

 **Brainstormed Credentialing Options for Illinois Conference**

This is a rough offering of ***brainstormed credentialing practices*** that relate to our disagreements around same sex relationships/marriage and IMC credentialing. (“same sex relationship/marriage” is the term MCUSA uses in these discussions.) This is a resource for congregations to use to generate thinking and discussion around concrete ways forward for IMC. Listing options can be a way to eliminate some options, and also to stimulate thinking that leads to other approaches.

These options do not try to discuss the arguments for the different views of same sex relationships/marriage. (Books are written for those important discussions.) We already know some churches want to affirm the gifts of leaders in a same sex relationship…..and we know some churches do not want to send a message that a same sex relationship/marriage is faithful discipleship. These are models to help us picture how we might go forward in this difficulty.

Under each option is a beginning list of “*Considerations*” These are to help clarify and raise questions about each option. These also serve as a place to list further thoughts around each option.

The “polar” options to the credentialing question appear at the beginning since both already exist in IMC and MCUSA. The “*Neutral” option* is what IMC rainbow churches are calling for. Similarly, Arthur (and others) “couldn’t imagine IMC pastors officiating same sex weddings”. (*Non-affirming option*).

**“Neutral” option** (Central District, Mountain States, Allegany, Pacific Northwest…)

Individuals are credentialed based on their gifts and the call from their congregation. A person officiating a same sex wedding or in a same sex relationship/marriage is not a consideration. The conference, “officially”, neither affirms nor objects to same sex marriage.

*Considerations*

-Non-affirming churches may understandably object that this gives the appearance that, as members of IMC, they affirm same sex marriage. - -This approach does not recognize there is not uniformity among IMC churches regarding the faithfulness of same sex marriage. -IMC does not appear “neutral” when it operates as if a same sex relationship/marriage is faithful discipleship. -This approach raises the question of why IMC should not merge with Central District when both are MCUSA area conferences and share the same geography.

**Non-affirming option** (Ohio, Mosaic, South Central….)

Individuals are credentialed based on their gifts and the call from their congregation. Since some congregations do not view same sex marriage as faithful discipleship, IMC will not credential nor hold the credentials of an individual who officiates a same sex wedding, or is in a same sex relationship/marriage.

*Considerations*

-Affirming churches may understandably object that this gives the appearance that, as members of IMC, they don’t consider same sex marriage to be faithful discipleship. -This approach does not recognize that there is not uniformity among IMC churches regarding the faithfulness of same sex marriage. -In certain instances, an affirming church would not have their leaders credentialed by IMC. -A person’s gifts and calling are not in question. This practice is based on a view that same sex marriage is not faithful discipleship. - -We understand from scripture and from experience that spiritual gifts are no guarantee of faithful discipleship.

**“asterisk” option**

Individuals are credentialed based on their gifts and the call from their congregation. Whether a person officiates a same sex wedding or is in a same sex relationship/marriage is not a consideration. The conference, officially, neither affirms nor objects to same sex marriage. Arrangements would be made for congregations to register nonsupport of a person’s credentials because of same sex marriage (perhaps placing an “asterisk” by a person’s name or by a congregation’s name that objects).

*Considerations*

- Would churches need to be notified when a credentialled pastor performs a same sex wedding or enters a same sex relationship/marriage? -

**“at variance” option**

Individuals are credentialed based on their gifts and the call from their congregation. If a pastor performs a same sex wedding or is in a same sex relationship/marriage, IMC will automatically designate that person is “at variance” with IMC’s understanding of marriage. There is no withdrawal of a person’s credentials.

*Considerations*

-It would seem with this option that IMC would need to affirm that Christian marriage is between a man and a woman.

**Each congregation takes responsibility for credentialing their leaders option**

IMC will not credential individuals as a conference. IMC churches are free to choose their own leaders, and to credential or not credential their leaders as they see fit, apart from IMC. Regardless of how pastors are or are not credentialed, pastors of IMC churches are free to pastor their congregations and participate in IMC functions and committees. IMC will continue to help congregations vet their pastoral candidates through MLIs and interviews.

*Considerations*

*-*In past years IMC has strongly encouraged congregations to have IMC credentialled pastors. This has especially been important when congregations call pastors from outside of MCUSA. This arrangement would depart from that emphasis. -Does this affect the very rare situations when the conference should be taking some action in a congregation/pastor situation? - This has similarities to MCUSA giving the responsibility to credential leaders to the area conferences.

**Mutual Forbearance option**

IMC will not withhold nor withdraw credentials of individuals who perform a same sex wedding, and IMC will not credential nor hold the credentials of individuals in a same sex relationship/marriage. Churches are free to choose their own leaders, and to credential or not credential their leaders as they see fit, apart from IMC. Regardless of how pastors are or are not credentialed, pastors of IMC churches are free to pastor their congregations and participate in IMC functions and committees.

*These arrangements are not punitive but are agreed upon demonstrations of respect and forbearance between conflicting viewpoints regarding same sex marriage among IMC churches.*

*Considerations*

-If it is not clear, in this arrangement: Affirming churches demonstrate forbearance by not asking IMC to credential an individual in a same sex relationship/marriage. Non-affirming churches demonstrate forbearance by agreeing to maintain credentials of pastors who officiate a same-sex wedding. ---In sum, each viewpoint demonstrates forbearance by living with a practice they disagree with.

- There is no implied difference between the faithfulness of performing a same sex wedding and being in a same sex relationship/marriage. Both are faithful discipleship in the eyes of affirming churches and both are not faithful discipleship in the eyes of non-affirming churches. Mutual forbearance could similarly be demonstrated by withdrawing credentials of pastors who perform a same sex wedding and maintaining the credentials of individuals in a same sex relationship/marriage.

**“disputable matter” approach**

There is a suggestion to frame gay marriage as a “disputable matter”…..where faithful discipleship might be ambiguous and not critical to faith…. from Rm 14, I Cor 8. (Wendy Vander Wal-Gritter devotes a whole chapter to this thinking in Generous Spaciousness.)

*Considerations*

*-*Is same sex marriage a “disputable matter”? -Even with an understanding like this, we still face the question of how conflicting viewpoints (albeit “disputable”) in IMC can demonstrate respect and forbearance toward each other.

-Paul pleads for demonstrated forbearance in **his example** of a disputable matter: *Do not put a stumbling block in your brother’s way…..if someone regards something as unclean, for him it is unclean…..it is better not to do anything that causes your brother to fall……if your brother is distressed by what you eat, you are no longer acting in love….Rm 14 If what I eat causes my brother to sin, I will never eat meat again…1 Cor 8*

**Dual Conference option**

An IMC congregation is free to join another area conference and become a dual conference congregation if they want their pastor to have credentials in an MCUSA conference ……out of consideration for non-affirming churches in IMC.

*Considerations*

-MCUSA encourages congregations to choose one area conference to belong to. -Some churches have continued to belong to 2 conferences for 20+ years since the merger….long after most people thought they should have disappeared. Perhaps they might have a useful purpose in our current situation. -Obviously, another conference would have to agree to this.

**Churches move conference membership option**

A church chooses to move their membership to a different MCUSA area conference where they affirm their credentialing practices.

**Dissolve IMC option**

In the absence of any agreement, IMC dissolution *may* be a more orderly way for congregations to realign than individual churches making isolated decisions….and keep more churches in MCUSA.

After a year of canvasing their churches, South Central asked their churches to vote on dissolving the conference. If dissolved, the churches could have decided if they want to join another MCUSA conference or whether they wanted to form another MCUSA conference. (South Central shares the same geography with Western District.) South Central decided not to dissolve by a small margin. The parallels between South Central/Western District and IMC/Central District are self-evident. <https://anabaptistworld.org/south-central-leadership-proposes-to-dissolve-mc-usa-area-conference/?utm_source=Anabaptist+World&utm_campaign=9f0214081b-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020-09-05_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_5cceb1cb31-9f0214081b-124166894>