

Minutes of the 51st Annual Conference Assembly

Ohio Conference of Mennonite Church USA

Sharon Mennonite Church, Plain City, Ohio

March 7, 2020

9:30-10:35 a.m. — Business Session #1

A1. Welcome — Conference Minister Dick Barrett welcomed delegates to Annual Conference Assembly (ACA). He explained that ACA is one day long this year because the Conference is planning to hold a separate missional festival in June. He thanked staff members Judy King and Alysa Short and the people of Sharon Mennonite for all their work in preparing for this assembly.

The theme verse for this gathering is Psalm 90:12. This psalm is attributed to Moses. As we gather this year, we have lots to celebrate as we see how God has been faithful. Ohio Conference has a new regional pastor, Tony Doehrmann, who is serving congregations in the western part of the Conference. Delegates will have an opportunity to offer written blessings for Tony. In addition to celebration there is grieving. The Conference is grieving the loss of three congregations and the passing of retired pastors, as well as the deaths of Rick Jones, pastor of Inlet Mennonite Church, and Bob Sauder, Ohio Conference moderator.

Dick Barrett introduced the new moderator, Lynn Miller.

Lynn Miller shared words of appreciation for Bob Sauder and extended a welcome to delegates, young adult delegates, and visitors. The theme of this gathering, “Hearts of Wisdom,” is appropriate for this time. It is wise to live thoughtfully each day. He encouraged everyone to spend time this year contemplating how transformative it would be if we would all strive to have a heart of wisdom.

A2. Opening Song — Dennis Graber of Sharon Mennonite Church led delegates in singing “Wade in the water.”

A3. Prayer — Dick Barrett led the delegates in prayer.

A4. Minutes of 2019 ACA — The moderator invited delegates to accept the minutes of the 2019 Annual Conference Assembly.

There was a motion to accept the minutes of the 2019 Annual Conference Assembly. M/S/C

A5. Introductions in Table Groups — Lynn Miller gave instructions to delegates for their work in table groups, and he introduced the parliamentarian, Matt Hochstetler. He also noted that the Resolutions Committee includes three members: Jeff Hochstetler, Rebecca Kauffman, and Mary Spearman. Delegates introduced themselves to the other people in their table groups.

A6. Introduction and Blessing of New Pastors — Dick Barrett and Regional Pastors Ralph Reinford and Tony Doehrmann introduced pastors who have begun new assignments in the Ohio Conference during the past year: Hardaye Ramjit, Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland; Lucas Johnson, Valley View Mennonite Church in Spartansburg, Pennsylvania; Terry Shue, bridge pastor at Maple Grove Mennonite

Church in Hartville; Alex Dye, affirmed as lead pastor at Oak Grove Mennonite Church in West Liberty; Jared Chase, affirmed as lead pastor at Sharon Mennonite Church; Walter Campbell, associate pastor at Sharon Mennonite Church; Ramon Lianez, Central Mennonite Church in Archbold; Conrad Mast, transitional pastor at Salem Mennonite Church in Waldron, Michigan. The regional pastors also recognized two pastors who were ordained during the past year: Shawn Hilliard, Martins Mennonite Church in Orrville; and Israel Aguilar, Good Shepherd Mennonite Church in Archbold. Dick offered a prayer of blessing for these individuals.

A7. Sending and Blessing of Congregations — Dick Barrett invited the delegates to pause to lament the leaving of several congregations from the Ohio Conference. Just as humans have a life cycle, so congregations also have a life cycle. Pine Grove Mennonite Church in Stryker and Emmanuel Mennonite in Monclova have closed during the past year. In addition, Pike Mennonite Church in Elida has chosen to affiliate with CMC (Conservative Mennonite Conference). Dick noted that he had worked with the Pike congregation during this process, and the choice to change affiliation was not an easy decision.

Darwin Hartman, pastor of Pike Mennonite Church, gave thanks to the Conference for the expressions of friendship and relationships over the years. Pike Mennonite Church has had a long relationship with Ohio Conference, and the Conference has been a great resource over the years, providing people who have helped the congregation work through difficult issues. He said the decision to change affiliation does not diminish the congregation's gratitude to the Ohio Conference. The decision-making process took place over several years. The congregation has felt a sense of theological drift from the historic anchor to the Bible. He expressed appreciation for the choice of Dick Barrett as Conference Minister.

Dick thanked LaVonne Hartman, a member of Pike Mennonite Church, for her many years of service to the Ohio Conference in a variety of positions. As assistant moderator, she served on the Leadership Team and the Ministry Development Team. She has also served as Ohio Conference's representative on the Board of Trustees for Bluffton University, as a member of the Credentialing Ministry, and as a Conference delegate to the Mennonite Church USA assembly.

Dick led the delegates in a prayer.

A8. Introduction and Action on Gifts Discernment Slate — Mel Hathaway, chair of the Gifts Discernment Ministry, introduced the slate of individuals who are to be affirmed for Conference positions. He invited people to give suggestions for people to fill positions. The Gifts Discernment Ministry is seeking suggestions for the vacancy which remains on the Stewardship Ministry.

Lynn Miller asked delegates to complete their ballots, and the Gifts Discernment Ministry team members collected the ballots.

A9. Introduction of the Spending Plan — Dean Falb, chair of the Stewardship Ministry, presented the proposed Ohio Conference spending plan for 2020-21. He noted several changes from the 2019-20 spending plan. In lines 21 and 22 of the plan, funding for Open Arms Hispanic Ministry and Brazo en Brazo has been added. Previously, funding for these two organizations came from capital funds. In line 29, funding for pastoral scholarships will come from the Endowment Fund.

He expressed the hope that the Conference can end the year with a positive balance. In the past several years, Conference finances have followed a pattern: For the first 9 months of the fiscal year the Conference has lower receipts, and giving increases during the last three months of the fiscal year.

In the proposed spending plan, denominational support is decreased because there will not be expenses for delegates attending convention, since the next denominational convention will not take place until 2021.

Regarding the transfer of capital funds, Dean noted that the Conference has not had to draw on capital funds in the past several years. Therefore, the proposed transfer from capital funds noted in line 49 is included only in case it would be needed. Capital funds include reserve funds and the endowment fund. Some recent changes in the capital funds balance include \$15,000 received following the closing of Pine Grove Mennonite Church in Stryker, as well as disbursement of \$31,550 for several items, including Hispanic ministries, Ministry Development Team grants, and a car for Regional Pastor Tony Doehrmann.

Endowment funds are now being directed toward an investment in pastoral leadership. These funds are being used for continuing education for pastors. In addition, the Conference is sharing the cost with participants in the Journey leadership development program at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

Lynn Miller announced that discussion of the 2020-21 spending plan will take place during the next business session.

A10. Introduction of Visitors — Lynn Miller introduced visitors to ACA, including Bob Yoder, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary; Bruce Breckbill and Chandler Ingle, Everence; Sue Park Hur, Mennonite Church USA; Karen Horseman, Mennonite Mission Network; and Haroldo Nunes, Open Arms Hispanic Ministries.

A11. Welcome and Instructions from Sharon Mennonite Church — Jared Chase, pastor of Sharon Mennonite Church, welcomed delegates and gave some instructions for procedures.

10:45 a.m.-12:15 p.m. — Worship

12:15-1:30 p.m. — Lunch/Pastor Appreciation Meal

1:30-3 p.m. — Business Session #2

A12. Opening Song — Dennis Graber led the delegates in the song “Jesus, help us live in peace.”

A13. Prayer — Lynn Miller opened the business session with a prayer.

A14. Gifts Discernment Ballot Announcement — The entire Gifts Discernment Ballot was affirmed by 98 percent. One hundred twenty-nine delegates affirmed the entire ballot, three partially affirmed the ballot, and four turned in blank ballots.

A15. Table Discussion — Delegates discussed the spending plan in their table groups. They considered two questions:

- Do you believe this spending plan proposal supports the structure necessary to fulfill our mission and purpose? Please explain.

- In light of Ohio Conference Leadership Team action to provide support from endowment funds for continuing education of pastors and cost sharing with participants in the Journey program, along with continuing efforts to raise funds generally and for specific programs, does this lend the need to seek a person who would lead/be responsible for these "development" activities (i.e. growing the endowment fund and soliciting operating support)?

A16. Open Mic —

Joel Sherk (Table 10) — His table group affirms the spending plan. They have questions about the second question. Would the person who would work at raising funds be a volunteer (perhaps a member of the Stewardship Ministry) or a paid staff member? Also, is there a statement of purpose for the endowment fund?

Dean Falb — Regarding guidelines for the endowment fund: Yes, there is a policy for awarding the pastoral scholarships. Members of the Credentialing Ministry are the gatekeepers for the scholarships. Regarding fundraising: This work could be done either by a volunteer or a paid staff person.

Jamie Rye (Table 15) — His table group affirmed using funds for pastoral development. They had a question about church planting. Sometimes when a church closes, the Conference receives funds from the closed congregation. Could those funds from church closings be used for church planting? It seems like the Conference should be setting aside funds for church planting.

Dean Falb — The Stewardship Ministry team met over lunch and discussed funding for church planting. We have an opportunity to elevate church planting. Money for church planting could come from the capacity building fund or the capital surplus. For the past several years, capital surplus funds have been used for Ministry Development Team grants, but it would be possible to use these funds for church planting.

Jared Chase (Table 16) — Overall his table group affirms the spending plan and the focus on leadership development. They wonder if more money could be added toward funding the Ministry Inquiry Program for young adults.

Dean Falb — The funding listed currently is based on a historical perspective. If the Stewardship Ministry sees more interest in the Ministry Inquiry Program, they could increase that amount.

Nancy Beck (Table 18) — Her table group affirms the budget, but there was a concern expressed that the two part-time regional pastors may not always be able to meet the needs of churches because of limited work hours. Do we have enough staff, or have we just cut our staffing level to meet our budget?

Lynn Miller — He understands the concern, and he said that the Leadership Team will keep in dialogue with the staff on this topic.

Additional conversation was tabled until the third business session.

A17. Mennonite Church USA — Sue Park-Hur, denominational minister for transformative peacemaking for Mennonite Church USA, reported about happenings in Mennonite Church USA (MC USA). A total of 2,800 people participated in MennoCon19, the denominational convention in Kansas City in July 2019. The denomination is encouraging us to think about our identity as Mennonites, using a social media campaign called #BringThePeace. #BringThePeace will also be the theme of the 2021 convention. Youth

ages 16-21 are now officially eligible to be delegates to MC USA conventions. At MennoCon19 delegates approved a churchwide statement on the abuse of child migrants.

The denomination is encouraging conversation about church planting. The Gathering Place website (<http://mennoniteusa.org/what-we-do/the-gathering-place/>) offers resources for spiritual formation. MC USA is revisiting membership guidelines. The denomination has several priorities for this year: immigration, women in leadership, and engaging conversation about militarism. The MC USA leadership wants to listen to the various conferences across the country, and Sue thanked delegates for sharing their stories.

A18. Mennonite Mission Network — Karen Horsman, director of donor relations for Mennonite Mission Network (MMN), shared information about MMN. She brought greetings from Karla Minter, MMN church relations representative, who usually attends Annual Conference Assembly but was unable to do so this year. MMN values the relationship with the Ohio Conference. She shared some highlights from the MMN report found in the annual report book, noting MMN mission workers with relationships to Ohio Conference congregations: Matthew and Toni Krabill (France), Neal and Janie Blough (France), Brian and Noelia Fox (Spain), and Deborah Byler (Guatemala).

MMN continues to work with numerous Ohio Conference congregations through the Missional Discipleship Initiative. MMN also has developed the Sent Network, which is focusing on church planting. Six of the 24 people involved in the Sent Network training are from the Ohio Conference. MMN also continues to offer service opportunities through SOOP, Service Adventure, and Youth Venture. She expressed thanks for the contributions to MMN by Ohio Conference individuals and congregations.

A19. Conference Minister/Gathered Report — Dick Barrett shared about the Gathered initiative, which has focused on supporting pastors. Pastors throughout the Conference have been meeting twice a year for fellowship, worship and encouragement. The two regional pastors are working to support pastors, although they are stretched to accomplish their workload while working only half time. The Conference is encouraging pastors to work with a spiritual director, and in February the Conference held a spiritual direction event for pastors.

We continue to think about what it means to plant churches today. Some people are planning to attend the Sent Conference in Philadelphia, which will focus on church planting. Leaders from numerous Ohio Conference congregations are continuing training through the Missional Discipleship Initiative. The Conference is also looking at leadership development. How can we better identify and raise up leaders from our own congregations?

He said that he would like congregations to answer several questions:

- What are you doing in your community that is missional?
- If your church wasn't there, would it be missed by your community?
- What is your congregation doing to raise up leaders? How can we as Ohio Conference help you to do that?

A20. Denominational Membership Guidelines — Dick Barrett said that recently an advisory group put together a report about the current state of the MC USA membership guidelines and gave recommendations. Ohio Conference pastors discussed this report at their Feb. 11 gathering, and the Conference has received feedback from pastors about the recommendations.

The recommendation of the advisory group is a non-binding recommendation. Members of the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) will offer input on the recommendation at their spring meeting. Ohio Conference representatives to the CLC include Dick Barrett, Lynn Miller and Assistant Moderator Paula Snyder Belousek.

Input from the CLC will be taken back to the Mennonite Church USA Executive Board. It is possible that the Executive Board will propose a resolution for presentation at the next Mennonite Church USA Assembly in the summer of 2021. However, we do not know what that resolution will contain. We hope to have about a year to discern about any proposed resolution.

God is at work in the Ohio Conference. In many ways this is a challenging time, but the church has always had challenging times. God calls us to be church in the time that we find ourselves in today.

A21. Immigration Resource Team Update — Coordinator of Volunteers Alysa Short reported for Dan King, who was unable to attend ACA. The current members of the Immigration Resource Team are Dan King, Greg Bowman, and Alysa Short. The team is working to investigate, evaluate and help congregations to implement the immigration resolution adopted at the 2019 Annual Conference Assembly. The team has surveyed congregations to learn how congregations have embraced the topic of immigration during the past year. The Immigration Resource Team encourages everyone to listen to immigrants' stories. They also encourage churches to have Haroldo Nunes or Dan King speak to their congregation about immigration. The Immigration Resource Team is seeking additional team members, especially people from the western part of the state.

A22. Table Discussion — Delegates discussed the reports in their table groups.

A23. Missional Story — Thomas Dunn, pastor of Crown Hill Mennonite Church in Rittman, and Bill Seymour, pastor of Orrville Mennonite Church, shared a missional story about the Wayne County churches and their relationship with the Congolese church in Akron. Thomas also thanked the Lee Heights congregation in Cleveland for their work with Congolese immigrants.

Bill Seymour told about two World Communion Sunday celebrations involving Wayne County churches and the Congolese church. In October 2018 nine churches, including the Akron Swahili Community Church, celebrated World Communion Sunday together at Central Christian with a morning worship service, followed by lunch together. The congregations came together again to celebrate World Communion Sunday in 2019, this time in an afternoon worship service. Three different language groups were represented: English, Spanish and Swahili.

Thomas Dunn talked about worshipping with the Congolese church. The Akron Swahili Community Church worships on Sunday afternoons from 2 p.m. to somewhere between 4 and 5 p.m. Periodically people from the Wayne County congregations have attended these worship services. One of Thomas' favorite memories is of Myrna Ramseyer of Crown Hill Mennonite Church closing one of these worship services in prayer, supported by a young Congolese woman who was serving as a translator that day.

Thomas noted that the Lee Heights congregation has been working to send some of the Congolese children to Camp Luz, and people are working toward funding scholarships for Congolese students to attend Central Christian School. He thanked Regional Pastor Ralph Reinford, who has been representing the Conference in relation to this group. He acknowledged the difficulty of this work, noting that this group's culture is very different than American culture, and there are language barriers. Rollin Mukanza,

a Bluffton graduate from Congo who is employed by the International Institute of Akron, has been a resource to connect the Congolese group with the Ohio Conference. It has been more than two years since this group reached out to the Ohio Conference, seeking connection.

Al Anthony from Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland talked about the Lee Heights congregation's experience with Congolese refugees from Lakewood. Members of Lee Heights have learned about the trauma experienced by people who have been displaced.

Thomas thanked the Ministry Development Team for approving a \$10,450 grant toward the purchase of a van for the Akron Community Congolese Association. The group which applied for the grant would like to match that amount with donations from Ohio Conference churches.

A24. **Announcements** — Lynn Miller made several announcements.

3-3:15 p.m. — Break/Snacks

3:15-4 p.m. — Business Session #3

A25. **Opening Song** — Dennis Graber led delegates in singing "Praise God from whom."

A26. **Vote on 2020-21 Spending Plan** — Delegates voted on the spending plan by paper ballot.

A27. **Missional Planning Team Report** — Corben Weaver Boshart of the Missional Planning team gave an update on some of the team's work. One focus is the Missional Discipleship Initiative (MDI). In MDI a pastor or church leader initiates this program, which consists of having groups of three or four persons meeting weekly for prayer, scripture and mutual accountability. The idea is for these small groups to multiply. The Missional Planning Team has found MDI to be a helpful and effective model. Anyone interested in MDI should contact a member of the Missional Planning Team.

Another missional initiative is the Sent Network sponsored by Mennonite Mission Network. The Sent Network, led by Mauricio Chenlo, is working to equip church planters and is focusing on planting peace churches.

In 2021 Ohio Conference will hold a missional conference just prior to ACA. The focus will be on mission in a rural context, and the speaker will be Brad Roth, author of *God's Country*. His theme will be "Faith, Hope and the Future of the Church."

A28. **Engaging Mission 2020** — Jennifer Hartzler of Oak Grove Mennonite Church in Smithville told delegates about plans for Engaging Mission 2020, a missional festival to be held in June at Bluffton University. This festival is designed to be a place for everyone. Childcare will be available, and youth groups are also welcome. This event will be an introduction to missional living. Input speakers will be Seth and Theresa Crissman, and there will be topic discussions led by Haroldo Nunes, Darin Nissley, and Marvin Lorenzana.

A29. **Mennonite Central Committee** — Jennifer Hartzler displayed a handmade ceramic pitcher commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of Mennonite Central Committee. This pitcher will be auctioned off at the Ohio Mennonite Relief Sale on Aug. 1.

A30. **Announcement of Spending Plan Vote and ACA Attendance** — Lynn Miller announced the results of the spending plan vote. **The spending plan was affirmed by 100 percent of the delegates.**

He also announced that 173 persons attended ACA, and those present represented 36 of the Conference's 46 congregations.

A31. **Acknowledging Staff Birthdays** — Lynn Miller noted that both Alysa Short and Ann Leaman have birthdays on March 7. Dennis Graber led delegates in singing "Happy Birthday" to them.

A32. **Blessings for Tony Doehrmann** — Lynn Miller presented Regional Pastor Tony Doehrmann with a mug filled with written blessings from the delegates.

A33. **Drawing for Delegate Awards** — There were two drawings for gift baskets. The first drawing was for people who prepared for ACA and served at ACA. The two gift basket winners were Babs Graber and Luann Miller. There also was a drawing for delegate gift baskets. Delegates winning gift baskets were Edna Troyer and Sheri Banks.

A34. **Closing Worship and Communion** — Delegates celebrated communion together. Sharon Mennonite Church Pastor Jared Chase gave introductory instructions, and Paula Snyder Belousek, Dan Hooley and Vickie Yoder led in readings. Dick Barrett, Ralph Reinford, Tony Doehrmann, and Lynn Miller distributed the communion elements to the delegates.

A35. **Words of Blessing and Closing Song** — Dick Barrett shared some final words of blessing with the delegates, and Dennis Graber led delegates in a closing song, "You shall go out with joy."

Recorded by Ann Leaman