

Credentialing Review Document for Mountain States Mennonite Conference (MSMC)

January 31, 2018

Background and Rationale

While following the same polity manual, different conferences within MC USA are arriving at differing answers to the question of who is eligible for credentialing. In light of these tensions, the Leadership Board of MSMC appointed a credentialing review committee in 2016 to consider our current credentialing process. This credentialing review committee considered a functional understanding of what it means to be in responsible mutual relationship with one another, by seeking to embody the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and remain consistent with Biblical and Anabaptist teachings and practices – through study, prayer and discernment. The committee considered how views of credentials are changing within our context and among generations. The committee reviewed its credentialing process with the goal of outlining a way that fits MSMC’s context in this moment while providing a bridge toward our future.

At the annual assembly in August 2017 the credentialing review committee presented a draft to the delegates for approval that led to follow up discussion. Their draft was also discussed at Pastor/Spouse Retreat in November 2017, was distributed to all MSMC pastoral ministers for response and was discussed with the Ministerial Council. This document from CMT represents revisions based on feedback from these forums and represents the current working document of the CMT and MC.

We sought to uphold these understandings in our process:

- Our wish is to strengthen congregational and calling bodies participation in this process of granting, accountability, and “holding” of credentials;
- We seek to honor setting apart persons with a credential for ministry and the understanding that we are all gifted with spiritual gifting as a part of the “priesthood of all believers”;
- We desire strong relationships between those who are credentialed, the calling bodies and the Conference;
- We desire to expand the understanding of who may be credentialed while increasing the opportunity for relational accountability among the Conference, congregations/requesting bodies and credentialed leaders. We believe this model will assist us in this time of transition in our churches and denomination to expand our concept of who is a spiritual leader while also holding relational accountability to a high standard.

Premises

1. We start with the credentialing processes as defined by Mennonite Church USA’s *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership* (2017)¹ as our guideline. We understand that in our denominational system, the Conference is the credentialing body.

¹ This document has Biblical foundations and understandings for the call of a pastor. Throughout the text it works collaboratively and in partnership with *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995).

2. The congregation and the Conference share in granting of credentials and accountability of credentialed pastors. The Conference confers and “holds” these credentials at the request of the calling congregation. Therefore, those credentialed are accountable to both their calling/home congregation and the conference of which the congregation is a member.
3. Credentialing serves as an affirmation, validation, and recognition of a call to ministry and spiritual leadership. The ministerial credential also provides professional recognition.
4. At times a member congregation may call a pastor or other spiritual leader with different views than others in the Conference or the denomination. These views presumably fit with the calling congregation. Deference is given to the discernment of the congregation unless it appears there are concerns (1) the congregation is not adequately considering² the affect of its decision on the congregation, conference and broader denomination, or (2) there are ethical issues or evidence of misconduct that the congregation is not adequately considering.
5. Engaging in responsible mutual relationship by proximity is an important part of the character and function of MSMC. In our by-laws we have outlined practical ways for our congregations to be in relational accountability with one another. However, we have not outlined similar expectations for credentialed members of MSMC. With the proposal as stated below, we recognize the value of developing a resilient community by nurturing relationships that can sustain conflict and differences. To this end we encourage nurturing healthy and vibrant relationships between congregations as well as between other ministry leadership of conference congregations.
6. The Conference grants credentials not only to pastors, but also to chaplains, and other persons in ministry. The Conference Ministerial Council is open to requests for credentialing for folks from member congregations who are involved in special ministries with continuing support from their congregation. Accountability in these cases is shared both by the institution that employs them (if applicable) and their home congregation.

MSMC Plan

1. MSMC leadership provides resources and training to congregational leadership and search committees in the context of identifying and hiring a pastoral candidate for a congregational call. This support includes utilizing all the resources, support and vetting provided by MC USA; thus, reinforcing the congregation’s relational mutual responsibility within MSMC and MC USA. As part of this process, all candidates are required to complete the MLI, to agree that a background check be performed, and cooperate with the reference-gathering process until the MLI process is complete. This is true even when a person holds a credential in another denomination.

² Our denominational accountability involves consideration of how our decisions affect the broader church. For example, see *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership* pages 33 and 56.

2. MSMC acts as the direct relational mutual responsible contact for MC USA. Congregations are encouraged to contact their Conference Minister upon learning of an opening of a pastoral position. Conference Ministers will make contact with the Ministerial Council with questions or as they see fit during the search and interview of candidate process. Conference Ministers serve as a guide to congregational Search Committees through the interviewing and hiring process, and for assistance to the congregation in taking credentialing steps (licensing, ordination, installation).
3. A congregational or organizational representative will be present for part of the credentialing interview and will take ownership for implementation of any follow up recommendations by the MSMC Ministerial Council.
4. Each credentialed leader in active ministry is expected to:
 - a. Participate in Healthy Boundary Training³, as well as subsequent refresher training, hosted by MSMC with the option of submitting a request for a waiver to the Ministerial Council should their place of employment already offer a similar training;
 - b. Participate in one yearly continuing education opportunity provided by the Conference;
 - c. Attend at least 2 of the regional pastor gatherings per year or 1 group set up for your ministry focus (like chaplaincy) per year. Respect and engage with the counsel of the gathering of other ministers in the group;
 - d. Make attending the pastors' retreat, Annual Assembly and the Faith and Life Forum(s) a priority;
 - e. Be in regular conversation with their Conference minister or submit a personal formation plan (especially in the case of being employed outside a congregational context);
 - f. Utilize comparable forums as arranged in collaboration with the Conference Minister in situations where geography or other reasons which may compromise the ability to comply with the above expectations.
5. The Conference will set up forums for persons in different ministry situations to share and support each other, including provision of information and opportunities for continuing education.
6. Because relational mutual responsibility is crucial, credentials will be moved from active to inactive if a credentialed person experiences a period of time without a call. The credential can be reinstated when this changes. This follows the procedure articulated in our *Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*.

³ Ministers are held accountable to broad ethical standards supported by guidelines such as can be found on the following links: <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/sexual-misconduct/> and <http://mennoniteusa.org/news/ministerial-sexual-misconduct-policy-provides-updated-process-church/>.