

Appendix B: Conference Resources, Renewing a Vision Development, Breadth of Variance

1. Conference Resources

As Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference congregations covenant with each other as a community of congregations, we seek to provide the following to one another through Connecting, Credentialing, and Celebrating:

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

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

- Providing a space for members to become aware of, and participate in, God's activity beyond their congregation
- Annual Sessions is a place we worship and celebrate what God is doing among us
- Celebrating in worship the licensing and ordination of pastors

2. Renewing a Vision Development

A. An Overview of the Unity and Variance Task Group's (UVTG) 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.”

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 LGBT¹ 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.
- **“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

¹ LGBT: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, but also as a shorthand for other sexual minorities.

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.

B. An Overview of Missional Leadership Team (MLT) Process

Following the commissioning of the Unity and Variance Task Group (UVTG) at the June 2014 Annual Sessions, members of the Missional Leadership Team continued to meet with and engage various members of the UVTG, particularly the chair, throughout their work. What follows is what MLT has done since receiving UVTG's final report.

- **UVTG Final report (February 20, 2016).** MLT received and discussed UVTG's final report as part of day-long meeting. We developed plans to create a document titled "Pieces of a Vision" that would be shared with delegates in advance of the March regional meetings.
- **March Regional Delegate meetings (March 5 & 12, 2016).** Delegates engaged "Pieces of a Vision" and "Regarding Breadth of Variance" documents. "Table Wisdom" notes were collected at each meeting, used by MLT in its work, and dispersed to delegates on April 25, 2016.
- **Two MLT conference calls to discuss "Table Wisdom" notes (April 7 & 12, 2016).** There were two conference calls – each call was 2-2.5 hours long to discuss what we heard at the regional delegate meetings and to develop ways to respond to delegates in preparation for our Annual Sessions in June, including "What We Heard" (emailed to delegates on April 25, 2016), "Frequently Asked Questions" from the March delegate meetings, and "Renewing a Vision" that includes "Covenant" and "Breadth of Variance" appendices. Our hope was to send these latter documents to delegates three to four weeks prior to Annual Sessions in June.
- **MLT Day-long meeting (April 30, 2016).** As part of this meeting we met with the chair of the UVTG and further develop the various documents.
- **Two MLT conference calls (May 14 & 24, 2016).** We met via conference calls – each was 2.5-3 hours long – to further discuss and refine the "Frequently Asked Questions" and "Renewing a Vision" documents; the latter will include "Covenant" and "Breadth of Variance" in the Appendix section.
- **Revised vision documents emailed to delegates, *Renewing a Vision, FAQs and Unity and Variance Recommendations to Missional Leadership Team* (May 27, 2016).**

3. Breadth of Variance

As we reflect on the current state of our conference and consider many issues that continue to challenge us – women in leadership, our practice of peacemaking, divorce and remarriage – we have congregations who address these very differently. We value our relationship with each one of you.

Missional Leadership Team desires to create space for congregations to engage in local discernment, while offering the discernment process for ways to confer together. Because we have been unable, as a conference or as a denomination, to decide on a stable and consistent understanding of LGBT inclusion, we hope that more stable and consistent understandings can occur within individual congregations as we strengthen our relationships with our God, one another, and our communities.

However, regarding questions about how congregations relate to LGBT persons, some congregations have already given significant time and study. There are significant questions about whether congregations are willing to invest time in a discernment process generally, and regarding this question in particular.

After receiving the table wisdom from March delegate meetings, and doing further reflection individually and as a group, we offer these three modified statements for your feedback.

1. *Individual congregations may, without fear of censure, receive or not receive single LGBT people or LGBT people in covenant relationship as members and non-credentialed leaders in their congregations.*
2. *Pastors, with the affirmation of their congregations, may, without fear of censure, officiate or refuse to officiate same-sex covenanted unions.*
3. *Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference will not credential or hold credentials of a person in a same-sex relationship unless Mennonite Church USA changes its polity and IN-MI Conference delegates affirm the change.*