

**INDIANA-MICHIGAN MENNONITE CONFERENCE
NORTHERN REGIONAL MEETING**

Calvary Christian Reformed Church, Wyoming, Michigan
March 5, 2016

TABLE WISDOM

What could "centering around Jesus" look like for you and your congregation?

Table #5: 1) More interaction between congregations. 2) Must start with individuals. 3) Spending more time with each other, sharing, better understanding.

Table #6: 1) Focus on Christ: service, offering forgiveness, and acceptance; biblical literacy. 2) Service stands out; discussion and discernment about living in south central Elkhart; hospitality; biblical frame (literacy). 3) Pastors/elders not spending time on "elephant in the room" and spending time on ministry to poor, drug users, those having a hard time (and we've lost people because of it). 4) Where we join in with what God is doing in the community; less judgmental. 5) Service and hospitality: How is Jesus reflected in what we are doing (as individuals)? 6) We focus more on a Trinitarian God than singling out Jesus at the expense of not talking about God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

Table #7: 1) Outreach to our community. 2) Renovation of our space with community needs in mind. 3) Care for each other. 4) Learning together as we study the Bible together. 5) Welcome to the marginalized in our community. 6) Spending more time living out our faith than trying to define it.

What could "centering around Jesus" look like for conference?

Table #1: 1) We should focus on our core values. It might be useful to consult with Amigo who has had to deal with core values in a diverse conference. 2) When we come together we should (continue to) tell stories and testimony to the work of Jesus among us. 3) We should focus most (but not all) our energy on our unity and callings; focus on our strengths and the positive. 4) We should be encouraging and supporting one another, and helping others to be released from what binds them.

Table #2: 1) "Jesus is Lord" can be a unifier when we are at different places theologically. It is one thing we should be able to agree on. 2) As we truly share the love of Jesus and are joined by others, we are changed and the dynamics of the congregation shift (this can be hard). 3) This is a call to move toward humility, listening, hearing others' stories. 4) Do we really want to do this? Are we willing to pay the price, do this with our eyes wide open? 5) We need to recognize God has been at work before we arrive! 6) *When we get together, we sharpen each other. This will make people more excited to come to gatherings to hear what else is happening. 7) *When tension erupts, we need to go to prayer, not Robert's Rules of Order.

Table #3: 1) Focus on Jesus to bring unity. Worshiping together is unifying. Hearing each others' stories is unifying. Center around Jesus, not issues. Jesus worked through relationships and

challenged the disciples. Small gatherings, not just affinity groups is unifying. Listening to others helps us to lift our eyes and helps us listen in our own communities. Can we trust, being open and vulnerable? Centering around Jesus is not easy! Encouraged us to practice what we preach. To be clear, a few individuals encouraged inter-church worship.

Table #5: 1) Standing firm on the mission of Jesus.

Table #6: 1) Make conference session in June focused on worship and good speakers (from agencies). 2) Celebrate! (each other's journey) 3) Biblical literacy.

Table #7: 1) Keep coming back to the FOUNDATION. Jesus and His teaching: love God with all we are, love neighbor as self; and keep asking, "Who is our neighbor?" 2) Support and encourage us as we seek to live out the love of Jesus in our particular contexts. 3) Keep learning more together about Jesus through Bible study, hearing each others' stories about following Jesus.

Table #8: Three ways: 1) Study gospels. 2) Share stories. 3) Discernment in face of new situations.

Here is our best thinking as a table group about how belief and practice fit together (or not):

Table #1: 1) Do we practice what we believe? Amen! Yes we try. 2) Do we think these six practices are good? Amen! They are challenging, but we can do our best. 3) We need to practice peacemaking in the midst of our differences.

Table #2: 1) Hard to get a handle on how to begin this discussion, but we talked a lot about #5 & 6 of the practices. 2) People who are actively sharing God's love in their communities know we demonstrate God's love first, meeting the practical needs of our neighbors, then as relationships are built, we can share Christ and they understand the Bible when introduced to it because they have already seen it lived out. 3) We like the idea of Annual Sessions including equipping. 4) We need to know and be able to move within our calling.

Table #3: 1) Discussion about studying the Bible versus reading. Some liked one word, others liked the other. Both want not only academic studying, but also reading, wrestling, learning. 2) Beliefs and practices make a circle. What we believe feeds our practices and values and vice versa. They energize each other. They do change over time. 3) How do we deal with different interpretations of the Bible?

Table #5: 1) Jesus commanded us to love each other. We discussed the element of conference meetings being more business. Should it be more congregational fellowship?

Table #6: 1) Bottom line: not sure. 2) We pick and choose what we believe in the Bible. 3) Let the Bible interpret itself. 4) We are conditioned by who we are around and we interpret as we understand (through personal lens) culture. 5) Today's culture has a different interpretation than earlier. 6) Differentiate between the principle being taught, rather than the specific application. 7) Affirmed having qualified teachers. What makes them qualified and who decides

and what happens to the "believer gathered around the Word"? 8) Re-orient our church life and make time to hone these practices. 9) It is one thing to state beliefs; it is another thing to live them out in this culture. 10) Questions: Are the beliefs as stated in the Confession of Faith something we can bring to the congregations we attend and covenant around these statements?

Table #7: The practices outlined seem to flow logically from our core belief. If Jesus is center, encourage folks to keep returning to and delving into the biblical text. We want to be resourced and encouraged to find ways to expand our practices outside of Sunday morning worship.

Table #8: 1) Practice versus beliefs.; stories of following Jesus instead of whether we have right beliefs. 2) Grace and mercy are always important.

Feedback and questions that we have about spiritual practices or process of discernment.

Table #1: We are still confused about the process of discernment. We need more time and better understanding.

Table #3: 1) On Mission Statement: Trinitarian is good. One liked this. One reads it and says, "It's nice, but so what. Seems generic." This person started to like it as the discussion went on. One person had a strong affirmation for the Mission Statement. Possible rewrite from one: "Centered on Jesus; guided by the Holy Spirit; acting through grace, love and peace; engaging the world God loves." Another edit option: Instead of using spirit twice, and spirit of peace, say, "ministry of reconciliation." Another likes that the Mission Statement talks about the triune God.

Table #5: 1) Appreciate common practices. What is process for discerning qualified teachers? Who determines? 2) Love is not mentioned in the common covenantal practices (pages 3-4). 3) The cycle of beliefs – faith – action – beliefs is lubricated with love.

Table #7: (page 3, no. 3; page 5, no. 5): What does "qualified teacher mean? Strong affirmation for number three – not in terms of making people defend themselves when they are at "variance," but in terms of starting our conversations with the assumption that our differing practices are rooted in our common commitment to Jesus, and inviting conversation about that. Our experience: even if we don't end up changing our positions, these kinds of conversations can transform our spirits and relationships as we hear each other well.

Table #8: Policing each others' beliefs leads us down an unhelpful path. 2) A focus on common spiritual practices can help us live with divergent beliefs.

Discussion: Covenant

Table #1: 1) We affirm the general idea of a covenant. 2) We are concerned about the addition of bureaucratic overhead in the conference office and in the churches (and for pastors). 3) But we very much like the idea of the mutuality of the obligation (which we stress should be life-giving). 4) we also worry about the cost it might have on local mission and shared ministries.

Table #2: 1) Affirm: Idea of covenant. And opening sentences under Covenant for Congregations and Pastors. 2) Concerns & Questions: A) Language needs to have some flexibility for those whose situations don't allow for some of these things, whether bivocational pastor, church plant, special circumstances. B) Expectations need to serve us and our growth, not the other way around. 3) Suggested Edits: A) "Congregations are encouraged to seek out and maintain relationships with other congregations." B) All the emphasis on Mennonite doesn't address the importance of ecumenical relationships.

Table #3: 1) Agree that there is value in renewing "vows," commitment. Gives an opportunity to reevaluate the church relationships. Be proactive instead of reactive. Focus on joining in and not in leaving and giving an avenue to leave with grace on all sides. 2) Is this recommitment too much process every two years for some churches? Support for continuing education requirements for pastors. Some of that accountability should be to IN-MI Mennonite Conference requirements, not just any continuing education anywhere. Should there also be a financial commitment expected? 3) Congregational ownership of re-covenant encouraged, not just from the leadership. Basically affirmation. 4) This could really be exciting. This could also be a lot of work for busy people. 5) Discussion about what things in the document are necessary, encouraged, optional (i.e. attending Annual Sessions versus small groups among area pastors). 6) Now is a good time to think about and reevaluate covenant relationships.

Table #5: 1) Covenant for congregations/pastors : possibly five years instead of two; keep conference accountable; pastors accountable to each other. 2) Shared convictions and process of discernment to be included. 3) Congregations should be helpful in meeting pastoral covenants with conference and congregation. 4) Will the covenant include "shared spiritual practices" and process of discernment? 5) What is a qualified teacher?? (Page 3, No. 3)

Table #6: 1) (What do you think?) Dealing with reality ...say make a commitment? Some won't do that. Group will be smaller...but will end up with stronger group and good idea in working with relationships. We are too far apart to do this? 2) (What do you affirm?) Wrestling with time commitment, so seems like conference promoting space via covenant to spend time together. Congregation would affirm this part; the way it lists spiritual practices (biblical); covenant idea; read about what it takes to have community and fellowship; renew every two years; takes away punitive; bottom up decision; congregational focus. 3) (Concerns) What am I if I don't sign? Where's my credentials? Congregations that don't, what if pastor wants to sign and congregation doesn't; what happens if congregation doesn't follow the Confession of Faith? What is the meaning of the covenant? Is it a guideline? A serious commitment? Accountability: always sounds threatening, like you'd better do this or you are out. 4) Pastor covenant requirements for bi-vocational people . 5) Some of these good ideas of relationship building can't happen with other Mennonite churches because of distance.

Table #7: 1) We appreciate – re-covenanting process – emphasis on intentionally joining the body (as opposed to emphasis on withdrawing from the body); commitment for intentional time; emphasis on conference as a relational rather than governing body. Regarding covenant content – covenant content emphasis – pastors gathering to support each other, congregations gathering to celebrate together; emphasis on broadening and deepening our connection with

each other. 2) Questions and concerns: Are there guidelines that must be formally agreed to in order to covenant? If so, when and how are they agreed to? What kind of follow-up? We hope lists given are lists of ideas about how we can deepen our connections, not a long list of requirements for congregations and pastors. could be a huge time commitment for pastors. 3) What kind of challenges does the two-year covenant renewal process pose for those doing conference financial planning. 4) A two-year covenant renewal process could require too much congregational energy.

Table #8: 1) Affirm in theory. 2) Concern about busyness. 3) Can we do this on a scale that is meaningful?

Discussion: Breadth of Variance

Table #1: 1) On statement one, we all can affirm it. We acknowledge that some in our congregations would disagree. 2) On statements two and three, we would prefer these to be congregational decisions, but for the unity of the conference, can affirm them as written.

Table #2: 1) Number 2: If our way credentialing pastors is through congregations, should this also not be through the congregation? 2) Number 1: Doesn't seem to be one Conference could legislate anyway. However, the "without fear of censure" phrase could be deleted and sets a tone for #2 & #3. 3) What makes something big enough or important enough to initiate the discernment process? 4) If it's truly discernment, we can't know ahead of time how it will turn out. We have to trust.

Table #3: 1) The document is trying to honor some of the concerns on both sides. Is this how we have gotten into this mess by being wishy-washy? Should we draw the line in the middle? 2) This is moving back toward congregational discernment, affirmations for this and reservations. 3) Have not been good at number two in the past. Would rather we decided on a polity one way or the other. 4) What issues go into discernment? Why only homosexuality? Infant baptism? Peace issues? Women in leadership? 4) Can we trust enough to let congregations experiment? None of us fully know God's will now. 5) We do have boundaries. Number one may not fly with some people/congregations. The lines look like they may continue to move. 6) Question of why homosexuality is an issues as opposed to other "sins." 7) Others say it is in issue because it is against church teaching. Draw a line.

Table #5: 1) Number one: Insert word practicing before LGBT. Number two: What would be time frame on this? Number three: Is this just future issues? We don't need to clear it with Mennonite Church USA. Our conference should stand on its own. These three items may not change decision to stay or go in congregations. Not strong enough wordage. 2) Are we spending energy on LGBT? What are conferences stance on other diverse issues: women in leadership, peace, and nonresistance? 3) Christ commands us to turn from our wicked ways?

Table #6: AFFIRM: 1) Number one: Letting congregations decide. Number 3: Delegates still get to participate in the decision if it would come down to MCUSA going with an MCUSA directive. 2) The group worked very hard on a difficult job. 3) Lots of affirmation for number one. 4) This moves in a positive direction. 5) More clarity in this process of discernment. CONCERNS: 1) In

light of covenants, is there a conference covenant as it relates to the denomination and between conferences? 2) Is the discernment piece a more "spelled out process" for this? What does it mean to evaluate a discernment process and the congregation still comes out at variance? 3) First option (Gameliel) is at variance with variance – won't hold credentials (number three) (page 5). QUESTION: 1) That this went into a discernment process. 2) If MCUSA makes a decision that delegates vote against, then what? 3) Wondering if it might be important, in the spirit of moving forward, to "vote" on something this summer; even if the vote is simply to say we affirm this direction, keep going (assuming there is not a complete proposal ready).

Table #7: 1) Affirmations regarding number one: We're supposed to show God's love to everyone, and this helps us to do this; gives space for congregations to be in relationship in the midst of difference; gives congregations space to discern in their particular context. 2) Affirmations regarding number two: We like that congregations and their pastors have space to discern this in their context and hold themselves accountable to relationships in IN-MI Conference. Commitment to honesty/careful discernment while staying connected with wider church. 3) We are still wondering: There are many issues (related to understanding the Confession of Faith) on which we differ. Why is sexuality "the hill that we die on?"

Table #8: 1) Number two stretches us – conversations are good. 2) Number three – like that it both affirms Mennonite Church USA and recognizes that there may be change. 3) Forbearance – our only path forward. Would like forbearance in number three – at least three congregations are at variance with that. 4) The younger generation is likely to see things differently. 5) Is number three moving the fight to another place?