



INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR ETHNO-RELIGIOUS MEDIATION

"Fostering a culture of peace among ethnic and religious groups"

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U.S. 501 (c) (3) tax exempt public charity, nonprofit and non-governmental organization in Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

MEDIATION ACADEMY

Specialized Mediation Training The Mediation of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts

Mediation Project

Mediation Case Study (developed by Matthew Cordella-Bontrager, October 24, 2018)

Retirement Benefits for Southeast Mennonite Conference Pastors

What Happened? Historical Background to the Conflict

Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA) is an Anabaptist Christian denomination in the United States, born from the 2002 merger of the [Old] Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. Although these two bodies were able to articulate a common Confession of Faith in 1995, the merger of these groups remained incomplete for another seven years due to differences in culture and church polity: the [Old] Mennonite Church being primarily Swiss-German in background and the General Conference Mennonite Church operating in the Russian Mennonite tradition; the [Old] Mennonite Church generally maintaining a distant relationship with government and a cautious attitude toward activism, and the General Conference taking a more active posture; the [Old] Mennonite Church operating out of a quasi-episcopal polity, where bishops over various regions historically ensured unity of doctrine and practice, and the General Conference operating out of a congregational polity, which does not countenance church authorities external to the local congregation.

These practical differences made not only for a difficult merger, but also for a difficult relationship as MCUSA. Although other sociological forces are likely at work in the attrition of membership, it is worth noting that the total membership of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the [Old] Mennonite Church before the merger in 1998 was roughly 133,000; in 2018, due to the attrition of members and church within constituent conferences of MCUSA, and due to

the departure of entire constituent conferences *en masse*, fewer than 65,000 members remain in fellowship with MCUSA.¹ This rapid decline strains the financial resources of the denomination.

Framing the story of MCUSA in terms of conflict between Russian and Swiss-German background Mennonites is a common and limiting error. MCUSA is highly diverse, and large shares of the membership are made up by people of color. The majority Southeast Mennonite Conference, a constituent conference of MCUSA based in Florida, is people of color. Over the course of a three-year discernment process, Southeast Mennonite Conference decided to separate from MCUSA. The presenting issue for this separation has been the willingness of MCUSA to allow churches which perform same-sex marriages, and ordain LGBT people, to remain in good standing with the denomination. MCUSA points to the *congregationalist* polity of the General Conference Mennonite Church in support of this policy, whereas Southeast Mennonite Conference points to the Confession of Faith and the denominational membership guidelines.

At stake in the departure of the Southeast Mennonite Conference from MCUSA is the participation of Southeast Mennonite Conference in the Corinthian Plan. The Corinthian Plan is a denominational healthcare plan that subsidizes healthcare for low and moderate income pastors. Many leaders in Southeast Mennonite Conference — people of color, serving *bivocationally* in pastoral leadership — benefit from the Corinthian Plan. Other bodies that have separated from MCUSA (e.g., Lancaster Mennonite Conference) have negotiated their continuing participation in the Corinthian Plan. No such agreement has been reached between Southeast Mennonite Conference and MCUSA. Leaders from MCUSA are openly hostile to the idea, with MCUSA denominational minister Michael Danner saying, “It lacks integrity, in my view, to separate yourself from MCUSA and still retain benefits that come from MCUSA ministries and programs, including those of our program agencies.”

Each Other’s Stories — how each person understands the situation and why

Southeast Mennonite Conference’s Story — *They are the problem; this is a very broken relationship.*

Position:

We are good Christians. We want to hold and live out our theological convictions about the exclusivity of marriage with integrity, maintaining denominational fellowship only with those Christians who share our convictions. MCUSA is not honoring the agreements we made at the merger, or the understandings that are set down in our [supposedly shared!] Confession of Faith. Now they want to take away our healthcare, because we will not tolerate their divergent teachings and practices in our fellowship.

Interests:

Clarity: We need you (and the watching world) to know where we stand on the matter of marriage and sexuality. We believe that if we maintain our affiliation with MCUSA, the clarity of our witness will be compromised. We feel that you have been willfully unclear in promoting affiliation with MCUSA, to try and slow your decline in membership.

¹ For the sake of transparency, it must be acknowledged that the author belongs to Lancaster Mennonite Conference, the largest of the constituent bodies that has left MCUSA. The presenting issue in the departure of Lancaster Mennonite Conference from MCUSA was the mainstreaming of same-sex marriage in MCUSA. In many respects, this parallels the situation of Southeast Mennonite Conference.

Integrity: We made an agreement, and you are not honoring it. The merger was grounded in our Confession of Faith, and clear membership guidelines. Those are not being upheld. We want to invest in relationships with people who will keep their word. If we remain affiliated with MCUSA, we feel that we are not keeping our word. Our integrity is compromised.

Belonging: We are not Swiss-German or Russian Mennonite. We are not white. We struggled to feel belonging among Mennonites even before the presenting issue of sexuality. We are troubled by both the practice and toleration of same-sex marriage in the church; this, too, makes us feel like we do not belong. When you violate our shared understandings to advance the interests of your LGBT children, and threaten to take away our healthcare for reacting, it reveals that we never truly belonged. You have power, and we do not. Other conferences which departed from MCUSA (e.g., Lancaster Mennonite Conference) were able to negotiate participation in the Corinthian Plan without hostility. Was it because they are predominantly white? This, too, makes us feel like we do not belong.

Respect: Your obvious animus toward us and our convictions makes us feel disrespected. You say that you lament our departure, but your failure to show us respect in this transition tells a different story. That a denominational leader would call our need to have continuing healthcare coverage a “lack of integrity” shows a deep lack of understanding or respect, both of our own desire to maintain theological integrity, and of the experience of low-income *bivocational* pastors who struggle to find health insurance.

Acknowledgment: We need you to acknowledge that we have not been represented well at high levels of decision-making at MCUSA. You have been very intentional about putting people of color in positions of leadership, but you have carefully curated these individuals, ensuring that they are willing to go along with your policies. This is tokenism; they do not speak for all people of color. We feel that we have not had an equal place at the table. We also need for you to acknowledge the way that our pastors have served sacrificially in *bivocational* roles. Surely, the Corinthian Plan was designed for people like this.

Self-sovereignty: Black and Latino congregations in MCUSA have been helped by grants from Iglesia Menonita Hispana and the African American Mennonite Association. Many of our churches have come to depend on this support. We sometimes feel like we cannot speak openly and critically about MCUSA, because of their generosity toward us. Our financial dependency has weakened our witness; we need to become differentiated and transparent.

Healthcare/security: We need to be able to count on this system that we have been paying into! We need healthcare! Healthcare is basic human right; why would you deny it to us because we disagree with your divergence from our membership agreement? You constantly advocate for justice and human rights, but then you deny those very things to the vulnerable people with whom you are in relationship. We want to continue participating in the Corinthian Plan.

MCUSA’s Story — *They are the problem; we must survive through progress.*

Position:

We are good Christians. We hold doctrine with an open hand. We believe that professing Christian can disagree about most, any matter of doctrine or practice and still maintain good church fellowship. We value diversity and inclusion. Our core documents are loose guidelines, not rules. We have committed to bold, progressive path into the future with our *Journey Forward* plan. Nevertheless, we are hurting from loss of membership and financial support. We cannot afford to subsidize healthcare for low and middle-income pastors who are no longer part of MCUSA. We

can barely afford to subsidize health care for pastors who are a part of MCUSA. If pastors from Southeast Mennonite Conference want to keep their health insurance, they should get on board with the *Journey Forward*.

Interests:

Financial security/survival: We are hurting financially. Enrollment in our colleges is down, membership in our churches is down; as a result, deep cuts in our denominational programming and services are inevitable. We deeply desire for the institution of MCUSA to survive into the next generation, and beyond. It's difficult to see how that can happen, if we're financially committed to supporting people who are no longer part of MCUSA. We want to invest our resources in people who are going to help us survive, not people who are critical of us and do not want to be associated with us. If Southeast Mennonite Conference leaves MCUSA, they should expect to stop participating in the Corinthian Plan.

Tolerance/forbearance: We highly value tolerance. In the midst of differences, even serious differences, we strongly believe that the right course for the church is to exercise forbearance. In fact, many of us hold as a matter of Christian conviction that to divide the church over the issue of sexuality would be a sin. We refrain from saying so on most occasions, but we believe that the people who leave MCUSA because they refuse to tolerate same-sex marriage are sinning. God's vision for the church is the inclusion and unity of diverse people. Groups that leave MCUSA are extreme and intolerant. By leaving, they undermine our important peace witness.

Progress: Our old agreements do not serve us anymore. The culture has shifted; we, too, have discerned a new movement of the Holy Spirit. We are trying to faithfully execute the new moral vision that we have discerned in the Bible, under the guidance of the Spirit. We need to repent of our past teaching and practice regarding LGBT issues, and embrace a new vision. While we firmly believe in the necessity of progress in this area, we wish that this value did not alienate so many of our constituents — like Southeast Mennonite Conference — who do not share our convictions in this area. We wish that they could bless our new direction.

Diversity: We value diversity, believing that the diversity of God's good Creation is a gift. LGBT people are part of God's good Creation, just like people of color. Everyone should be welcome in MCUSA, and it is a problem for us when it seems like they are not.

Ongoing relationship to people of color: We recognize that our commitments to diversity, progress, and forbearance have been deeply alienating to many people of color. It does not fit with our self-concept when our representatives (who are largely educated, white progressives) clash openly with people of color. We value the moral credibility that your approval would give to our agenda. Broken relationship with Southeast Mennonite Conference frees us to pursue progress without their dissenting voices, and to practice forbearance with people who are more like us. However, the departure of Southeast Mennonite Conference also wounds our diversity.