferences, national church bodies, and international fellowships.” According to MCUSA’s membership guidelines, “Congregations have the authority to determine the criteria and the responsibility to implement the process for membership of persons joining their congregation, as well as leaving. They do so in consultation with their area conference and in consideration of expectations for membership in Mennonite Church USA.” Congregations are members of MCUSA through a local area conference, such as Atlantic Coast Conference. ACC’s bylaws have five criteria for congregations to be members: “a.) The existence of a recognized body of members; b.) An adequate leadership structure that supports the operations of a viable congregation; c.) A willingness to embrace the current Confession of Faith of Mennonite Church USA as a guiding framework for ministry and relationship; d.) A commitment to giving and receiving counsel from the conference and/or its constituent congregations; e.) A readiness to share responsibly in the program of the Conference with interest, prayers, personnel and funds.” MCUSA’s membership guidelines can be found at http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/MembershipGuidelines_2013_July.pdf

Glossary of Terms

Open & Affirming – A term embraced by some churches to describe an open invitation to LGBT individuals participating in all areas of church life. Several churches within ACC have been open and affirming for many years.

Polity – A term that refers to our structure—how congregations within ACC relate to each other. ACC’s history is one of a “congregational” polity, wherein congregations are given broad latitude to determine matters of faith and practice within their local context.

Saskatoon and Purdue Resolutions – Statements adopted by Mennonite Church and General Conference at their assemblies in 1986 and 1987. The statements are nearly identical with subtle shifts in wording. The 1987 (Mennonite Church / Purdue) resolution includes this covenant: “We covenant with each other to study the Bible together and expand our insight into the biblical teachings relating to sexuality. We understand the Bible to teach that sexual intercourse is reserved for a man and woman united in marriage and that violation of this teaching is a sin. It is our understanding that this teaching also precludes premarital, extramarital and homosexual sexual activity. We further understand the Bible to teach the sanctity of the marriage covenant and that any violation of this covenant, including spouse abuse, is sin.” The same resolution also includes this confession: “We confess our fear and repent of our rejection of those of us with a different sexual orientation and of our lack of compassion for their struggle to find a place in society and in the church.” The full text of the statements can be found at <http://ljohms.ams.edu/Resolutions.htm>

Teaching Position – A shorthand way to summarize the perspectives of the 1995 Confession of Faith and the 1986 / 1987 Saskatoon and Purdue resolutions.

Unity in Diversity - A key concept in ACC’s history, suggesting that as ACC congregations are unified around many aspects of faith and practice, yet have significant diversity in other areas. Also the title of an historical work by John Rudy written to celebrate ACC’s 25th anniversary.

ACC Facilitation Team Members

Bruce Bradshaw - *Mennonite Congregation of Boston*

Jon Carlson (Co-Chair) - *Oley Valley Mennonite Church*

Julie Dunst (Co-Chair) - *Zion Mennonite Church*

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Merv Horst - *Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship*

Bob Petersheim - *Conestoga Mennonite Church*

Rolando Santiago - *Neffsville Mennonite Church*

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