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## DAILY NEWS POSTS

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Discussion of MSMC decision 'complicated and difficult'



1.31. 2015 Written By: Tim Nafizger

### A report on various responses to a conference's licensing decision

When Mountain States Mennonite Conference (<http://www.mountainstatesmc.org>) (MSMC) announced the decision to license Theda Good on Dec. 23, 2013, church leaders responded in a February 2014 letter.

MSMC leaders hold that this letter stands in contrast to earlier instructions based on a June 13, 2012, letter ([https://themennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/EC\\_statement\\_2012-June.pdf](https://themennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/EC_statement_2012-June.pdf)) from the Executive Committee of Mennonite Church USA (<http://www.mennoniteusa.org>) Executive Board (MC USA EB) regarding same-sex relationships.

The ongoing discussion regarding the decision and its consequences within MC USA in the past year remain complicated and difficult for the leaders involved.

**Despite these challenges, MC USA and MSMC reps have agreed to find ways to move forward**

## despite differences.

For example, in April 2014, a group of MSMC and MC USA reps met to discuss the licensure process, review any regrets about the events as they transpired, and think together about a way forward that could bring unity to the broader church.



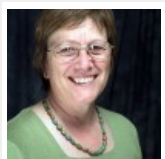
Herm Weaver

Also, for this article, Herm Weaver, conference minister of MSMC, and Ervin Stutzman, executive director of MC USA, asked to be interviewed together as a symbol of their commitment to work together going forward. In their conversation on Dec. 19, 2014, they both emphasized their hope for the church moving forward together.

"Those of us working at this for MSMC were trying our best to follow Jesus. That continues to be what we aim for every day," said Weaver in a Jan. 6 email. "I know the same could easily be said about my friend Ervin and likely the EB and many other folks who are disappointed in the outcome."

The EB's February 2014 letter (<http://www.mennoniteusa.org/moving-forward-a-statement-from-the-executive-board/>) states: "Mountain States Mennonite Conference acted without sufficient counsel from the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) and the Conference Ministers' group."

According to multiple sources, MSMC reached out in many different ways during their year-long discernment process and followed the most recent letter from the executive committee of the EB regarding same-sex relationships.



Nancy  
Kauffmann

In the fall of 2012, MSMC invited counsel from Stutzman into their discernment on licensing Theda Good. According to MSMC's timeline of events ([http://www.mountainstatesmc.org/%20Licensing\\_Document](http://www.mountainstatesmc.org/%20Licensing_Document)), "Ervin's instructions were to keep Nancy [Kauffmann] involved." Kauffmann is denominational minister for MC USA.

"The MSMC leadership board and the credentialing committee were moving with as much integrity as possible," Kauffmann said on Dec. 10, 2014. "I encouraged them to make their decision based on whether this person was called, not on their LGBTQ identity. While I was able to speak into their process and offer counsel, both myself and my supervisors agreed, based on existing ministerial polity, that it was the conference who would decide on

whether or not to license Good." MSMC included Kauffmann regularly in their conversations about Good's licensing process through the year of 2013.

"[Kauffmann] presented an alternative to ministerial credentialing for the conference to consider, but they made a different choice," said Stutzman in a Jan. 16 email.

### **June 2012 letter from the Executive Committee**

Among the documents that Kauffmann provided MSMC as part of their discernment process was the most recent letter from the MC USA Executive Committee (EC, which is a subcommittee of the EB that provides leadership for the board and "acts for the Executive Board as necessary between regular meetings of the board," according to the board's policies) on the topic of same-sex relationships, written on June 12, 2012.

"It gave an understanding that it would be the conference that made that decision and that we wouldn't be jumping in and telling them," Kauffmann said.

The letter states ([www.themennonite.org/daily-news/mc-usa-executive-committee-responds-sex-unions/](http://www.themennonite.org/daily-news/mc-usa-executive-committee-responds-sex-unions/)): "Ministerial credentials are held at the conference level and thus ministers' accountability is to the area conference rather than the national conference."

It continues: "We understand the frustration of persons who wish that the national conference would make decisions that our polity has given to area conferences of Mennonite Church USA to resolve."

**"The June 2012 letter was fairly significant for us early on," said Weaver on Dec. 19, 2014. "It reinforced for us a bit of a hands-off approach from the wider church."**

Given the significance of the June 2012 letter in guiding their decision-making process and their guidance from Kauffmann, Rhoda Blough, moderator of MSMC at the time, said it was painful to read the EB's February 2014 letter.

"It felt very demeaning to read that our 'conference decision has exacerbated the polarities within our church and frayed the fragile strands of accountability that hold our church together,' " she said in a statement to the Constituency Leadership Council (CLC) on March 20, 2014.



Ervin Stutzman

### **Stutzman said the letter was written exclusively to address ministers performing same-sex covenant ceremonies.**

"They didn't envision the situation of ordaining a person in a same-sex relationship," he said on Dec. 19, 2014.

Richard Thomas, member of the EB and MC USA moderator at the time the letter was written, agrees with Stutzman. He says the letter, which he signed, was taken out of context by MSMC. In a Jan. 9 email he wrote that their interpretation "does not take seriously the whole letter but perhaps picks out several sentences which out of the context of the whole letter may be used to support a conference action in violation of national polity."

The national polity Thomas references is Part 3 of the 2001 Membership Guidelines ([www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/MembershipGuidelines\\_2013\\_July.pdf](http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/MembershipGuidelines_2013_July.pdf)).

### **Conference ministers meetings in 2013**

The EB's February 2014 letter said MSMC did not adequately consult the conference ministers' group, a nongovernance body made up of conference ministers from MC USA's 21 conferences.

This group meets for one evening twice a year during the CLC gathering and a third time each year for three days in a joint gathering with area conference ministers from Mennonite Church Canada.

### **Conversation—or lack of conversation—surrounding MSMC in those conference ministers' meetings is interpreted differently.**

"We did reach out a few times to invite involvement from the wider church in our process," said Weaver. "A number of times I talked about this at conference ministers' meetings and got almost no response. It was pretty quiet in the room."

Stutzman spoke to the challenge of discussing LGBTQ inclusion in these gatherings. "In 2013, a year ago, getting conference ministers to talk about this area was very difficult," said Stutzman. "I'm not faulting Herm here at all. I think Herm has reached out to conference ministers. The ethos of that meeting was such that people had strong feelings but didn't feel free to speak up."

According to Stutzman, the topic is difficult to bring up. In an exercise at the December 2013 conference ministers' meeting, participants were instructed to write down their personal convictions on the inclusion of LGBTQ people in the church. The process created some anxiety in the room and not everyone participated, he said.

"I assumed that when the [MSMC] board got close to making a decision, we'd have the broader group engage it," Stutzman said. "People were uncomfortable asserting themselves into that [MSMC] process because they felt it was an imposition, but they had an expectation that there wouldn't be a decision different from what they had agreed before."

Carol Wise sees this expectation of a status-quo-affirming decision by MSMC and the surprise at a different result as a problem. Wise is director of Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Interests (BMC). "In some ways it's an indicator of how removed leadership has been from what is happening in many of our congregations," she said on Dec. 31, 2014. "You've really had to work at being uninformed to not know that attitudes toward LGBTQ people are changing."

### **Several conference ministers spoke to the MSMC issue and the conference ministers' meetings.**

James Wenger, regional conference minister for South Central Mennonite Conference, said he perceived Weaver's comments to the conference ministers gatherings in 2013 as more of a report than an invitation.

"We were just informed that they were doing this. Giving and receiving counsel wasn't part of that," Wenger said on Dec. 30. "I guess people individually could have gone and talked to him."

At the same time, Wenger acknowledged that Terry Shue, director of Leadership Development for MC USA, and the others setting the agenda for the conference ministers' meetings did not want to discuss MSMC's discernment either.

"There was a sense that people were afraid to really make it in an agenda item because it was so controversial and they didn't know how they were going to handle it," Wenger said.

In a Jan. 5 email, Fred Kanagy, North Central Conference conference minister, said, "It is very difficult, if not impossible, to carry on profitable discussions when speaking different languages; when words are defined very differently."

#### **Correspondence to Mennonite Church USA leaders in January 2014**

Stutzman acknowledges that he and the EB staff chose not to bring up MSMC's discernment process at CLC gatherings or conference ministers gatherings. Still, the EB's February 2014 letter states that MSMC "acted without sufficient counsel."

When asked about this incongruity, Stutzman referred to the board's Feb. 13-15, 2014, meeting as a "perfect storm."

Along with a blizzard that kept five board members from the meeting, Stutzman also points to what the February 2014 letter refers to as "a significant amount of correspondence to Mennonite Church USA leaders" generated by MSMC's decision to license Theda Good.

#### **"Quite a few conferences had written very specific critiques of the board for not having taken action on MSMC," said Stutzman.**

Wenger provided this reporter with a 2014 letter that the executive committee of South Central Mennonite Conference wrote to the Executive Committee of MC USA.

"If no action is taken in this matter, we expect that some South Central congregations will not continue as members of MC USA," the South Central letter said, "and suspect that other conferences may be facing a similar possibility."

It cites this potential loss and harm to "the unity of the church" as a factor that should limit the autonomy of congregations and conferences. They do not specify what action they are asking for from the Executive Committee, but Wenger said they were not asking for MSMC to be expelled or disciplined.

The letter asserts that MSMC's decision was in "direct opposition to core documents of the Mennonite faith." According to Wenger, this feeling is stronger in the case of MSMC because of their unique process of joining MC USA as a conference in 2007 and the specific commitments they made to the membership guidelines in that process.

These commitments can be read here (<http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/MSMC-Response-to-Mennonite-Church-USA-Criteria.pdf>).

#### **Wenger said he understands the shift in tone from the EB's June 2012 letter to the February 2014 letter.**

"I can see why they changed their mind between the first and second letter," he said. "When MC USA was formed, we lost 200-300 churches, and the EB saw that with MSMC's decision we might be gearing up to lose another 200-300 churches. And for that reason they saw that they needed to take a different course."

Kanagy said his conference (North Central Conference) was glad that MC USA did not recognize Good's license. "It was reassuring to us that our denominational leaders were not being swayed by a minority to change our denominational position or simply look the other way," he said.

Allen Lehman, Franklin Mennonite Conference minister, said in an email on Jan. 6: "If you see some evolution in the Executive Boards' journey toward more responsible actions and decisions, I rejoice. If they overstepped their authority, then I ask, if not them then who will do something? I am sure if the Executive Board would have led in a way that affirmed MSMC, those who see themselves as progressive would not care a bit if they exercised authority in that direction."

"In MC USA, we are a very diverse set of conferences," said Stutzman. "We need every possible way to find commonalities to keep us together."

#### **Hopes and challenges going forward**

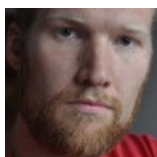
Many of the Mennonite leaders interviewed for this article agree that Mennonite church polity is rooted in and dependent on personal relationships rather than church-based judicial proceedings like those used by Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist

churches.

"When we depend on personal relationships [in our denomination] and there is high stress, it's not an easy place," Stutzman said. "We believe in peacemaking, in working with each other, and so instead of a generalized conflict we need sharpened conflict and more trusting relationships. When I speak about relationships being the main thing, some conferences feel like I'm abandoning truth."

Along with MC USA leaders, Weaver cited Willard Metzger, executive director of Mennonite Church Canada, as a hopeful example of Mennonite leadership. "I've really appreciated Willard's capacity to let go and trust God and know that whatever structure we have may come undone, but God doesn't come undone in the midst of our structures," Weaver said. "I've tried to focus a lot of my own personal energy in that direction. God is able to do more than we can even imagine."

According to Weaver, some of the conference ministers have been discussing how to build more trust among the 21 conference ministers of MC USA. "Keith Weaver [conference moderator of Lancaster Mennonite Conference] and I have been talking about doing some retreats where we don't do work, but we just get to know each other," said Herm Weaver.



*Tim Nafziger, a writer who blogs at [www.themenonite.org](http://www.themenonite.org), attends Ojai Valley (Calif.) Community Church.*

*Photo above: Members of the Mennonite Church USA Executive Board pray during the Feb. 13-15 2014 meeting in Harrisonburg, Va.. Photo by Hannah Heinzekehr.*

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