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Mennonite Church USA Statement on Abortion

Based on former Mennonite Church (1975) and
General Conference Mennonite Church (1980) statements

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I. Preamble

11 “We believe that God has created human beings in the divine image. God formed them from the
12 dust of the earth and gave them a special dignity among all the works of creation. Human beings
13 have been made for relationship with God, to live in peace with each other, and to take care of the
14 rest of creation.”¹ (Article VI, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*)

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II. We believe

- 17
- 18 • Human life is a gift from God to be valued and protected. We oppose abortion because it
19 runs counter to Biblical principles.
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 - 21 • The fetus in its earliest stages (and even if imperfect by human standards) shares humanity
22 with those who conceived it.
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 - 24 • There are times when deeply held values, such as saving the life of the mother and saving
25 the life of the fetus, come in conflict with each other.
 - 26
 - 27 • The faith community should be a place for discernment about difficult issues like abortion.
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 - 29 • Abortion should not be used to interrupt unwanted pregnancies.
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 - 31 • Christians must provide viable alternatives to abortion that provide care and support for
32 mothers and infants.
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 - 34 • The church should witness to society regarding the value of all human life.
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 - 36 • Professionals whose ministry involves dealing with the moral dilemmas of abortion and
37 reproductive technologies need our support.
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III. We confess

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- 42 • We have failed to offer a clear voice affirming life as an alternative to our society’s
43 frequent reliance upon abortion as the solution to problem pregnancies.
 - 44 • We have failed to show compassion for those who are suffering the consequences of
45 abortion.
 - 46
 - 47 • We have failed to work for a just health care system that would assist poor families in
48 caring for their children.
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50 **IV. Commentary**² (corresponding to Sections II and III)

51

52 **Human life is a gift from God to be valued and protected.** Humanity and humans have a special
53 place in God's creation. The Bible teaches that all human life is a gift of God and of immeasurable
54 worth in His sight:

- 55 • The Psalmist speaks of God's intimate involvement in the creation of human life. "For it
56 was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise
57 you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very
58 well." (Psalm 139:13, 14).
- 59 • Abortion runs counter to biblical principles which give a high value to human life.
60 "Portrayal of God as the author and giver of life creates a general presumption against any
61 human decision to terminate life."³
- 62 • We are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26, 27; 2:7-9; 9:6; Psalm 8).
- 63 • We are protected and admonished by the commandment, "You shall not murder" (Exodus
64 20:13).
- 65 • We are instructed to act in the best interests of our neighbor (Matthew 22:39; John 15:17;
66 Romans 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 10:24).
- 67 • Throughout the Bible we are called to demonstrate special concern for the defenseless, the
68 widow, the orphan, the oppressed, the stranger, and the one who has no advocate. Though
69 the Bible does not explicitly say so, in our day concern for the "defenseless" should also
70 extend to the fetus.⁴

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72 **The fetus in its earliest stages (and even if imperfect by human standards) shares humanity**
73 **with those who conceived it.**

74

75 The Bible does not speak directly to the question of abortion. A biblical passage that indirectly
76 speaks to the status of the fetus (Exodus 21:22-25) seems to place a higher value on the life of the
77 mother than the fetus. For the death of the fetus the husband is to be compensated with money, but
78 where the wife suffers hurt or death, there shall be "life for life, eye for eye."⁵ The Bible places a
79 high value on the life of the fetus, though it does not necessarily support its defense to the
80 exclusion of all other considerations.

81

82 We understand that the fetus is not just a *piece of tissue* to be discarded at will. On the other hand,
83 neither is the fetus treated as a *human/person* in the full sense of that term. Human life begins at
84 conception. We agree that any attempt to define the beginning of humanness at a point along the
85 spectrum of development is a mistake, tempting as it may be.⁶ At the same time, our martyr
86 tradition and our hope in eternal life do not insist that human life trumps all other values.

87

88 Most people will choose the life of the mother if a choice must be made about the survival of either
89 the mother or the fetus. In those rare situations when a choice must be made between the life of the
90 mother and the life of the unborn child, Christians should prayerfully seek the guidance of the Holy
91 Spirit with a group of believers committed to discerning the will of God.

92

93 Even though we wish every child to have a healthy body and a strong mind, the lack of such does
94 not make the child less a person in God's sight. Some persons⁷ pose a test of "personhood." For
95 utilitarians, personhood requires higher thought processes called "preferences."

96

97 Such persons believe that since a fetus or newborn has few, if any, preferences, it should not be
98 recognized as a person. We believe that such a test of personhood could lead to screening fetuses in
99 order to eliminate people with disabilities or those with genetic diseases that will likely limit their
100 life or restrict the enjoyment of life. For many families, the presence of a handicapped child has
101 become the source of great joy. At the same time we recognize the special challenges faced by

102 families caring for developmentally disabled or handicapped children. We believe that the
103 possibility of deformity or mental handicap is not sufficient reason to choose abortion.

104
105 **There are times when deeply held values come in conflict with each other.**

106
107 We stress the importance of respect for the life of the fetus. We condone abortion only under the
108 most exceptional of circumstances. When abortion appears to be the least bad choice among
109 several undesirable options, we stress the need for discernment in the faith community.

110
111 Because of the diversity of moral conviction in our society, we realize that what the law permits is
112 not necessarily moral behavior for the Christian. We believe, however, that the church should
113 witness to society in favor of the “general presumption against any human decision to terminate
114 life.”⁸ We will offer counsel about alternatives to abortion.

115
116 While many could support legislation which seeks to curtail some types of abortion, we recognize
117 that legislation banning all abortions will not stop abortions from happening. Instead, it places
118 sanctions on those women who choose abortion, without regard for the fathers involved or the fact
119 that the women are already suffering the consequences of their choice. It also disproportionately
120 affects the poor, as those with means will find ways to obtain safe abortions. Further, legislation is
121 using the government to force others to comply with our Christian standards, something our
122 forebears clearly rejected. We believe that the demands of discipleship are to be accepted
123 voluntarily, not imposed legally upon everyone regardless of conviction.

124
125 **The faith community should be a place for discernment.**

126
127 We believe that the New Testament pictures the church as a community (koinonia), which seeks to
128 discern the will of God and take responsibility as a group for decisions. The emphasis on individual
129 rights and autonomy in our society has deeply affected our community. To call for discernment in
130 the community of faith is counter cultural in the extreme. We urge members of the faith community
131 to engage in a discerning process rather than making decisions in isolation. We recognize that such
132 a process will usually involve only a small group within a congregation. Through this process of
133 counsel and mutual accountability the church may promote a standard without insisting on
134 uniformity for all. The individual woman or couple must finally decide on the question of abortion.
135 We believe the larger community should be available for counsel to those making the decision.

136
137 We urge pastors and congregations to foster a climate of openness so that these decisions can be
138 worked out prayerfully in the context of Christian community. We believe that the community
139 should be supportive of a woman or couple, sharing the responsibility for, and burden of, that
140 decision. This would include sharing in the responsibility for the care of that person or family if a
141 continued pregnancy leads to the birth of a child that brings hardship on a family or individual.

142
143 **Abortion should not be used to interrupt unwanted pregnancies.**

144
145 We support responsible decisions to limit family size. We believe that when pregnancy is not
146 desired, responsible men and women will take responsibility for their sexual behavior. We do not
147 support the use of abortion as a means of birth control or for limitation of family size.

148
149 **We are committed to providing care and support for those infants who are carried to term.**

150
151 We will seek creative alternatives to abortion that will enhance the well-being of mother, father and
152 child. We commit ourselves to show concern for individuals who place their children for adoption.
153 The faith community should be ready to support financially, and in other ways, the families of all
154 children, including those who are developmentally disabled.

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The church should witness to society regarding the value of all human life.

We will promote consistency in favor of human life along the entire spectrum of human existence. We stand in opposition to sacrifice of life in the womb, in the death chamber and through war in all its forms.

We commit ourselves to support professional caregivers.

We know that the church has often left the difficult task of dealing with persons facing abortion to the professionals in medicine, law, mental health, or social work. We commit ourselves to support our professionals whose ministry includes dealing with moral dilemmas of abortion and reproductive issues. When a person for reasons of conscience chooses not to perform or participate in performing abortions we will advocate on their behalf.

We will advocate for a society that does not rely on abortion as the primary solution to problem pregnancies.

Historically we have affirmed the high value of human life and we continue to do so. We express deep dismay over the millions of abortions in North America since the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973. Three of ten conceptions (approximately 1.5 million each year) end in destruction of the fetus.⁹ On the 30th anniversary of Roe v. Wade we restate the biblical call for preservation of life even as we recognize the difficulty of addressing moral issues by government legislation.

We recognize that within our fellowship we hold a wide variety of convictions about abortion. We acknowledge that there are situations in which some Christians may seek abortions for what other Christians regard as selfish or inadequate reasons.

We will act with compassion toward those who choose to have an abortion.

We will support persons who are suffering as a result of their decision to have an abortion. We have too often failed to care, nurture and support the mother or family with an unwanted pregnancy.

We seek to become a more compassionate body, rather than judgmental of those with unwanted pregnancies.

The Bible reflects an attitude of compassion toward the sinner. Jesus' harshest words were directed against the self-righteous. He warned against judging others. He spent much time with outcasts and sinners and he told those who caught the woman in an act of adultery, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:7). We believe that persons who have an abortion for reasons regarded by others in the Christian community as wrong should be treated with love, so that Jesus' word of redemption may become operative, "Go your way and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11).

We commit ourselves to work for a just health care system that will assist poor families in caring for their children.

Because we are concerned about just health care for all, we will:

- Recognize that protests against abortion have greater integrity when they are combined with concern for all human life.
- Commit ourselves to work for a just health care system that will assist poor families in caring for their children, thus eliminating conditions that help create a culture of abortion.

- 208 • Urge our members to consider becoming adoptive or foster parents to care for abused and
209 unwanted children.
- 210 • Become persistent advocates for a national health care policy which controls costs while
211 emphasizing quality care.¹⁰ (From MC and GC Delegate Assembly Resolutions on Health
212 Care, 1992 and 1993)
- 213 • We believe that the use of abortion among the poor is driven at times by the inequities and
214 gaps in the present health care system. An informed woman with financial resources has
215 always been able to get a safe abortion while a poor woman who is less informed has
216 resorted to abortions under expensive, dangerous and clandestine conditions.

217
218 We affirm life even as we grieve the conditions that lead persons to consider abortion.

219 **V. A Call to the Congregation**

220 The congregation can be a place of healing or a hostile place for persons who have had or are
221 considering abortion. We give a high value to life and also respond with compassion to those who
222 may be considering abortion. We believe the body of Christ must hold these positions in tension.

223
224 We call on congregations to form caring teams who are able to walk with individuals seeking
225 guidance as they deal with unexpected and unwanted pregnancies. If we want to create safe places
226 in our congregations where people can talk about their problems, we must learn to listen in a non-
227 judgmental way to those who fail to live up to their best intentions.

228
229 We call on pastors and congregational leaders to address issues of sexuality and appropriate sexual
230 expression in sermons, in Sunday school classes and in premarital counseling. We believe
231 congregations offer life to their communities by being involved in community organizations that
232 support adoption and foster care.

233
234 We commit ourselves to provide Christian education about human sexuality for both young and old
235 and to foster understanding of various means by which pregnancy can be prevented when it is not
236 desired. We commit ourselves to teaching sexual chastity before marriage and faithfulness in
237 marriage.

238
239 We believe congregations have the ability to talk about abortion, express their commitment to
240 Scripture and discern its meaning for today. In many congregations, there are persons who can
241 share their experiences of being parents, doctors, lawyers, pastors, nurses, and social workers.

242
243 A difficult moral issue like abortion requires ongoing study and discussion. We commit ourselves
244 to continue to search for God's will in this matter even as we continue to speak out against
245 abortion. We are sure that God's love in Jesus Christ binds us together in this search: "For now we
246 see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know
247 fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the
248 greatest of these is love. (I Cor. 13:12, 13)

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254 The reference committee for this statement included:

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260 Staff from Mennonite Church USA Executive Board

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¹ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Herald Press, 1995, Article VI, page 28

² All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

³ *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* by Richard B. Hays, Harper Collins, 1996, pp. 455-456.

⁴ John Howard Yoder (see recommended reading) speaks of a "prejudice in favor of the defenseless."

⁵ Although this has historically been the interpretation of the text, some people interpret it to mean that there is a live birth. They therefore believe the text does not support making a distinction between the status of the fetus and the mother.

⁶ See Hays, page 455, for a more complete discussion.

⁷ "Who Lives? Who Dies? The Disturbing Logic of Peter Singer," *The Christian Century*, July 3-10, 2002 pp. 24-29.

⁸ See Hays, pp. 455-456.

⁹ "Inconvenient Lives," *First Things*, December 1996, page 9.

¹⁰ See Resolution on Health Care endorsed by GCMC and MC delegates in 1992 and 1993 respectively. May be viewed at www.MennoniteChurchUSA.org.