

Membership Guidelines

(Approved by the Nashville 2001 Delegate Assembly July 5, 2001)
(Distributed as an administrative update to the Delegate Assembly July 2013)

I. Basis for membership

Mennonite Church USA desires to be a people of God committed to biblical foundations and to Anabaptist perspectives. While our church was formed out 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, national 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 national church bodies; national church bodies join to form 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 developing denomination is 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, as well as leaving. 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, either to join or to leave. They do so in consideration of expectations for membership in Mennonite Church USA. Congregations forfeit their membership in Mennonite Church USA if and when they are no longer affiliated with an area conference.

5. Mennonite Church USA has the authority to determine the criteria and the responsibility to implement the process whereby area conferences join or leave as member conferences of Mennonite Church USA. They do so in consideration of the expectations for membership in Mennonite Church USA (see II.1).

6. Charter membership in Mennonite Church USA consists of all member area conferences and congregations who were part of the General Conference Mennonite Church or the Mennonite Church at the effective date of the original Bylaws, and who indicated 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. This includes those congregations who joined area conferences during the time of area conference deliberations on whether or not to reaffirm their membership in Mennonite Church USA.

7. The official number of members in Mennonite Church USA shall be the sum of members reported to the Executive Directors by each area conference. This shall also be the membership number submitted to Mennonite World Conference.

8. 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 with their counsel. These new conferences may attain membership in Mennonite Church USA through action of the Delegate Assembly upon recommendation from the Executive Board.

9. New congregations attain membership in Mennonite Church USA through their membership in an area conference.

10. Congregations will generally hold membership in only one area conference. Where dual affiliation of a congregation with more than one area conference existed prior to the merger and continues to be perceived to serve the best interests of the congregation and their conferences, 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.

11. 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.

12. 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 was 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 were 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. The following commitments and polity 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 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.

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 Mennonite Church USA.

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

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 for a list of other actions that may prompt such a review.