

## **Minutes of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference Assembly**

### **Ohio Conference of Mennonite Church USA**

#### **Online via the Zoom videoconferencing platform**

**March 6, 2021**

#### **9-10 a.m. — Business Session #1**

**A1. Welcome and Announcements** — Moderator Lynn Miller welcomed delegates and gave some instructions for meeting on the Zoom videoconferencing platform. He announced the three members of the Resolutions Committee: Jeff Hochstetler, Rebecca Kauffman and Matt Hochstetler. He also noted that Matt Hochstetler would serve as the parliamentarian for this meeting.

**A2. Scripture and Prayer** — Conference Minister Dick Barrett shared the theme scriptures for Annual Conference Assembly — John 1:35-51 and 1 Peter 3:15-16. He then led the delegates in a time of prayer.

**A3. Minutes of the 2020 ACA** — Moderator Lynn Miller invited delegates to approve the minutes of the 2020 Annual Conference Assembly.

**The minutes of the 2020 Annual Conference Assembly were approved as presented. M/S/C** (This motion received 100 percent affirmation.)

**A4. Breakout Room Introductions** — Lynn Miller explained the process of using breakout rooms. Delegates met in groups of six in breakout rooms and took time to introduce themselves to each other.

**A5. Introduction and Blessing of New Pastors** — Dick Barrett and the regional pastors, Ralph Reinford, and Tony Doehrmann, introduced the pastors with new assignments in the Ohio Conference: Jeff Hochstetler, lead pastor at Berlin Mennonite Church; Nathanael Hofstetter Ressler, pastor at Maple Grove Mennonite Church (Hartville); Lucas Johnson, lead pastor at Valley View Mennonite Church; Keith and Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach, interim pastors at Millersburg Mennonite Church; Patrick and Christine Nafziger, interim co-pastors at Summit Mennonite Church (Barberton); Alex Dye, lead pastor at Oak Grove Mennonite Church (West Liberty); Andy Stoner, community life pastor at Oak Grove Mennonite Church (West Liberty); and Sarah Short and Gary Stuckey, pastoral team at Inlet Mennonite Church (Wauseon). Ralph Reinford led a prayer for these pastors.

**A6. Sending and Blessing of LifeBridge Community Church in Dover** — Dick Barrett read a letter from the LifeBridge Leadership Team acknowledging the leadership of Dan Hooley during the transition time. The LifeBridge congregation has chosen to affiliate only with Evana. Previously LifeBridge had been part of both Ohio Conference and Evana. The LifeBridge Leadership Team noted, “Our departure is not without sadness and some pain,” and the team expressed thanks for the support the congregation has received from the Ohio Conference. Dick Barrett led the delegates in a time of prayer and blessing for the LifeBridge congregation.

**A7. Introduction and Action on Gifts Discernment Slate** — Alvis Pettker, chair of the Gifts Discernment Ministry, presented the Gifts Discernment slate. He noted that there is still a vacancy on the Ministry Development Team. He thanked everyone who is currently serving the Ohio Conference, especially everyone on the Gifts Discernment Ministry. He encouraged delegates to use the Gifts Discernment nomination form.

Lynn Miller explained how to use the online Gifts Discernment ballot. He noted that results from the vote would be shared later.

**A8. Introduction of the Spending Plan** — Dean Falb, chair of the Stewardship Ministry, presented the proposed spending plan for 2021-22. He highlighted some changes from last year's spending plan to this year's spending plan. Spending for pastoral assessments and healthy boundaries training is projected to be lower than in the current year. In addition, the amount of spending proposed for retreats and seminars is lower, partially because of some events being conducted virtually rather than in person. He also reported on the funds available in the Conference's capital accounts.

**A9. Delegate Questions** — Dean Falb answered some delegate questions regarding the spending plan.

**A10. Gifts Discernment Ballot Results** — Lynn Miller announced that that Gifts Discernment Ballot had received 100 percent affirmation.

**A11. Introduction of Visitors** — Lynn Miller introduced several visitors, including Karla Minter from Mennonite Missional Network, Haroldo Nunes from Open Arms Hispanic Ministries, and Jane Wood, Bluffton University president.

**A12. Missional Story** — Dave Elkins of Central Mennonite Church in Archbold shared a video outlining Central's journey with technology during the pandemic. He described the use of specialized software and noted that the congregation has been livestreaming its worship services via Facebook Live. Central has continued to stream services after starting back with in-person worship. The number of live online attendees remains about the same, even as in-person attendance is rising. Online attendees even include folks from out of the country.

In addition, people in the congregation have shared Sunday school lessons, children's programming and youth programs online via YouTube with a link sent to parents. There have been a lot of hiccups and mistakes along the way, and increasing the use of technology in worship has created a need for training people to use the technology. He suggested that congregations that livestream their worship services designate a streaming host, someone who acts as a greeter to the online guests via chat and encourages conversation. He also suggested asking at-home people to record videos of themselves which can be used during the worship service.

**A13. Instructions for Worship** — Lynn Miller gave delegates some information regarding the worship service.

**10-10:15 a.m. — Break**

**10:15-11:15 a.m. — Worship**

**11:15 a.m.-12:15 p.m. — Lunch**

## **12:15-1:15 p.m. — Business Session #2**

**A14. Visioning Update/Antiracism Training** — Dick Barrett reflected on the challenges of being the church during the pandemic during this past year. Offering virtual services gives an opportunity for new outreach. Giving has been fairly stable, and in some cases, has increased. This has been a tiring and draining year for many pastors. This year has been hard for visioning. God is God, and we are not. As a conference, we have been working at balancing God's call to be still with following the leading of God.

The Leadership Development Resource Team has been meeting virtually. The team has compiled a list of seminaries and other educational programs for people feeling called to pastoral ministry. The team is looking at barriers to ministry, and they recently conducted a survey about women in ministry. The survey results showed that as a conference we have grown in our acceptance of women in leadership positions, but there is room for more growth.

Racism still exists in our context. The Ohio Conference staff, Leadership Team and Ministry Development Team have been undergoing anti-racism training through Widerstand Consulting. This training has been an eye-opening experience. There is need for further education and dialogue regarding racism, and some of our congregations have been working in this area. Later in this meeting we will have a presentation from a group of pastors of Wayne County churches that have been dealing with this topic. In addition, two Ohio Conference pastors, Kevin Himes and Vikki Pruitte-Sorrells, have been working together to explore issues of race jointly with their congregations, Salem Mennonite Church in Kidron and Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland. Their experience has been highlighted in a webinar from Mennonite Mission Network (MMN) titled "Speak the Truth in Love." A recording of this webinar is available on the MMN website: <https://www.mennonitemission.net/events/Speak-the-truth-in-love>. There has been no shortage of challenges in this past year. However, challenges are just opportunities that God has presented us with.

**A15. Mennonite Mission Network Video** — Karla Minter of Mennonite Mission Network (MMN) shared a brief video about the work of MMN. The Missional Discipleship Initiative has numerous participants from Ohio Conference congregations. MMN has 60 mission workers in 50 countries. MMN has been adapting how it does things during the pandemic. Karla Minter expressed thanks to the Ohio Conference for prayers, partnership and financial donations.

**A16. MC USA Membership Guidelines Update** — Conference Minister Dick Barrett reported to delegates about the Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) membership guidelines. He noted that MC USA membership guidelines deal with membership of a conference in MC USA, and they do not relate to a congregation's membership in MC USA.

In January the Executive Board of MC USA made the recommendation to retire the MC USA membership guidelines. However, because the denominational delegate assembly planned for this summer will be held virtually, there will be no action on the recommendation about the membership guidelines this summer.

Reviewing some history, Dick Barrett noted that in 2016, Ohio Conference delegates passed a resolution stating that a congregation does not have to be a member of Mennonite Church USA to be a member of the Ohio Conference. In 2017 Ohio Conference delegates voted to continue affiliation with MC USA with several possible triggers for review of this decision. One of those triggers for review was a substantive

change to the denominational membership guidelines.

He said the Leadership Team of Ohio Conference believes that the actual retirement of the membership guidelines would be a substantive change that would trigger a review of Ohio Conference's affiliation with MC USA. "As the Leadership Team of Ohio Conference, we see our affiliation with MC USA as more than one issue," he said.

In anticipation of MC USA's Membership Guidelines being retired sometime in 2022, and in keeping with the resolution passed by the Conference's delegate body in 2017, the Ohio Conference Leadership Team is suggesting a two-step path to begin discerning what future affiliation with a denomination might look like:

- In the upcoming months Ohio Conference Leadership Team, with input from our pastors and delegates, will continue to clarify our own identity, purpose, mission and God's vision for us in the future.
- We will discern together what it means for Ohio Conference to affiliate with a denomination today and what we want that relationship to look like in the future.

Dick Barrett noted that the Leadership Team wants to make clear that these action steps are in no way indicative of what we might decide as a Conference regarding future affiliation with MC USA if a resolution to retire its membership guidelines were to pass in 2022. (A copy of Dick Barrett's statement about the membership guidelines is included at the end of these minutes.)

**A17. Breakout Rooms** — Delegates met in small groups in their breakout rooms to give feedback on the presentation about Mennonite Church USA's membership guidelines. Lynn Miller asked that someone from each group take notes and send them to Judy King.

**A18. Question-and-Answer Session Via Chat** — Delegates were invited to use the chat feature to pose any questions they had regarding the MC USA membership guidelines. Dick Barrett responded to these questions.

Question: Can you clarify: Does question #2 mean discerning affiliation with MC USA specifically? Or with any denomination?

Answer: The question we want to clarify is, "What does denominational affiliation really mean today?" We want clarity about what we expect from a denomination, what it really means to connect with a denomination before we make any decisions about affiliation.

Question: What is our purpose? What brings life, not conflict?

Answer: Yes, we want to be careful with that moving forward as we discern. We realize that several years ago, a lot of us found the process of discerning questions about dealing with the denomination to be draining.

Question: I would love for someone who has strong ties with MC USA to express the benefit of being affiliated with a denomination. I clearly see the benefit of Conference from personal experience.

Answer: That's a good question. I think there are lots of benefits of being affiliated with the denomination. Some examples: help with credentialing, Mennonite Mission Network, Everence, the Corinthian Plan.

Question: Did you update the Conference vision statement?

Answer: That's what we are working on now.

Question: It seems that MC USA has stated that each conference should function autonomously. Has Ohio Conference's posture and/or documentation reciprocated this movement?

Answer: This view of the denomination is not so much a change as an acknowledgement that most of the authority is in the conferences (for example, in the licensing and credentialing of pastors).

All delegates are encouraged to send feedback to the Leadership Team.

**A19. Missional Story** — Anti-Racism from the Grass Roots: This short video from a group of Wayne County congregations featured pastors from the congregations talking about *Series on Solidarity*, a project which they have worked on together. *Series on Solidarity* is a series of six videos with a study guide. The congregations have used these videos in small group discussions. The pastors noted that some of them have had some pushback in their congregations, but also positive responses. This series gives optimism for the future.

**A20. Announcement** — Lynn Miller announced that there would be a brief break time and reminded delegates that there would be a time of communion during the last session. He asked delegates to have their communion elements at the beginning of the last session.

**1:15-1:30 p.m. — Break**

**1:30-2:30 p.m. — Business Session #3**

**A21. MC USA Video** — Glen Guyton, executive director of Mennonite Church USA, appeared in a brief video with an update about the denomination. MC USA is focused on several renewed commitments: following Jesus, witnessing to God's peace, and helping people experience the transformation of the Holy Spirit. The denomination is putting emphasis on peace witness. The Justice Fund of MC USA has been successful. He encouraged everyone to sign up for PeaceMail email communications from MC USA and reminded everyone that the MC USA convention will be in Cincinnati July 6-10, 2021. There will be some form of in-person event, as well as a virtual option.

**A22. Breakout Room Discussion** — Delegates spent time in their small groups discussing the missional stories which had been shared.

**A23. Vote on the Spending Plan** — Lynn Miller reminded delegates that Dean Falb, chair of the Stewardship Ministry, had presented the 2021-22 spending plan during the first business session. That presentation served as a motion to affirm the spending plan. Lynn Miller asked for someone to second that motion, and Ken Gruenhagen did so. Delegates voted on the spending plan using a Google submission form.

**A24. Pastor-Spouse Retreat and Workshop Offerings Post-ACA** — Coordinator of Volunteers Alysa Short shared information about upcoming events: The Pastor-Spouse Retreat will take place Nov. 12-14

at the Mills Park Hotel in Yellow Springs. Comedian Shawn Reynolds will perform as part of the retreat. Ohio Conference is encouraging congregations to gift this weekend to their pastors. There are only 22 rooms at this venue, and they will be available on a first come, first served basis.

Ohio Conference will be offering online workshops following ACA. There will be five free one-hour workshops on Thursday evenings, beginning March 11.

**A25. Journey Program Introduction and Recognition** — Jewel Gingerich Longenecker, dean of lifelong learning at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS), spoke about the Journey leadership development program at AMBS. Each participant in the program works with a mentor. Ohio Conference has become a sponsoring conference for this program.

Jeremy Clevenger of Wooster is one of five individuals completing the Journey program this year. His mentor was Jacob Dodson, pastor of Wooster Mennonite Church. On behalf of AMBS, Jewel Gingerich Longenecker presented Jeremy with a certificate of completion and lamp from the Journey board. She also expressed thanks to Jeremy's mentor, Jacob Dodson.

Dick Barrett noted that the Journey program has been a blessing with the diversity of people participating from all around the world, and he gave a prayer of blessing.

**A26. Missional Planning Resource Team and Missional Festival Update** — Alex Dye of the Missional Planning Resource Team briefly reviewed the 2021 Missional Conference, noting that speaker Brad Roth focused on the rural church, evangelism through relationships, and prayer. Recordings of the conference will be available on the Conference website.

Plans have begun for a Missional Festival on June 24-26, 2022, at Bluffton University. This event will be in both English and Spanish. Coordinator of Volunteers Alysa Short is looking for volunteers willing to help plan this event.

The Missional Discipleship Initiative (MDI) is an ongoing initiative from Mennonite Mission Network. Many people from several Ohio Conference congregations are participating. The focus is on making disciples who make disciples. Ohio Conference is in the forefront of what is happening in MDI.

**A27. Spending Plan Affirmed** — Lynn Miller announced that the 2021-22 spending plan was affirmed by 99 percent of delegates.

**A28. Announcements** — Lynn Miller announced that video recordings of all ACA business sessions, the worship service and the missional conference will be posted on the Conference website.

In other announcements, he noted that at this Annual Conference Assembly, there were participants from 32 congregations. One hundred thirty-three people were registered, including 122 delegates. The offering totaled \$2,069.

He also noted that immediately after the end of ACA, delegates would receive a link to an online evaluation.

**A29. Words of Thanks** — Lynn Miller expressed thanks to the ACA Planning Committee, including Judy King, Alysa Short, Dick Barrett, Dan Hooley, and Lynn Roth of Central Mennonite Church, who was in charge of technology for this event. He also thanked Ann Leaman for her work with Conference

publications and the ACA Worship Planning Team, which included Vikki Pruitte-Sorrells, Bill Seymour, and Mara Weaver Boshart.

A30. **Closing Worship** — Paula Snyder Belousek and Dick Barrett led delegates in a time of closing worship and communion.

A31. **Recognition of Persons Whose Terms Are Ending** — Dick Barrett named the individuals who are ending their terms of service: Dean Falb, Alan Kauffman, Dee Custar, Miriam Zehr, Barbara Kauffman, Dave Troyer, Ginny Cress, and Lynn Miller.

A32. **Closing Prayer** — Dick Barrett closed the meeting with prayer.

Recorded by Ann Leaman

# Conference Minister Statement

## Regarding Mennonite Church USA Membership Guidelines

In 2001 Ohio Mennonite Conference became a conference of Mennonite Church USA when the denomination we had been a part of, Mennonite Church (MC), merged with the General Conference (GC) denomination. In order to merge the two denominations *Membership Guidelines* were established. In 1999 the original *Membership Guidelines* (Part I and Part II) failed to gain enough approval due to differences in the level of acceptance of LGBTQ persons into the life of congregations. In light of that a Part III was added entitled “Clarification on some issues related to homosexuality and membership.” Parameters were created in Part III which forbid pastors holding credentials in a conference of MC USA from performing a same-sex covenanted ceremony. If they did, such action would be grounds for review of their credentials by their area conference’s ministerial credentialing body. With the addition of Part III to the *Membership Guidelines*, the delegate bodies of both denominations gathered together in Nashville in July 2001 and approved the guidelines by nearly 90% to facilitate the merger.

Since 2001, people, congregations and conferences across MC USA have interpreted and implemented the *Membership Guidelines* in different ways. Some interpreted them as a temporary agreement which was written and agreed to primarily for the purpose of the merger and the birth of MC USA, thus being time sensitive. Others interpreted them as a binding covenant for an unlimited time, highlighting both the covenant and commitment language contained therein.

Complicating matters, the two denominations which merged held different views on polity as related to who made decisions. As a general rule, the General Conference gave its churches much more autonomy in decision making while Mennonite Church congregations gave more authority to their conference in making decisions. Throughout their history, Anabaptist and Mennonite churches have never been top-down and authoritative in decision making outside of congregations, a cluster of congregations, or perhaps a conference. Even in conferences which are given more authority and where congregations hold to a common confession of faith, congregations have acted differently on such matters as the level of acceptance of members who served in the military, those who are divorced and remarried, and women in pastoral leadership, just to name a few.

Much has happened in our society and the church over the past 20 years, especially regarding the level of how much LGBTQ+ persons are accepted into the life of our congregations, including for some conferences, the approval of pastors performing same-sex marriages. In a few instances this has included granting ministerial licenses to pastors who are in a same-sex covenanted relationship.

Recognizing the differences in theological interpretation in congregations and conferences across MC USA, the delegates at the 2015 assembly in Kansas City approved two resolutions: 1) *On the Status of the Membership Guidelines*; and 2) *Forbearance in the Midst of Differences*. In order to exercise forbearance in the midst of the differences, *On the Status of the Membership Guidelines* resolved that the delegate body would not entertain changes to the *Membership Guidelines* for four years.

Four years later, at the MC USA delegate assembly in 2019, again in Kansas City, the delegates recommended that the Leadership and Executive Board of MC USA move forward in discerning



a way to process what to do with the *Membership Guidelines*. Since that time an Advisory Group was formed, met together and offered recommendations. MC USA's Constituency Leaders Council (CLC), with representatives from all 16 conferences and the agencies of MC USA, spent time at two of its recent biannual meetings discerning and offering feedback to the Executive Board.

At its January 22-23, 2021, meeting the Executive Board (EB) of MC USA made the decision to bring a resolution to its CLC to retire the *Membership Guidelines*. This is the anticipated timeline of next steps in the process:

- Mar. 12-13, 2021 - CLC meets to discuss the resolution and offer feedback to Executive Board
- April 16-17, 2021 - EB will be meeting to decide a final resolution to be brought to delegate body.
- Spring 2022 – Most likely the earliest MC USA's delegate body will gather in person to vote.

It is important for Ohio Conference delegates and our congregations to understand that MC USA's *Membership Guidelines* only deal with the membership of a conference to MC USA. It has nothing to do with how a congregation determines its own members or even how a conference determines its member congregations. Ohio Conference's delegates made a decision at its ACA in 2016, and it is in our current Constitution, that a congregation does not have to be a member of MC USA to be a member of Ohio Conference.

Ohio Conference is one of several conferences of MC USA which continues to humbly hold a more traditional understanding of Scripture as it relates to sexuality and especially that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. We continue to hold our credentialed ministers accountable to the resolution passed by the Ohio Conference delegate body in 2015 that they will not perform a same-gender ceremony and that Conference will not recognize a congregation's request to credential a pastor in a same-sex relationship.

At Ohio Conference's Annual Conference Assembly in 2017, the delegate body approved a resolution proposed by the Leadership Team that included a statement that we will continue our affiliation with Mennonite Church USA. Three changes would trigger a review of that affiliation:

- A substantive change in the Confession of Faith;
- A substantive change in the membership guidelines of MC USA;
- 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.

While there is currently no suggestion for changes to the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, nor any requirement from MC USA for area conferences to recognize the credentials of pastors who have performed same-sex marriages or who are involved themselves in a same-sex relationship, the Leadership Team of Ohio Conference believes that the actual retirement of the *Membership Guidelines* would be a substantive change that would trigger a review of our affiliation with MC USA.

As the Leadership Team of Ohio Conference, we see our affiliation with MC USA as more than one issue. Over the past several years we have heard many pastors and members of our congregations question how well Ohio Conference fits with where Mennonite Church USA is at today. We have also heard some pastors and congregational members express appreciation for MC USA.

In anticipation of MC USA's *Membership Guidelines* being retired sometime in 2022, and in keeping with the resolution passed by our delegate body in 2017, the Ohio Conference Leadership Team suggests the following two step path to begin discerning what future affiliation with a denomination might look like:

- In the upcoming months Ohio Conference Leadership Team, with input from our pastors and delegates, will continue to clarify our own identity, purpose, mission and God's vision for us in the future.
- We will discern together what it means for Ohio Conference to affiliate with a denomination today and what we want that relationship to look like in the future.

We want to make clear that these action steps are in no way indicative of what we might decide as a Conference regarding future affiliation with MC USA if a resolution to retire its *Membership Guidelines* were to pass in 2022. Implied in trying to discern God's will on matters is that we come into the discernment process with as little bias as possible and no pre-conceived favor of the result. We allow the Holy Spirit to lead in the entire process which includes any decision or decisions to be made. On behalf of the Leadership Team our prayer is that as a conference we will continue to be faithful to who we feel God is calling us to be as we interpret Scripture and discern the Holy Spirit's leading together.