

February 23, 2016
INDIANA-MICHIGAN MENNONITE CONFERENCE
for March delegate meetings

Pieces of a Vision

Missional Leadership Team (MLT) wants to invite pastors and congregations to a more comprehensive vision than simply a position on breadth of variance we are willing and able to live with. Looking down the road as best we can we want to set in place a few things to shape conference direction without creating structure that inhibits the Spirit:

- **Center conference life around Jesus**
- **Create a new covenant organized around beliefs and spiritual practices**
- **Identify a discernment process**
- **Incorporate the Unity and Variance recommendations into this larger picture for moving ahead.**

Therefore we present to delegates in draft form these two documents, “Pieces of a Vision,” and “Regarding Breadth of Variance We are Willing to Live With.” We have been helped by the work of staff, feedback at the January conference leadership retreat, and by receiving the report of the Unity and Variance Trask Group.

Centering conference life around Jesus

Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. This simple confession unites the church across cultural, national, racial, denominational and every other human-made boundary that separates people from each other. As one, the church proclaims faith in Jesus for salvation from sin and service to God.

Jesus is a person, the fullest expression we have of our creator and the original intent for the world. We follow this Jesus whom God sent into the world. (Colossians 2:6) Jesus is not a theology or belief construct. While Jesus is not bound by Anabaptist traditions, we believe the Anabaptist stream of faith contributes to a more complete understanding of what it means to follow Jesus here and now.

Mission statement (possible revision)...

Our current mission statement:

Joyfully following Jesus, we will cultivate a missional imagination in every congregation.

Several words/phrases emerged at the January conference leadership teams¹ retreat at Amigo Centre and were further engaged at the February Missional Leadership Team (MLT) meeting. We invite your feedback.

We are a community of congregations...

Centered on **Jesus**
 Guided by the **Holy Spirit**
 Acting through **Grace** and **Love**
 Engaging the world **God** loves
 In the spirit of **Peace**

Key documents – Centering ourselves on Jesus in worship, celebration and witness.

- *The Bible*
- *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995)
- *Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists* (Mennonite World Conference) (attached)
- *Missio Dei – What is an Anabaptist Christian?* (by Parker Palmer)

Shared Spiritual Practices

Currently, our conference and denominational by-laws refer to beliefs we hold in common. Commonly held beliefs are essential for maintaining communal identity. The Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference bylaws do not address how and to what extent the beliefs we “hold” are binding or how we handle situations when we disagree on these things.

Presumably, a congregation that wants to be Mennonite and that meets the criteria for membership in a Mennonite conference is doing so because it assents to commonly held Mennonite beliefs. It is reasonable for the conference to expect that member congregations actually manifest these beliefs in their common life.

Yet, experience has shown that it is difficult on a practical level to hold one another accountable for a difference in beliefs. On a relational level, divisions occur when we expect everyone to agree on everything we say we believe. Recent examples of congregations differing on the Confession of Faith, in addition to our current beliefs on human sexuality, would be divorce and remarriage, women in leadership, peace theology, evangelism, and church planting.

There is a close relationship between belief and spiritual practice. That is, our beliefs tell us what we value and they orient us toward how we practice our faith. As we live out our faith by following Jesus’ commandments, those experiences shape our beliefs. In all of this, the Holy Spirit is the counselor who reminds us of everything Jesus taught us and who enables us to

¹ Conference leadership teams are Missional Leadership Team (MLT), Advisory Council (AC), Gifts Development Team (GDT), Leadership Enhancement Team (LET), Ministry Credentialing Team (MCT), Stewardship Team (ST)

obey (John 14:15-26). We can trust that as we together live out the spiritual practices outlined in this covenant, the Holy Spirit will shape our beliefs.

Since belief and spiritual practice are so closely related, this document proposes that we agree to be accountable to one another not only for holding common beliefs, but also for implementing a set of common spiritual practices, and sound practices are currently embedded within our Confession of Faith.

These are the common covenantal practices through which we seek transformation toward Christlikeness and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

- 1) We will worship God² as the central act of our common life whenever the church is gathered. (Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (COF) Article 1 God, and Article 9 The Church of Jesus Christ)
- 2) We will practice prayer, fasting and generous giving to separate ourselves from the influence of the principalities and powers of this age and to make us available to fully participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. (COF Article 18 Christian Spirituality and Article 21 Christian Stewardship)
- 3) We will prayerfully study the Bible together weekly in our congregations and whenever the conference gathers, guided by qualified teachers³ for the purpose of increasing our competence in reading, interpreting, and applying the scriptures in an Anabaptist perspective to our everyday lives and to the critical issues of faith we face in the world.⁴ (COF Article 3 Holy Spirit, Article 4 Scripture, Article 15 Ministry and Leadership, Article 17 Discipleship and Christian Life, and Article 18 Christian Spirituality)
- 4) We will accept and offer hospitality⁵, believing it creates the context for God's kingdom to appear in our midst, particularly as we minister to the poor, the hungry, the prisoner

² Worship of God includes adoration, thanksgiving, confession of our sins to God and one another, assurance of forgiveness, intercession and communion.

³ One might ask how this practice is different than attending Sunday School. By naming this a basic practice of our covenantal life, our conference would need to re-appropriate *significant* structural and program resources to calling and equipping qualified Bible teachers and assessing teaching. Developing common understandings around what it means to be a teacher will be an important next step in this process. There would be good biblical basis for doing so. See James 3:1, I Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11, II Timothy 4:3, Hebrews 5:12.

⁴ Applying the scriptures in an Anabaptist perspective is often referred to as the "hermeneutic of obedience." (See Stuart Murray's *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*, 2000).

⁵ Genesis 18:1-8; I Kings 17:8-24; Luke 10:1-20; Luke 24:13-35; Romans 12:9-13; Hebrews 13:2

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⁷ Genesis 18:1-8; I Kings 17:8-24; Luke 10:1-20; Luke 24:13-35; Romans 12:9-13; Hebrews 13:2

and the stranger. (COF Article 10 The Church in Mission and Article 18 Christian Spirituality)

- 5) We will study the Bible with neighbors and strangers, inviting them to become disciples of Jesus.⁸ (COF Article 10 The Church in Mission and Article 8 Salvation)
- 6) We will practice peacemaking by extending loving-kindness and forgiveness to our brothers and sisters as well as to our neighbors and enemies. (COF Article 17 Discipleship and Christian Life and Article 22 Peace, Justice, and Nonresistance)

These spiritual practices will help to form our Annual Sessions agenda. Our Annual Sessions will become a time of equipping congregations to do these practices, and a space where we share testimonies of how we are being “transformed into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit” through these spiritual practices.

Process of Discernment

We commit to submit to clear and reliable pathways for communal biblical discernment when considering beliefs and practices that differ from the broader church. Speaking clearly and listening well, we agree to the following pathways for discernment:

When a congregation is considering beliefs or practices that differ from the beliefs and practices outlined in our conference by-laws, *Mennonite World Conference: Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995), Missio Dei: What is an Anabaptist Christian?, Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love, or A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership* (the polity manual), the congregation will:

- 1) Begin by articulating how the beliefs and practices we hold in common (named above) bear witness to God’s intended purposes for the church and the world.
- 2) Accept guidance from the Missional Leadership Team in designing a trustworthy process of discernment. The Central Plains Mennonite Conference resource *Seeking God’s Will Together* will be used to prepare and equip the congregation to enter this process.
- 3) Articulate the new belief or practice to brothers and sisters in the conference in terms of how it bears witness to God’s intended purposes for the church and the world.
- 4) Enter into a thorough and substantive process of biblical discernment with a peer congregation that embraces the conference’s articulated beliefs and practices. This

⁸ The teaching of the Word was the highest priority to which the apostles gave themselves (Acts 6:1-7). It was the basic means of sharing the Gospel. In the places in the world where the church is growing, biblical and theological education are the primary methods of calling people to Christ.

process will be determined by the conference leadership team in consultation with the two congregations and teacher. It would not be expected, or likely helpful, that such pairings would be with congregations that represent polar positions.

- 5) Be led in their study by a qualified teacher offered by the conference leadership in consultation with participating congregations. *Teachers will be chosen based on their ability to lead an honest inquiry, not for their ability to lead toward a predetermined outcome.*

If after the full commitment of a congregation to the conference discernment process the congregation embraces the conference's articulated beliefs and practices, the process is considered complete.

If that is not the case, there are two options for the Missional Leadership Team to consider as the outcome of this discernment process:

First, that if after the full commitment of a congregation to the conference discernment process that the congregation still believes it must follow the original practice that differs, it will be blessed to follow that course of the teacher Gamaliel, "If the path is of human origin it will fail, but if it is of God it will flourish." (Acts 5:38-39)

Second, that if after the full commitment to the process the congregation still believes it must differ, the conference and congregation can evaluate the continuation of the relationship.

Covenant for Congregations and Pastors

Our new vision includes strengthening relationships in order to more deeply engage in kingdom work together. When our congregations are better connected we can serve our communities and the world more effectively. We will write a simple covenant and invite congregations and pastors who want to be part of this conference to covenant in June 2017, and renew every two years. Congregations will decide who signs the covenant on their behalf. Pastors and others who desire their credentials to be held by IN-MI Conference will sign the covenant. (We recognize there are still details to be worked out in this area. Again we welcome ideas for clarification.)

The following are obviously not exhaustive lists, but are a starting point to get your ideas flowing. Hopefully as we engage in deepening relationships with each other we will not only learn from each other, but also lead one another to greater faithfulness.

Congregations:

- Learn from each other. Find congregation in a different part of the conference that you don't know very well, and commit to sharing joys and challenges over the course of the year. Pray for each other during that year.

- Have fun together. Identify a congregation in your area and plan a fellowship event together. Have a variety show, watch an interesting movie and discuss it, have a facilitated discussion focused on getting to know each other.
- Look outward into the community together. Engage in mission with a congregation in close proximity to you. Come together to put on a musical for community children, volunteer at a local nonprofit, adopt a local school, do a peace march, host a summer Vacation Bible School, have a joint offering project for a year, plan a summer or spring break service trip with SWAP together, etc.
- Celebrate God together. Come together for worship. Have Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday services together, gather for an old fashioned hymn sing and soup supper.

Pastors:

- Attend or send a representative from your congregation to the IN-MI conference area council meetings every time they meet.
- Attend IN-MI Annual Sessions each summer.
- Meet with another IN-MI pastor regularly to share joys, struggles, and to pray together.
- Create an "affinity" group for pastors in your area (pastors who are over 60, pastors who are bi-vocational, pastors who serve large churches, pastors who serve small churches, pastors who are mothers of young children, etc.)
- Pull together a group of pastors in your area and hire someone to facilitate Group Spiritual Direction for you on a monthly basis.
- Start a new small group of pastors' families in your area. Meet together for prayer, fellowship, service, and worship.
- Do a pulpit exchange with another church.
- Design a sermon series and work together with another local pastor or pastors to create it.

We offer these pieces of a vision for your reflection and feedback. First responses can will be shared at March delegate meetings on March 5 and 12.

April-May, following the delegate meetings, Missional Leadership Team (MLT) will review comments and refine parts of the document. We also hope delegates will discuss "Pieces of a vision" with their congregations, so they can bring that wisdom to Annual Sessions.

An updated version of this document will come to delegates for Annual Sessions, June 16-18, 2016.

Missional Leadership Team

Gene Hartman, moderator

Paula Killough, moderator-elect

Rebecca Kauffman

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Appendices

Appendix A

A Different Name?

Perhaps down the road several years, as we live into our new vision, a different name would emerge that would be appropriate for conference.

Appendix B

This list represents further work begun at the January conference leadership retreat at Amigo Centre.

What Indiana Michigan Mennonite Conference provides its member congregations

Connecting

- Congregational coaches for pastors and lay leaders
- Support and guidance in a congregational crisis
- Connecting pastors for mutual support and professional enhancement
- Resources and programming for congregational life
- Capital Fund Grants

Credentialing and Leadership Development

- The Journey Program – a pathway to pastoral ministry
- Mentors for new pastors
- Guidance for congregations during a pastoral transition/search process
- Official body to vet and credential pastors
- Church Planting

Celebrating

- The place where congregations can enter the bigger story of God's activity in the world

Other

- A simple doorway for distributing mission funds to many church agencies and organizations (commonly referred to as pass through funds)

Appendix C

An Overview of the Unity and Variance Task Group's Process

In June 2014, the Unity and Variance Task Group was commissioned at Annual Sessions to lead a process through which conference members could “engage issues of variance and give feedback or direction to conference leaders.” The task group was further instructed to ensure “that the process will be accessible and inclusive so that all members of conference have the opportunity to add their voice to the discernment.” (*Job Description, Unity & Variance Task Group*, attached).

The task group worked towards these ends by leading times of worship and discernment during Annual Sessions in 2014 and 2015 and during the regional meetings in 2015. We also prepared a survey that was distributed to all conference congregations in January, 2015. With others in our conference, we helped to plan and lead two special events, “Faithfulness under the Cross: Unity, Division, and the Church” in March 2015 and a “Pastors’ Sabbath” in September 2015. In addition to these more public events, the task group met and consulted with numerous other people and resources that have helped to shape our work.

- **Annual Sessions (Goshen, June 2014).** At the time when most of the task group was introduced, we invited Michael Gulker and Rob Barrett from the Colossian Forum to share with conference delegates during a worshipful work session and workshop.
- **Colossian Forum Colloquium (August, 2014).** In August 2014, two task group members attended a five-day colloquium in Grand Rapids, MI that was organized by the Colossian Forum.
Centered on LGBT⁶ realities, people with different positions and fields of expertise practiced listening and speaking in the pursuit of faithfulness to Christ.
- **Colossian Forum Training (December 2014, January 2015)** Three task group members received training from the Colossian Forum on leading difficult discussions in the context of worship.
- **Survey (January 2015).** As a tool for further conversation and discernment around areas of unity and disagreement, the task group prepared a survey and, in January 2015, sent it to all conference congregations through their pastors and delegates. The survey was available in English and Spanish, both online and in hard copy, and everyone who was a part of a conference congregation was invited to participate. The task group collated and discussed the survey responses, including the many written responses to the open-ended questions. Results were shared during regional meetings in 2015 and made available upon request.

⁶ LGBT: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, but also as a shorthand for other sexual minorities.

- **“Faithfulness Under the Cross: Unity, Division, and the Church” (East Goshen Mennonite Church, February 2015).** John Troyer, Mary Lehman Yoder, and John Roth were invited to share their visions for the church. Over three hundred people attended the event, and a video recording was made available online.
- **Regional meetings (March 2015).** At the north and south regional meetings in 2015, the task group presented the survey results and led conference delegates in table discussions. We received and discussed feedback both from individual conversations and table group discussions.
- **Annual Sessions (Indianapolis, June 2015).** We led a worshipful work session and shared with delegates our “half-formed, half-way conclusions.” We received and discussed feedback both from individual conversations and table group discussions.
- **Pastor’s Sabbath (September 2015).** Partnering with conference leadership, the task group helped to organize and implement a meeting for pastors at Kern Road Mennonite Church. Conference pastors sang hymns and prayed with and for each other. In the afternoon, Jewel Gingerich Longenecker led a session on how transformative Bible study might become a practice that binds us together.
- **MCUSA resources.** Throughout its work, the task group consulted resources from MCUSA, other conferences, and various leaders.