

Lancaster Conference terminates retired pastor's credentials

Mennonite Church USA's Lancaster Mennonite Conference has removed the ministerial credentials of a retired pastor for officiating a same-sex marriage.

Chester Wenger, a 96-year-old retired missionary and minister from Lancaster, Pa., signed the marriage certificate for his son, Philip Wenger, and his partner, Steve Dinnocenti, after Pennsylvania legalized same-sex marriage in May.

Lancaster Conference is the first area conference to terminate ministerial credentials for officiating a same-sex wedding. Other conferences have disciplined pastors in some way, without terminating credentials.

Keith Weaver, Lancaster Conference moderator, said the action was based on the conference's commitment to the MC USA Membership Guidelines, which state, "Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant."

Weaver said the decision was made "following a review process that was experienced as mutually gracious and respectful."

He said members of Lancaster's credentialing commission shared the outcome with Wenger Oct. 8.

"I am at peace with their decision and understand their need to take this action," Wenger wrote in [an open letter to the church](#) sent Oct. 30.

In an interview, Wenger said he believes the Bible dictates calling people to serve. He was called to Ethiopia with his family by Lancaster Conference and Eastern Mennonite Missions. Lancaster Conference requested that Virginia Mennonite Conference ordain him, which it did in 1949. EMM called him to direct Home Missions. He also pastored Blossom Hill Mennonite Church in Lancaster.

He said it is Lancaster's right not to call him anymore.

"It doesn't worry me," he said. "I'm nearly at the end of life anyway."

He married his son because "he's my precious son."

He believes his family can serve as an example of finding fellowship and love in the midst of differing perspectives.

So with the input of his wife, Sara Jane Wenger, and their son Philip, he wrote the open letter to share "the light the Lord has lit within me, under a bushel" — a call to inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in MC USA.

"We believe this is an opportune moment for the church to boldly proclaim a pastoral, grace-filled readiness to include both homosexuals and heterosexuals within the blessing of a marriage covenant designed to be wholesome and God-honoring," it states.

Chester was reluctant to write the letter. He knows it will cause hurt.

"I have been living an acceptance of [gays and lesbians], but I have not been promoting it," Chester said. "And that has been my basic stance."



Wenger

Deeply blessed

Philip, also of Lancaster, said Chester's life has been a stellar example of gently living faith — a faith deeply blessed by Lancaster Conference.

"To this hour, he has such an intense and burning love for his conference and his church," Philip said. "He understands where they're coming from [by removing his credentials], but he wants them to understand where he's coming from."

Philip, the seventh of eight children, was born in Ethiopia. He came out to his father at age 15.

"I told him I thought he might grow out of it," Chester said. "He came back a few years later and said, 'Dad, I haven't grown out of it.'"

Philip, now 57, said it took his dad about 10 years to accept his sexuality. He read books on sexuality and faith and then immersed himself in the Bible, seeking answers.

"My father at that point moved in his perspective, probably motivated by love, but definitely moved into being open and accepting," he said.

Some of Philip's siblings are not accepting of his sexuality, but Chester and Philip are quick to say it doesn't affect the way they function together and love each other as a family.

It's a model Chester wishes his church and conference could adopt.

"That's exactly what my letter is about," he said. "I wish we could reorganize in such a way to have latitude for people to fellowship even if they don't agree on everything."

An act of love

Philip and Dinnocenti have been together for 27 years. When the law allowed it, they wanted to be legally married.

"We planned a small little ceremony in our backyard with just two witnesses and our parents," he said. "We just told stories about love and commitment."

They had a marriage certificate and had someone from the Episcopal church where they are members who could have signed it. But they asked Chester if he wanted to officiate the June 21 ceremony.

He said the request was not an act of desire to create a ripple in the church.

"It was purely an act of love between a father and a son," he said.

He didn't actually consider that Chester would be disciplined.

"I was surprised that the church would do this to somebody of my father's age and his length of service to the church," he said. "I didn't think they'd do it."

He said if he could go back, he wouldn't ask his father to sign the marriage certificate.

"But now Lancaster Conference has acted in the way that they did, and my father has a great deal of love for them, and I just have to end up respecting that he made the choice he did," he said.

He believes the Mennonite church needs to go through its own journey on this issue.

"Maybe by the light of his life and his words, my dad may be able to touch a couple of hearts and minds," he said.

