

REPORT ON CONVERSATIONS WITH LEADERS OF CONFERENCE CONGREGATIONS

Summarized by Cliff Brubaker, Regional Pastor West, Year of Covenant Coordinator

What were the conversations about? In short...

- Assess and build trust between OH Conference congregations and Ohio Conference
- Gather information for setting future direction for Ohio Conference
 - Where are headed?
 - How will we get there together?
 - With whom will we travel?
- To date there has been conversation with 40 congregations.
- Most conversations are about an hour and a half in length
- Conversations were done with participants of the congregation's choosing
- 10 questions
- Lots of miles, lots of very good conversation
- Process and questions were designed to give an overview of the conference rather than detailed statistical information.

Reporting back

- Below are a summary of what congregations said in response **to two questions that are important background to the direction for the conference proposed by the OH Conference Leadership Team.**
- Since the visits and conversations are continuing, a longer summary will be sent to delegates prior to the Annual Conference Assembly.

Question # 5 was designed to provide feedback that would be helpful in identifying where congregations need the resources of conference to be focused: ***What are the challenges you need to be prepared to meet in the next five years?***

- By far the most common response was the need to learn how to make connections in the community in which the congregation is located now.

What is behind that need?

- Most Ohio Conference congregations are significantly smaller and significantly older than they were 10 and 20 years ago.
- Youth have left their home areas to study and to take jobs that matched their training, and have not returned to the communities and congregations in which they were raised.
- Recognition that the millennial generation thinks differently and values different things than previous generations. "What is the future for rural congregations that are located in settings that are generally no longer attractive to the millennials?"
- "We have not had a youth group for a number of years because we did not have youth. We have youth that will soon be that age, and we have to learn how to do a youth group with a new generation."
- Almost all congregations described themselves as warm and caring. Many congregations find, however, that they are not equipped to build and sustain relationships with people from outside their church community.
- Most congregations described themselves as being diverse, but found the communities of which they are part to be growing in diversity.
- Some congregations identified the change that a wide range of available Christian radio programming has brought. Congregations and communities are exposed to competing visions of the Christian life.
- Most of the information on being missional churches is written in urban or suburban settings. How does that translate to our rural congregations?

Question #8 The OH Conference Leadership Team has prepared a tentative statement regarding continuing relationship with Mennonite Church USA. How does the proposed direction fit or not fit your congregation?

The proposal in short:

- Continue to be part of 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 MCUSA; 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.
- Continue to utilize The Voice Task Force to speak into denominational processes and with agencies affiliated with MCUSA.
- Put our best energy into being and becoming missional congregations together.
- Minimize the effort spent on the same-sex marriage issue.

Responses

- Many groups found the proposed direction to represent their congregations well or found the direction acceptable. Though many congregations noted a wide range of perspectives on this issue within their congregations, congregations generally found the statement to be a good way to move forward.
- 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 the anticipated future movement of the denomination toward a more open stance on same-sex marriage. When asked what could be done to make this statement more acceptable to them, the regular answer was that the conference should leave the denomination.
- Some groups found the statements on same-sex marriage to be more restrictive than they wish, and wonder if there is room for them in the conference.
- Some congregations expressed a significant interest in continuing to be part of Mennonite Church USA, even if they favor a more traditional understanding on same sex marriage. Some expressed significant loyalty, while others noted a firm commitment to continue to be part of the conversation within Mennonite Church USA.
- 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 there was significant affirmation of this direction. 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.
- Some on both ends of the spectrum of the conversation raised some interest in looking at the statement about minimizing the effort put into the same-sex marriage issue. Some believed that if it is an issue, the effort needed to bring resolution should be given. To some at the end who would wish for more openness on this issue, they would like continued work on this issue.