

MEDA CALLS OFF ATTEMPT TO EXPEL MEMBER

Clovis, California (GIA 9/29/09)--An attempt by Pennsylvania nonprofit Mennonite Economic Development Associates ("MEDA") to expel Bruce Leichty from its membership was halted by MEDA's attorneys after Leichty notified MEDA September 17 that MEDA was proceeding under an unlawful corporate bylaw.

"I have expressed my appreciation to MEDA officers Allan Sauder and Howard Good for making a principled decision to respect state law," said Leichty, "but the decision does nothing to alleviate my distress about why MEDA decided to try to expel me in the first place. It is deeply troubling when a church-related nonprofit would rather cut off a relationship with a Christian brother, even a dissenting brother, than invest in dialogue of more than 20 minutes."

MEDA did not reply to an offer for comment on this report, conveyed by e-mail 9/28/2009 to Sauder and Good.

Leichty, a California lawyer and publisher, says that when he was notified of MEDA's intent to expel him, the only reason he was given for the expulsion effort was that unspecified "conduct" on his part was inconsistent with MEDA's vision and mission statements. He says he first learned of the plan to expel him September 2 when he received a fax from MEDA announcing that an expulsion hearing would be held by telephone at 1 p.m. Pacific time September 18, and that he would be given a 20-minute hearing by MEDA's membership committee.

"I immediately contacted MEDA in writing asking them to detail the charges against me, but was eventually informed two days before

the hearing only that the conduct related to my attendance as an authorized exhibitor at the MEDA meeting in Columbus, Ohio, where I was told that my exhibit offended some people," Leichty says.

At the Ohio MEDA convention, Leichty had set up a display of books and resources relating to a number of different themes of his business Good Information Advocates (www.goodinformation.org), including critiques of Stalinist terror, Holocaust dogma, rabbinic Judaism and Freemasonry, most of them authored or provided by persons who either were Mennonite or had lived among Mennonites. His exhibit table was forcibly carried away and his books were boxed up by MEDA officers who refused to tell him what item(s) caused offense. A summary of his ouster as a convention exhibitor appears at www.goodinformation.org.

A couple days later Leichty protested his treatment in a presentation he made from the floor at a MEDA members' meeting, and he notes that he asked for and later received compensation for his expenses in flying out to the Ohio convention. "MEDA effectively admitted that I had done nothing wrong in coming to the convention with the expectation of being a small business exhibitor."

"Nor do I believe that my beliefs are inconsistent with the vision or mission of MEDA, or I wouldn't be a member to begin with," adds Leichty. "MEDA says that it wants its members to share abilities and resources to create business solutions to poverty, and to express God's love in helping people earn a livelihood and enrich their communities, all of which I support. After I received a letter September 16 from MEDA's attorneys alluding again to the 'offense' I caused in Columbus, I pointed out that I appreciated

and supported MEDA's programs, and I tried to explain how I was attempting to live out MEDA's vision and mission in my own business ventures as a lawyer and advocate."

"What is particularly ironic to me is that although MEDA uses the name Mennonite, and though individuals who advocate for reforms and practices that are contrary to denominational positions are apparently welcome to be part of MEDA, my own faithful expression cannot be tolerated--and no one at MEDA or in the denomination has shown me where my own positions deviate from denominational positions, or biblical teaching, for that matter. It is not as if I am denying Christ or blaspheming the Holy Spirit. No one has accused me of immorality or illegality."

"I have no indication yet that MEDA is willing to hear me out on this point or any other," he says, "but they were at least willing to comply with law."

Leichty says that after he was notified of the hearing he also immediately asked for the bylaws of the organization of which he was a member. He says that after his rude reception in Ohio he had also asked for the bylaws on three occasions between November 2008 and March 2009--without getting a response.

He conveyed the message of his pending "excommunication" from MEDA to a group of colleagues, correspondents and friends, Leichty said, and at least one of these individuals expressed dismay at the process and was instrumental in raising questions with a local MEDA chapter about the pending expulsion.

After that happened, Leichty says, he was sent a set of bylaws as amended by the MEDA Board of Directors June 6, 2009. Those

bylaws contained the provisions for an expulsion hearing to be conducted only by a membership committee of the Board.

When Leichty continued to press for a set of MEDA bylaws as they had existed at the last members' meeting in November 2008, he was sent another set--two days before the announced hearing. Leichty says it was then that he confirmed that the Board had amended the "old" bylaws solely in order to be able to expel him without bringing the matter to the attention of all members; "it was obvious that I was the target of the amendment."

The "old" bylaws, said Leichty, allowed for the "removal" of a member only on a two-thirds vote of members at a meeting of MEDA members, after allowing for a presentation by the member to be removed. These bylaws did allow for certain amendments of the bylaws to be made by the board acting without advance membership approval--but not an amendment pertaining to termination of membership, says Leichty.

"Pennsylvania law controls on that point," says Leichty. "It is not unlike California law, with which I am somewhat familiar, because I have advised several Mennonite-related organizations incorporated in California who were amending their own bylaws. The laws of both states essentially say that only members can change their bylaws providing for termination of membership. That seems like an inherently fair and reasonable law in a democracy."

Leichty sent a letter detailing his findings to MEDA's law firm, Buchanan, Ingersoll & Rooney, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the evening of September 16, and at the end of the day September 17 he says he received a terse one-paragraph letter thanking him for his

letter and stating: "It has always been, and continues to be, MEDA's desire to pursue its objectives in a manner consistent with all applicable law....To that end, the expulsion hearing scheduled for Friday, September 18, 2009 [] has been cancelled."

"My opinion is that the provision in the `old' MEDA bylaws relating to removal of a member still governs MEDA, because the `new' bylaws were adopted unlawfully this past summer--at least on that one point, and I haven't yet examined the rest of the `new' bylaws in detail," says Leichty. "I don't know yet how MEDA proposes to remedy this defect which is really a violation of the rights of all its members, not just the one member who certain directors wanted to expel."

Convinced that MEDA doesn't want to give him any sort of platform for his views, Leichty says he would not be surprised if MEDA simply refrains from further efforts to remove him--but that he will be ready to give an account of himself if they do.

"If MEDA simply drops its efforts because of `the law' that wouldn't satisfy me," he adds, "because my real objective is to foster more faithfulness and understanding among Christian entrepreneurs and activists of the views of certain marginalized dissidents--which often have surprising implications for our relationships with the worlds of business, finance, government, international development, ethics, and advocacy for the poor--all of which are core MEDA concerns."

Leichty says he offered shortly after his ouster as an exhibitor to meet with the MEDA board at the next annual meeting at San Jose, California (November 2009), to explain his ministry of

advocacy, and that his effort was rebuffed, but he expresses hope that "perhaps God will still permit further groundwork for a meaningful exchange of views and information with MEDA's leaders and members."

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