



MORAVIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA, SOUTHERN PROVINCE
Provincial Elders' Conference

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Response to Petition from Concerned Moravians

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We consider your petition, delivered to us on November 8, as an appeal to the PEC as stated in *Church Order of the Unitas Fratrum* (COUF) #601.¹ We have spent many hours in prayer, discernment, and conversations regarding our response. You have raised several important questions which required earnest study and consideration. We respect your concerns, we are grateful for your love for our Lord Jesus Christ and his Moravian Church, Southern Province, and we hope that we can move forward together for the good of the church, its members and congregations.

The first two pages comprise our response, with more extended discussion and explanation in the endnotes.

1. The petition advocates for what is stated in Sections 657 and 819 of COUF, acknowledging one point of view regarding marriage.² This is one of the several viewpoints within our Province that have been identified since at least 1995, and in our worldwide Unity since at least 2002.³ Insisting that there is only one understanding is contrary to how our 2018 Synod determined we will strive to live with one another in our differences.
2. In adherence to the Ground of the Unity and the Covenant for Christian Living, our 2018 Synod Resolution 13 requires us to respect varying viewpoints, allowing everyone to express their perspective freely without recrimination, providing that they do so in accordance with our foundational documents.⁴
3. We have discussed your request to take this matter to the Unity Board, and we are not prepared to do so, for the following reasons:
 - a. The Concerned Moravians group has already contacted the Unity Board and has been advised that, according to church order, this is a matter to be decided first within the Province.
 - b. In the 16 years since the 2002 Unity Synod, given the cultural, social and political realities in many of our Provinces world-wide, it has become clear that it is not possible to have conversation or dialogue within the worldwide church on the matter of homosexuality and the church.⁵ Direct conversation about this issue may create legal and other difficulties in some of our provinces and would be harmful to the unity of the church.
 - c. It is the responsibility of the Provincial Synod to carry out the principles of the *Unitas Fratrum*, and to legislate for its own province, developing “a Constitution and Church Order for its particular area adapting it to local conditions” (COUF #208).⁶

We believe that the 2018 Synod acted in good faith based on principles found within church order, and decisions of appropriate church bodies. ⁷ Synod approved Resolution 14 by a 64 percent majority.

4. The Provincial Elders Conference is responsible for implementing the decisions of Synod, and we will continue to do so. ⁸
 - a. In accordance with Synod's directive, we have formed a Resolution 14 Response Team to carry forward the good work of the 2014 Resolution 12 Steering Committee in a variety of ways including: hosting gatherings for conversation, and developing and offering workshops or events focused on topics such as: perspectives on human sexuality, biblical interpretation, Moravian polity and governance, and maintaining relationships in times of disagreement.
 - b. We will support pastors and church boards as they make decisions in response to Resolution 14 regarding same-gender marriage within their congregations.⁹
5. Finally, brothers and sisters, we believe the best way forward is to live in accordance with the directives of our synods of 1995 and 2018,¹⁰ recognizing our differences on this question along with the much greater unity we share in Christ. According to our Moravian understanding, if something is not an essential of the faith, there is a degree of liberty among us regarding views and understandings about it. Unity does not mean uniformity in matters that are "not of the essentials," including the particular ways certain scriptural passages may be understood or interpreted. We find our unity not in a particular interpretation of scripture, but in Christ.¹¹ Further, we hold that such differences should not divide us, but in some way should be taken into account. As stated in the Moravian Covenant for Christian Living:

"We will be eager to maintain the unity of the Church. Realizing that God has called us from many and varied backgrounds, we recognize the possibility of disagreements or differences. Often these differences enrich the Church, but sometimes they divide. We consider it to be our responsibility to demonstrate within the congregational life the unity and togetherness created by God who made us one. How well we accomplish this will be a witness to our community as to the validity of our faith." (MCCL #14)

We have much work to do together, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, minister to the sick and imprisoned, welcome the stranger, and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Even as we seek to understand human sexuality and our own heritage as Moravians, let us commit to follow the Lamb who has conquered, in service to the world for which he died.

Your brothers and sisters in Christ,

For the Members of the Provincial Elders' Conference, Southern Province

Endnotes

PEC response to Petition from Concerned Moravians

- ¹ In the case of the Provinces governed by a Synod, the individual members, congregations, institutions and boards shall have the right of appeal to their Provincial Board. The final court of appeal in these cases shall be their Provincial Synod. (COUF #601).
- ² The Unitas Fratrum regards it as a sacred obligation to hold an ideal of Christian marriage as pure as it is given by our Lord in his teaching, viz. that Christian marriage is an indissoluble union and requires the lifelong loyalty of the man and the woman towards each other in thought and deed. (Church Life in the Unitas Fratrum, Ch. III, The Family, COUF #657)
- “Christian marriage in the Moravian Church is between a man and a woman.” (2016 Unity Synod Resolution 44, COUF #819)
- ³ These differences have been acknowledged within our Province since 1995 and the worldwide Unity since 2002:
- “We are not agreed on the question of the morality and acceptability of sexual relations between homosexuals. The interpretation of Scripture, theological sources, scientific, psychological and sociological data is in dispute among Christians who are sincerely and conscientiously concerned with the question of homosexuality.” (1995 Southern Province Synod)

The 1995 Synod recognized the following range of viewpoints:

- 1) [From a 1993 Church and Society Conference] “we, as Moravians and sinners saved by grace who struggle daily against the pressures of Satan and the world and after having searched the scriptures, we perceive homosexual behavior, extra-marital affairs, and pre-marital sex, to be in opposition to the guidelines set forth for us as Christians; however, our denomination welcomes all people into our midst that we might worship and praise God as we seek to do His will in our lives, praying daily that He will remove all sin from our lives”
- 2) “other Moravians do not condemn sexual relations between homosexuals who have responsibly committed themselves to an exclusive, lifelong, caring, covenanted relationship with one another, and believe such shared love between adults brings each partner to a fuller state of being in a deeper relationship with God and one another.” and
- 3) “many Moravians hold variations of these two beliefs.”

The 2002 Unity Synod observed:

“The church is not of one mind on the issue of homosexuality at this time and honest differences of opinion exist within the Unity based upon our varied understanding of the Scripture.” (2002 Unity Synod, in Church Order of the Unitas Fratrum (COUF) 2002, #908)

The dialogue process mandated by our 2014 Synod’s Resolution 12 saw participation from members of our churches who aligned with four of the following five viewpoints (we had no participants representing viewpoint 1):

1. Some in our church who experience a homosexual orientation are not comfortable with their sexuality and have struggled with questions of self-worth and acceptance.
2. Some in our church who experience a homosexual orientation understand it as their natural sexuality and want to affirm it as normal and healthy for them. They wish to have committed same-sex unions recognized and honored by our church and desire to be

accountable for living faithfully, lovingly, and generously in faithful union with a partner.

3. Some in our church who have come into close contact—in family and in friendships—with people of homosexual orientation, who are Christians, come to share that positive view. When they share in the pain of censure that may be the experience of their family members or friends, they are often motivated to advocate full acceptance of homosexuality.

4. Some in our church struggle to come to grips with this issue, wrestling with their interpretation of scripture and their desire to include all persons within the embrace of Christ's church. They are seeking help to understand the differing perspectives in order to determine where they stand.

5. Some in our church have experienced homosexuality and homosexual activity as contrary to God's will. For them, this experience upholds the authority of the Bible and the teaching of our church. Some within this group view those who have worked at reorientation or maintained celibacy as inspiring examples.

⁴ Resolutions 13 of our 2018 Synod decided the following:

- “The Moravian Church Southern Province will recognize among its membership the adherence to and expression of differing opinions related to homosexuality”
- “Any person, group, congregation, agency and entity within the Southern Province retains the right to make opinions related to LGBTQ+ issues known, without fear of recrimination, provided such opinions live up to our covenant: ‘We will not hate, despise, slander, or otherwise injure anyone.’ (MCCL, V. Our Witness in the World, A. Love toward All, par. 29.)”

⁵ The 2002 Unity Synod call for dialogue within and among the Provinces of the world-wide church has not been fulfilled. This is illustrated in the following specific actions that were mandated, but not completed:

Unity Synod 2002 asked the Unity Committee on Theology *“to develop discussion materials that will guide the Provinces,”*

Unity Synod 2009 recognized *“the need for continuing discussion of matters related to the church’s ministry to homosexual persons; [and] “it was resolved that the UCOT continue its discussions of theological, biblical and pastoral issues related to the church’s ministry to homosexual persons with the goal of producing discussion materials for the provinces prior to Unity Synod 2016.”*

Unity Board 2010 (Resolution 9) directed that: *“the theological implications will be dealt with in the Standing Committee on Theology and a report including resources for the provinces on the issue will be communicated to the Unity Board prior to its meeting in 2012”*; and asked the UCOT *“to collect information from all Provinces about the understanding of the issue of homosexuality, and based on this information distribute teaching materials on the issue ‘Pastoral ministry to homosexuals’, and material explaining the differing understandings on homosexuality in different parts of the world”*

The barriers to and inability to have such dialogue were not adequately dealt with by the Unity Board, or its Executive Committee. These were not brought fully to the attention of Unity Synods (2009 and 2016) such that these obstacles could be addressed and perhaps overcome. By way of example: It is our understanding that only 3 provinces complied with the 2010 Unity Board request for information mentioned above.

The *Discussion Paper on the Role of the Worldwide Moravian Unity* presented to the

2016 Unity Synod (which did not study it, but commended it to the Provinces) offered the important commentary that:

There are a number of different ways in which we can be united and increase the opportunities for unity. Dialogue may be the most basic of ways in which we can continue the process of increasing unity. The importance of interreligious dialogue has been well argued by various theologians, and the Moravian Church is a member of groups such as the World Council of Churches where dialogue with others is seen as indispensable. Where we seem to have fallen short is the lack of effort given to theological dialogue within the Moravian church itself.

- ⁶ A Provincial Synod has the responsibility to “carry out the principles of the *Unitas Fratrum* laid down by the Unity Synod for constitution, doctrine, worship and congregational life.” (COUF #404a) And, also “to legislate in regard to constitution, worship and congregation life for its own Province.” (COUF #404b). A Provincial Synod “develops a Constitution and Church Order for its particular area adapting it to local conditions.” (COUF #208).

Legislating and adapting to local conditions may include a Provincial Synod diverging or dissenting from general principles established by Unity Synod (with the understanding this may generate a conversation with or corrective action by the Unity Board or Unity Synod.)

There are a number of things specified in COUF with which compliance by the Provinces currently varies, such as: what constitutes Christian marriage, how divorce is viewed and treated, the ordination of women, having at least two bishops in a Province, and a bishop not being eligible for election as PEC president.

Worldwide, there are three Provincial Synods that have decided to diverge, in varying ways, from what is stated in COUF about marriage. Another Provincial Board (along with its bishops, and Faith and Order Commission) has questioned the content of Unity Synod Resolution 44.

- ⁷ “This issue does not rise to the doctrinal equivalent of the New Testament confession, “Jesus is Lord,” but is a biblical, theological, and pastoral issue on which the Church must dialogue.” (2002 Unity Synod, 2016 COUF #885);

“Our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is far greater than this issue,” and “that this issue is not belonging [does not belong] to the essentials of the faith and the church.” (2010 Unity Board)

“We believe this issue does not rise to the doctrinal equivalence of the New Testament confession, ‘Jesus is Lord’, but it is a biblical, theological and pastoral issue to be addressed in the various political, cultural and social settings of the Unity.” (2011 Unity Committee on Theology report, provided to the 2016 Unity Synod).

The Church of Jesus Christ, despite all the distinctions between male and female, poor and rich and people of different ethnic origin, is one in the Lord. The *Unitas Fratrum* recognizes no distinction between those who are one in the Lord Jesus. We are called to testify that God in Jesus Christ brings His people out of every ethnic origin and language into one body, pardons sinners beneath the Cross and brings them together. We oppose any discrimination in our midst because of ethnic origin, sex or social standing, and we regard it as a commandment of the Lord to bear public witness to this and to demonstrate by word and deed that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. [Ground of the Unity, The Church as a Brotherhood]

- ⁸ The Synods of the Provinces elect the Provincial Boards as the highest administrative authorities of these Provinces. These Boards act in the name and by the commission of their

Synods, are responsible to them, and shall render account to them of their administration. [COUF #406]

These Boards are responsible for carrying out the Church Order laid down for their own Province, its districts, congregations, and fields of work, and the other resolutions of the Provincial Synod. [COUF #407]

It shall be the duty of the Provincial Elders' Conference to: See that the enactments of Synod are carried out, including implementation of strategic directives of Synod and setting plans and priorities for the Board of Cooperative Ministries. [Constitution, Moravian Church in America, Southern Province, Sect. 10.5]

⁹ On matters that do not rise to 'the doctrinal equivalent of the New Testament confession, "Jesus is Lord", the 2018 Synod affirmed:

- The role of pastors and Boards of Elders (or Church Boards) in determining the following within the congregation: who is or is not admitted into the membership and leadership; who may or may not participate in rites (confirmation, marriage) and sacraments (baptism, communion); and the purposes for which church buildings [and property] may be used.
- The freedom of conscience of pastors to decide whether or not to administer a rite or sacrament in any particular situation. [Resolution 14]

And affirmed:

- "The role of the Provincial Elders' Conference in: overseeing candidacy for ordination (including defining requirements for ordination); approving ordination of Deacons, and consecration of Presbyters; and administering the call process and appointment procedures including calling and superintending the ministers of the Province."
- "The respective roles, discernment and decision-making of the Provincial Elders' Conference, church boards, and pastors in the call process including the privilege of: The Provincial Elders' Conference to determine which individuals are considered for call, Church Boards to decline consideration of individuals, and Pastors to decline a call."
- [And that] "There are differences among us in the above matters, and we will be respectful of one another's viewpoints, and of the roles, discernment and decisions of our pastors and church boards, and of the Provincial Elders' Conference." [Resolution 14]

Some members and congregations have questioned whether, if the province allows same-gender marriage, their congregation can be successfully sued if they refuse to permit a same-gender marriage within their building or with their pastor as officiant. We have sought legal advice on this question, and have been advised that, at this time, the religious-based decisions of pastors and church boards in regard to hosting or performing same-gender marriage would not be viewed in legal terms as a discriminatory practice. If a church rents its facilities to the public as a business enterprise, it is possible it may face legal action for declining to provide equal access to such services. While church boards may determine whether they wish to have gay and lesbian individuals, whether single or in same-gender marriages, serve in such roles as pastor, church educator, music or choir director (e.g., positions involved in communicating the doctrine and beliefs of the church), employment law would prevent imposing such limits on other staff not involved in the delivery of church doctrine (e.g., administrative, maintenance, support, etc.).

¹⁰ 1995 Synod:

- that in our discussions and dialogue with one another on the question of homosexuality

we will strive at all times in our hearts and in our actions to love one another, to respect one another's understanding and search for truth and God's will concerning the question of homosexuality as befits Christians of good will seeking to bring unity in Christ, and

- that in the interest of justice, we oppose without reservation all acts of violence, coercion, and intimidation against persons who are homosexual, or who are perceived to be homosexual, and
- that we affirm certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons...

2018 Synod:

- That the Moravian Church Southern Province will recognize among its membership the adherence to and expression of differing opinions related to homosexuality; and,
- That any person, group, congregation, agency and entity within the Southern Province retains the right to make opinions related to LGBTQ+ issues known, without fear of recrimination, provided such opinions live up to our covenant: "We will not hate, despise, slander, or otherwise injure anyone." (MCCL, V. Our Witness in the World, A. Love Toward All, par. 29.)
- [that] we have learned and experienced that our unity in Christ is far greater than our differing views and understanding about homosexuality and the church and, that we can be welcoming, respectful and loving toward one another in our differences.
- [that we affirm] there are differences among us and we will be respectful of one another's viewpoints, and of the roles, discernment and decisions of our pastors and church boards, and of the Provincial Elders' Conference.

¹¹ "As Moravians, proclaiming Christ and Him crucified as our confession of faith, and believing that the Triune God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only source of our life and salvation, we do not believe that Jesus points us to Scripture so that we can find the answers there, but rather that Scripture points us to Jesus so that we can find the answers in him. As a church we must be attentive to God's Word (the word of the cross, the word of reconciliation, the word of personal union with the Savior, the word of love between one another), and our faith and order must be formulated under Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Yet, it is not Scripture and our conformity to a particular interpretation of it that unites us, but rather Christ, our Chief Elder, who holds us together by keeping us all close to Him." (Guidelines of Biblical Interpretation)