

Summary of Conversations with Congregations 2017 Annual Conference Assembly of Ohio Conference

Since late October, Cliff Brubaker has participated in conversations with leadership groups from 42 Ohio Conference congregations. The purpose of the conversations were to a) identify ways that trust could be built or rebuilt between Ohio Conference congregations and Conference itself; and b) gather information that could be helpful as the Conference leadership answers questions about the future of Conference. The questions used in the conversation are listed below, along with some of the most frequent responses. The questions were not designed to provide statistical information, but some effort was made to report the most frequent responses earlier in the list of responses. **The effort below is an attempt to summarize the most frequent responses and is in no way a record of all responses.**

1. With the overall purposes of this conversation in mind, what would you like me to know about your congregation?

- Many congregations are engaged in significant programs of care and mission in their communities. Some examples include community gardens, worship services for people with developmental handicaps, day cares, providing facilities for blood donation events and for immigration specialists, community prayer labyrinths, after school tutoring, community choirs, a wood-fired pizza oven for community events, thrift shops...a imaginative list.
- Ohio Conference congregations were birthed in a variety of ways: Mennonite or Amish settlers needing a place to worship, families relocating in new communities or cities, church splits, and church plants.
- With several notable exceptions, many congregations are smaller and older than they were 20 or 30 years ago. In some situations, buildings that had sizable congregations now have small groups worshipping there. The most frequently identified contributing factors to their smaller size were the fact that many youth follow more attractive employment opportunities in more urban areas as well as the loss of some members around the same-sex marriage conversation in the broader church.
- On the other hand, several congregations are building or may need to build to accommodate their growth, and some of these are in rural areas.
- Many, but not all, have fewer children. For example, Lockport reported having 50 children age 5 and under. Wooster has a group of youth emerging in their congregation, and they have not had a youth group in a number of years. They recognize that they will need to learn to do youth programming for a new generation of youth.

2. As you look back on your history with Ohio Conference,

a. When was your relationship at its best? How would you describe your relationship to Conference at that time?

b. In what ways has your relationship to Conference strengthened your congregation?

- Times of pastoral transition and search.
- Regional pastors' care for pastors.
- Resourcing for pastors.
- Conference's engagement in mission and church planting.
- Some with longer memories remember mission gatherings of Ohio Conference that were filled with worship and stories of mission. These events were inspiring and helpful.
- Outside help in working at difficult conflicts.
- See Note #3 in the final section of this report.

3. As you consider your current relationship with the Conference:

a. How would you describe your relationship now?

b. How has your current relationship changed from 2a?

- Many groups noted that it was likely that the most common disposition in the congregation toward Conference was not knowing about the Conference at all, or indifference to the Conference, or both. One congregation called it “polite indifference.”
- Many groups also noted considerable confusion about the roles of the Conference and the denomination, which often are seen as a single entity to many.
- For many congregations who reported strained trust, they also said that the strained trust was with Mennonite Church USA, and not the Conference.
- Considerable frustration was noted about the argumentative flavor of ACA session in the past several years. Comment: “We have a very influential husband and wife in our congregation that have been strong advocates for conference for years, and have always enjoyed going to delegate sessions and reporting back. After the last two years, they are not interested in returning.”
- Some concern was stated about the unclear position of some former Conference staff members on LGBTQ issues.

4. As you consider your future relationship with the Conference:

a. What adjectives would you use to describe your desired future relationship?

b. What might we (Conference and congregation) do to help that happen?

- Continued resourcing for pastors and pastoral transitions. Pastor/elder retreats also have value for a number of congregations.
- A good number of congregations noted a desire for a personal connection with Conference staff. Congregations often expressed thankfulness during the conversation that a Conference staff person came to their turf and listened to their situation.
- There were few people under 50 years of age present in these conversations. For those under 50 who were present, there was strong desire expressed for Conference to use social media, video clips, and forms of communication other than printed pages. “We don’t read printed paper anymore.”
- One congregation used the picture of adult children as a way of describing what they hoped for. Like an adult child, a congregation makes decisions about its life and is trusted with those decisions, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

5. What are the challenges you need to be prepared to meet in the next five years?

- By far the most common report was shrinking numbers. How can we be more effective in reaching into our community? What will the finances look like with our shrinking numbers? “Our primary focus over the years has been to raise our own children in the faith. What is our focus now when we no longer have many children in the congregation?”
- The culture is shifting in a variety of ways: more secular, more toward urban settings.
- A number of churches reported recognition that there will be other issues around which we will need to have difficult conversations, and that they need skills in structuring and managing those conversations. Related to that is finding ways of continuing to be church together when we don’t agree on everything.
- Congregations experience a diminished commitment to Sunday morning worship attendance. There are many more competing activities.

- Churches are experiencing challenges related to finances and to fewer people to take responsibilities for church programs.

6. What do you want Conference to care about most?

- Providing resources and help for us to connect with our neighbors. Many groups could recognize their lack of skills to engage their communities at this time.
- Us. This congregation, its situation, its people, its leadership, and having a relationship with us. The smaller the congregation, the more likely this was to be reported.
- Our pastor(s): providing resources, care, encouragement, and accountability.
- Keeping a clear voice that stays the course on critical issues about beliefs. Curiously, this point did not come up directly until a third of the conversations had happened, but was mentioned often as a priority after that.
- Staying focused on the bigger issues: “Orphans and widows;” “Building the Kingdom;” “Doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly.”
- “The voices of those of us that are in the middle of the LGBT conversation.” Though this was stated this directly only once, it was stated with clarity and humble conviction, and represented significant sentiment in a number of congregations.
- In one conversation, a pastor turned his tablet around for everyone to see. The tablet showed the home page of the Ohio Conference website with its clear focus on “Worship, Faith and Witness.” The pastor pointed to it and said, “That is what I want conference to care about most. Worship, Faith, and Witness.”

7. Where are you currently with continuing as part of the Ohio Conference?

- a. As a leadership group? What has been your process?
- b. As a congregation? What has been your process?

- The good number of congregations have had at least come conversation about continuing with the Conference. For some, this happened, if nowhere else, in preparation for the 2016 ACA.
- On the other hand, a good number of groups reported that they did not have a need to have a conversation about this question.
- The majority of the congregations want to continue to be part of the Ohio Conference. For most, being part of the Ohio Conference is not the issue—they would like to continue.
- A number of congregations are concerned about continuing as part of MC USA. They identified concerns about the recent events in MC USA related to credentials for pastors who are themselves involved in same-sex marriages, or about the expected direction MC USA will take on this issue.
- Some congregations clearly want to continue to be part of MC USA. This connection is at least as high a priority as the connection with Ohio Conference.
- Several congregations are uncomfortable with the firmness of the stand of the proposed direction of Conference. While they understand that the stand is representative of many congregations in the conference, they are inclined to be more welcoming of those in same-sex relationships. They wonder if there is a place for them in the Conference.

8. Included is a tentative statement from the Ohio Conference Leadership Team regarding continuing relationship with Mennonite Church USA. How does the proposed direction fit or not fit your congregation?

- Many congregations found it helpful to look at the statement and separate the roles of the Conference and the denomination. A good number also found it helpful to hear the positions the Ohio Conference delegates had taken related to pastoral credentials, and found the proposed direction to be understandable and fitting to their congregations.
- Some congregations found plans to continue with MC USA to be objectionable, even a potential cause to withdraw from Ohio Conference. Some found the proposed direction understandable for the Conference, but that it took a stand on same-sex marriage that was more restrictive on content or flavor than their congregation.
- More information on this question was reported and can be found in the shorter but more focused listening report attached to the Leadership Team's Direction Statement.

9. If you do not expect to continue with the Ohio Conference, what changes might help make it possible for you to continue?

- For some who are not certain, leaving MC USA is the desirable resolution. Beyond leaving, these congregations generally found they were not able to identify what additional things the Conference could do with its statements that would make staying possible.
- For congregations on the other end of the spectrum of the same-sex marriage question, they reported a desire to find more room on this issue.

10. What counsel would you like to offer the Leadership Team as it prepares to call a conference minister?

- The question was framed in the conversations to focus on character traits, gifts, and primary functions rather than on staffing structures and staffing levels.
- Someone who listens well.
- Someone who moves toward conflicts when that is needed, and who manages conflict well.
- Someone who communicates well and is able to utilize a range of communication tools.
- A person with theological commitments and dispositions that align with the center of the spectrum of Conference congregations.
- In one conversation, a significant exchange pointed to one of the tensions of the core functions. One person noted that we need a person with gifts of a pastor, someone who cares for and who can shepherd the Conference. Another person at the table then noted that we need someone with the gifts of leadership, which means taking initiative when the situation calls for that.

General notes from the conversations

1. One of the recurring themes in the conversations was what "Conference" means to a congregation. It was often helpful/necessary to ask for clarification about that question somewhere in the conversation. The primary indicator for asking the question is when I heard the pronoun "they" used to refer to Conference. I started to ask, "When I say the word 'Conference,' what comes to mind for your congregation? Think of it as a continuum. At the one end, 'Conference' is an institution, with staff, committees, financial systems, policies, and is in the business to giving direction. On the other end, 'Conference' is us, a group of congregations linked together, with a few staff and structures to serve those connections and congregations. One end, Conference is 'them.' The other end, Conference is 'us.' Which way does your congregation lean?" The first time I articulated this question, there was silence, and then a person gave a thoughtful answer, with a smile. "When things are going the way we think they ought to go, Conference is an 'us.' When it is not going the way we want it to, it is "they.""

2. While it is not new information, it is very clear in the conversations that there is much confusion about the responsibilities and roles that the Ohio Conference has, Mennonite Church USA has, the various agencies have, and even local pastors groups have.
3. There is a recurring theme related to the authority and influence Conference has. One representative quote: “There was a time when we seemed to get quite a bit of direction from Conference. We do not hear that coming anymore. And we need that.” My follow-up questions: “What would the kind of direction you want from Conference look like? What kind of direction were you given in earlier times—what would an example be?” Later in the conversation, the person that framed the statement above said, “We can say we want more direction, like it used to be, but that kind of direction is not well received anymore.”
4. Some groups could articulate their desire for the Conference to be more definitive on the same-sex marriage issue, and hold congregations at variance accountable, but when asked to give an example of a time Conference had functioned in a helpful way to provide accountability with their own congregation, there were not examples that were named. Stated another way, it sounded like it was generally easier for congregations to desire accountability for other congregations than to welcome accountability themselves.
5. There is regularly a request for information, for more information and for information in a variety of forms. On the other hand, one participant noted this during the conversation about more communication: “I think that communication is important, and it is important for the Conference to be creative and responsive as it plans communication patterns. I also think that there is a tendency to make ‘Conference’ a scapegoat. When things are uncomfortable in our worlds, we want and need someone or something to blame. And Conference is a good target—an easy place to locate blame for a world that doesn’t work like it once did.”

Submitted by Cliff Brubaker, Ohio Conference Regional Pastor West and Year of Covenant Coordinator