

WHERE? HOW? WHAT?

Proposed direction for Ohio Conference's next chapter
Prepared for Winter Regional Meetings and the 2017 Annual Conference Assembly

During the Ohio Conference Leadership Team meeting on Aug. 6, 2016, team members identified three key questions about the future which needed to be addressed leading into and at the 2017 Annual Conference Assembly. The three questions were:

1. **Where** are we as Ohio Conference going?
2. **How** are we going to get where we are going together?
3. **What** will our affiliation look like in our next chapter?

An additional question, although not new, emerged again:

4. **How** will we pay for the work of Conference?

The Leadership Team utilized several sources as it gathered information to respond to the questions.

- A. The Year of Mission, which helped congregations learn more about what being a missional church might look like.
- B. The Year of Covenant, which helped us look at the nature of covenants, God's mission, and our relationships with each other.
- C. The Stewardship Ministry Team carefully monitored the impact that fewer and smaller congregations had on congregational giving to Conference as well as the operating expenses of Conference.
- D. Particularly helpful to the question of our future connection with Mennonite Church USA was putting together three earlier decisions:
 - a. At the 2014 Annual (Ohio) Conference Assembly, the delegate body affirmed a statement that said that credentials of an Ohio Conference pastor would be suspended if the pastor performed a same-sex marriage or were themselves involved in a same-sex relationship.
 - b. At the Mennonite Church USA General Assembly at Kansas City in 2015, the delegate body affirmed a resolution that the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) and the membership guidelines for Mennonite Church USA would not change before 2019, meaning there would not be delegate action on these two items in 2017.
 - c. At the Annual (Ohio) Conference Assembly in 2016, the Ohio Conference Leadership Team said that Ohio Conference would continue as part of Mennonite Church USA in the coming year, but could review that connection if Mennonite Church USA would change either the Confession of Faith or the membership guidelines, or if the Ohio Conference were required by some action at the national level to recognize the credentials of a pastor who was engaged in a same-sex relationship or performed a same-sex wedding ceremony.
- E. Cliff Brubaker engaged in visiting the congregational leaders throughout the Conference, using a set of questions that looked at several areas:
 - a. Trust between congregations and Conference
 - b. The challenges congregations expected to face in the next five years
 - c. What we want and need Conference to care about most, and
 - d. Feedback on our intended future connection with Mennonite Church USA. (Cliff has visited 40 conference congregations as of Feb. 16, and continues to make these visits.)

Through those sources, several pieces of the picture of the future of the Conference began to emerge:

- I. Becoming missional churches:
 - The **Year of Mission** began with the 2016 pre-Annual Conference Assembly workshop called *Becoming Missional: Re-learning How To Be Sent*. Combined with the Fall Regional Missional Gathering and a variety of other sources, exposure to ideas related to being missional churches has generated interest and excitement in many congregations.
 - The report from Cliff of his visits with congregational leaders noted that the single most widespread need expressed by congregations is learning how to meaningfully engage the local communities of which they are part.
- II. The **Year of Covenant** helped identify the need to continue our work at building a new covenant together. Though we share many beliefs, we need to find ways of sustaining respectful relationships through challenging times of discernment.
- III. **Finances** have been challenging. Information that emerged:
 - Expenses have been cut considerably. Revenue has also dropped considerably. Through most of the year-to-date, we have operated at a deficit.
 - The Leadership Team is concerned that current staffing levels have been cut to the point of pushing staff members past sustainable workloads to deliver the services they have been able to provide. The pastoral staffing level had been at three full-time equivalency as recently as the summer of 2015. We currently have 1.5 full-time equivalency pastoral staff.
 - Cliff's report from congregations indicates that congregations highly value Conference resources in pastoral transitions, support for pastors, and for the Conference to know and care about them as congregations.
 - Conference does have significant financial reserves. The delegate body can approve drawing down these reserves to stabilize current finances and ensure current operations, but the Stewardship Ministry recognizes that doing so could threaten the long-term financial sustainability of the Conference.
- IV. Cliff's listening to congregational leaders about **the future connection with Mennonite Church USA** indicated that:
 - Many groups found the proposed direction to represent their congregations well or find the direction acceptable.
 - Though some congregations find affinity with the Conference statements related to same-sex marriage, they find affiliation with Mennonite Church USA to be troublesome, either because of current events or anticipated future movement of the denomination toward a more open stance toward same-sex marriage.
 - Some congregations find the statements on same-sex marriage to be more restrictive than they wish, and wonder if there is room for them in the Conference.
 - In short, there is no one statement or resolution about affiliation with Mennonite Church USA that will be the most desirable resolution to all of us, but the Leadership Team's proposal seems to be the best option for allowing at least most of us to continue to be engaged with Ohio Conference.

The Leadership Team has come to several **convictions** about the current and future situations:

- a. Our commitment to faithfulness, the viability of our congregations and conference, and the need to place our current disagreements in broader perspective lead us to the conviction that **we need to learn to be missional churches together**, and to find new and more effective ways of living out and incarnating the Gospel in our communities.
- b. There is not a single perfect solution to the question of affiliation. It appears that no solution will fit the spectrum of our congregations on this question. However, we believe that **continuing our current affiliation with MC USA** while maintaining triggers that could

prompt review allows us the best opportunity to be church together and to speak into the denominational processes at this time.

- c. We need to **call a new executive leader/pastor** with gifts to help us articulate and sustain a common vision and to build relationships that can serve to strengthen trust. We believe this will require two full-time equivalents for pastoral staff, which include the Conference executive role and the regional pastor role. With the work of Ralph Reinford (full time as regional pastor) and Cliff Brubaker (half time as regional pastor), we currently have 1.5 full-time equivalences in pastoral staff.
- d. We need to **practice responsibility** for both our **financial sustainability and for stewardship of the mission** to which we have been called. With the transitions that are part of this moment, these are not normal times, and they call us to solutions that are not normal solutions. We believe that we are in a time when taking risks to lean into our mission means taking financial risks. We need to be clear about the risks we are taking financially and be willing to live with their outcomes. Backing away from our mission is also taking a risk.

In keeping with these convictions, the Leadership Team sets out the following direction:

1. **Where are we going?** We will give our best energies and focus to **becoming missional congregations in the settings to which God has called us.**
 - By “missional churches,” we mean churches
 - a) Engaged in sharing and embodying the way of Jesus in the world, and
 - b) Marked by a lifestyle of neighborliness and willingness to cross barriers to disciple others. Missional churches provide a culture in which each person is empowered, supported and sent out to disciple others in their context.
 - We will continue to embrace the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* as our statement of belief and practice.
 - We will minimize the time spent on same-sex marriage issues.
2. **How will we do it together?**
 - We will merge the focus of the two initiatives of the past year (Year of Covenant and Year of Mission) into one. The combined initiative will be called “**Gathered and Sent.**” A longer version could be, “Gathered in Covenant, Sent in Mission.”
 - The “Sent” part of “Gathered and Sent” will provide us with resources, tools, training and support to enable us to reach out and to grow as missional congregations. Examples could include:
 - a) Events to encourage each other and to celebrate and hear stories about what God is doing in our settings.
 - b) Mentoring for pastors or leaders.
 - c) Training events for growing missional cultures, learning to live with a centered set approach, utilizing the APEST (Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd and Teacher) model of leadership, and practical training in engaging in “third places,” that is, neutral meeting places where disciple-making relationships can begin.
 - The “Gathered” part of “Gathered and Sent” will help us tend to our center. Examples could include the following:
 - a) Articulating a covenant that would include our core values, a procedure for working at differences in community, and spiritual practices to sustain covenant living.
 - b) Studying together how we use the scriptures and how we use the Confession of Faith.
 - c) Learning and practicing skills for engaging fruitfully in difficult conversations.
 - We will **call a Conference executive** that is gifted in helping us articulate and sustain vision as well as in working constructively with conflict.

3. What will be our affiliation?

- Based on our statements regarding the Ohio Conference stand on same-sex marriage issues, and on the denomination's decision that the Confession of Faith and the membership guidelines for MC USA will not change before 2019, we will continue our affiliation with Mennonite Church USA.
- We will also continue to hold the three changes that could trigger a review of that affiliation:
 - a) A substantive change in the Confession of Faith.
 - b) A substantive change in the membership guidelines of MC USA.
 - c) A change in policy or practice at the national level that would require Ohio Conference to recognize the credentials of pastors who have performed same-sex marriages or who are involved themselves in a same-sex relationship.
- We will continue to utilize the Voice Task Force to speak into denominational processes and to agencies affiliated with MC USA.

4. How will we pay for it?

- Ask the delegates to approve the "Healthy" Budget which allows for calling a Conference executive to serve Ohio Conference and which keeps staffing at a level that is sustainable for staff members. The Leadership Team believes that this budget will:
 - Increase the rate and the success of progress toward become missional congregations.
 - Allow the time required of our staff to be at more sustainable levels.
 - Allow communications to continue to come to congregations in timely and helpful ways.

May God's Spirit give us direction and strength to grow in being part of the mission in which God is engaged.

SETTING DIRECTION FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER OF THE OHIO CONFERENCE

Ohio Conference Annual Conference Assembly March 24, 2017

SAMPLE BALLOT

As we prayerfully consider God's leading into the future, we commit ourselves to the following:

- We will continue our affiliation with Mennonite Church USA.
 - Three changes could trigger a review of that affiliation:
 - a. A substantive change in the Confession of Faith;
 - b. A substantive change in the membership guidelines of MC USA;
 - c. A change in policy or practice at the national level that would require Ohio Conference to recognize the credentials of pastors who have performed same-sex marriages or who are involved themselves in a same sex-relationship.
 - We will continue to utilize the Voice Task Force to speak into denominational processes and to agencies affiliated with MC USA.

- We will put our best energy into being and becoming missional congregations together.
 - We will join the Year of Mission and the Year of Covenant initiatives into a single initiative: *Gathered and Sent*.
 - We will minimize the effort spent on the same-sex marriage issue.

___ Yes, I affirm the direction proposed by the Leadership Team.

___ No, I cannot affirm the direction set by the Leadership Team.

If you were not able to affirm this direction, what change(s) would have made it possible to affirm?

NOTE ON THE BUDGET

Two budgets will be presented at the Annual Conference Assembly, and the delegates will be asked to choose between the two. The Leadership Team recommends that the delegates choose the "Healthy" Budget. While progress can be made on the proposed direction above with either budget, choosing the "Healthy" Budget will:

- Increase the rate and the success of progress toward becoming missional congregations.
- Allow the time required of our staff to be at more sustainable levels.
- Allow communications to continue to come to congregations in timely and helpful ways.