

How can we be faithful – how can we exhibit the fruits of the Spirit – while we address our differences?

Introduction

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 Christ is Lord and Savior. The simple confession that unites the church also divides it. Different readings of Scripture, experiences, cultures, and traditions have led us to different understandings as we build upon our common confession. As many, the church passionately holds onto these different understandings as signs of both its faithfulness and identity.

With a confession that both unites and divides, how, then, shall we live? In many ways, this is the question with which Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference is wrestling. While our differences have been expressed most recently and passionately around how we address same-sex sexual relationships, our conference and denomination have long struggled in the midst of conflict to reconcile Christ's prayer for unity with Christ's call to holiness (John 17:20-24; Matthew 5:13-16). At times, we have emphasized Christ's call to holiness in a way that devalues our witness of living in unity. At other times, we have emphasized Christ's prayer for unity in a way that devalues our witness of living holy lives.

Unity and holiness, however, belong together, and emphasizing one without the other fails to witness to Christ who empowers both. As the Unity and Variance Task Group, we have found Ephesians 4:1-6 and 11-16 to be foundational both to our work and final recommendations as we strive to be faithful to both unity and holiness.

Dwelling with Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16

The first Unity and Variance Task Group agenda Mark sent to us in August 2014 included as the second matter of business, "Dwelling in the Word – Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16." We held that meeting on August 21, and from Mark's first reading of the passage and our reflection on it, it felt right. Certainly it felt right that this should be, must be, the spirit in which we do our work. Beyond that, it felt right that a church that recognized the integrity of this vision and aspired to live in a spirit, holding both unity and holiness, would be the only church that might somehow address the radically divisive issues before us.

Who would not want to be part of such a community? The maturity to which the passage calls us seems to be both individual and collective; the text lifts up both the personal and the communal traits that will mark lives worthy of the calling we have received. It will be a church that recognizes and honors diverse callings and individual work, while knowing that those called find their gratification and fulfillment by working in the unity of the spirit for the common goal of growing and building up the church in love.

Maturity means having a backbone and a clear mind, a necessary spirit of resistance—there are forces in the world that must not be succumbed to—but the resistance arises from affirmations, and it is accomplished by speaking the truth in love. This maturity is both attainable and beyond us, a present reality and a future to hope for and work toward.

We could all name people and congregations who in attractive ways combine strong convictions with a spirit of patience, humility, and gentleness and in that embodiment demonstrate what a powerful and nourishing force such maturity can be. We could all name failures great and small, not least our own.

Each of our meetings began with reading this passage and at least silent reflection, and that time brought us together, grounded us, and oriented us. Soon we adopted as a kind of motto and even vision statement words borrowed from our partners in the Colossian Forum and intended by us to capture something of that Ephesians 4 perspective: **How can we be faithful – how can we exhibit the fruits of the Spirit – while we address our differences?**

Caught up in that statement are at least these assumptions: we have real differences and they need to be recognized and addressed; there's no reason to believe that our differences are going away any time soon; our differences do not justify treating each other in a less than Christian way; we must be patient, and there's no good way of saying when, if at all, that patience can be judged to have run its course.

However, for at least some of those taking strong positions on the issues of sexuality that are dividing us, "patience" has become the problem. For both some "conservatives" and some "liberals," it is time to separate from those who are prepared to advocate a position they discern as clearly out of step with basic Christian teaching. And who cannot imagine some situation in which patience has run its course and become debased so that now it's time for some decisive measure of separation? We imagine being part of a 19th-century congregation in which some brothers and sisters were slave-owners who sincerely and passionately believed that slave-holding was just and biblical. We can imagine that our ability to be patient would fade and disappear, and we would be looking, however regretfully, for separation.

So one way of framing the issues before the Mennonite Church and its congregations is to ask, in the spirit of Ephesians 4, can we find a way, find perspectives and structures, that allow us to embrace and live together with the question of how we can be faithful and exhibit the fruits of the Spirit while we address our differences.

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 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 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.

Commitment to Practices and Discernment

In the Bible agreements are formed between God and God’s people, in which God makes promises to his people, the worshipping community. These faithful commitments are grounded in the self-giving steadfast love of God. The preferred response is our sacrificial love in return. In the Old Testament, God made such agreements with Noah, Abraham and Sarah, and Moses.

Jesus Christ is the basis of the new covenant, the bond of friendship that God has given us. We can accept this or reject it. Because he loves us with indescribable love, he urges us to accept it — to put our faith, our trust, in Jesus Christ—to trust him with our lives, and to accept him as our only means of salvation. (2 Corinthians 5, Ephesians 2, Acts 10.36, Luke 22.20)

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

Currently, our conference and denominational by-laws refer to beliefs we hold in common. Commonly held beliefs are essential for maintaining communal identity. Our Mennonite World Conference *Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists* and *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) will continue to guide us as we center on Jesus in worship and celebration.

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, and peace theology.

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 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*. Commonly held beliefs are essential for maintaining communal identity. Our *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* (1995), or any succeeding confession, will continue to guide the faith and life of our conference.

Commonly held practices may be even more important for maintaining communal identity. First, it is difficult to see someone’s beliefs, but it is not difficult to observe their practices. Second, spiritual practices shape our beliefs. As we obey Jesus, we come to know Jesus, and this knowing becomes belief. Third, spiritual practices shared by the community powerfully shape the identity of the community.

This document also proposes that when congregations come to differ on a commonly held belief, they will implement a specific set of discernment practices that are described below.

The Unity and Variance Task Group has been asked to listen carefully to leaders, delegates, pastors, and members of our congregations since June of 2014. From this two-year listening process, we now recommend that the congregations of Indiana Michigan Mennonite Conference intentionally commit together to enter into the following shared practices outlined in Ephesians 4 and Philippians 2. This commitment comes out of our awareness of God’s never ending love for us and our joyful response.

The practices we recommend are:

**Being God’s Faithful Community: A Commitment to Spiritual Practices for
Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference²**

In response to God’s unqualified love for us, we covenant to common practices through which we submit ourselves completely to the purposes of God who longs to transform us into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.³

The Spiritual Practices

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

- 1) We will worship God⁴ 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 teachers⁵ 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.⁶ (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 hospitality⁷, 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 and the stranger. (COF Article 10 The Church in Mission and Article 18 Christian Spirituality)

² We are grateful to the leaders of Central Plains Mennonite Conference for sharing their work on Spiritual Practices and Discernment with the Unity & Variance Task Group.

³ This offers several key components. 1) there is a clear statement of God’s ultimate longing for creation. 2) it reflects the Trinity; 3) it is embedded in the greatest commandments and therefore honors our most basic biblical commitment; 4) the vision is embodied in an incarnate person, Jesus, rather than conceptual commitments or virtues; and 5) the work of transformation is located in the power of the Holy Spirit. This offers a covenant that is precisely aligned with Vision: Healing and Hope and allows us to surrender our pretension to perfection.

⁴ Worship of God includes adoration, thanksgiving, confession of our sins to God and one another, assurance of forgiveness, intercession and communion.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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).

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

- 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. (COF Article 24 The Reign of God)

Authority for accountability to our shared convictions and practices reside in the church’s mutual discernment. The Missional Leadership Team will want to think about where the initiative for this process comes. Can Conference ask a covenanting congregation to enter in?

A Process of Discernment for Differing Beliefs and Practices

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 Conference 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 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.*

Two options for the Missional Leadership Team to consider as the outcome of this discernment process:

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.

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.

Policy recommendations

The Unity and Variance Task Group was asked to make recommendations about how our conference tolerates, or does not tolerate variance. In the previous section, we made recommendations for how our conference churches should covenant together in shared spiritual practices, and in discernment of differences. But questions surrounding inclusion of LGBT people in our congregations have been the most present, both because of the long history of the controversy in Mennonite Church USA and its predecessors, and because of the swiftly changing cultural, political, and legal landscape. The following policy recommendations, which will likely be the most controversial parts of our recommendations, center around LGBT inclusion, and address directly our conference's lack of unity on this matter.

Background

Discussions and controversies over LGBT inclusion have been present from before the merger of the (Old) Mennonite Church (MC) and General Conference (GC) Mennonites. For example, as Loren L. Johns writes in his review on *Homosexuality and the Mennonite Church*,⁸ LGBT inclusion was a sticking point:

In 1998 the MC and GC General Boards met together in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Several regional conferences had signaled that they would not be party to the merger/transformation if “denominational membership guidelines allow for including congregations that accept noncelibate homosexuals as members.” The boards decided that they must develop a set of “membership guidelines” that would specify how noncompliance with the teaching of the church on homosexuality would be dealt with on the conference and denominational levels. They were convinced that the success of the merger depended upon broad support of those membership guidelines in both MC and GC congregations.

On the one hand, the guidelines stipulate that “credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony” and affirmed the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*'s statement that “God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life” and “right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship.” On the other hand, the guidelines also affirmed a call to “bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other” and to engage in an “ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other” on these matters. At the annual conference of Mennonite Church USA, the membership guidelines and the *Confession of Faith* were reaffirmed as “the guiding document for questions regarding church membership and samesex relationships/marriages,” while looking to conferences to “interpret and implement these documents in mutual accountability.”⁹ At the same time, the delegates affirmed a resolution on *Forbearance in the Midst of our Differences*, which stated:

The intended consequence of adopting this resolution is that churches of differing convictions about same-sex covenanted unions may remain together within Mennonite Church USA rather than feel they must separate or be excluded by others¹⁰.

⁸ *Homosexuality and the Mennonite Church*, Loren L. Johns, <http://ljohns.ambis.edu/H&MC.htm>, accessed December, 2015.

⁹ *Resolution: On the Status of the Membership Guidelines*. http://mennoniteusa.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/07/ResolutionOnStatusofMembershipGuidelines_2015Jul02.pdf Accessed December, 2015.

¹⁰ *Resolution: Forbearance in the Midst of Differences*.

We note the inherent disjointedness of both of these resolutions passing, mostly to remark that the controversies surrounding LGBT inclusion are long-standing, deep, and confusing. And we note, with lamentation, that several congregations within our conference have left the conference over this and other issues, and that other congregations are on the brink of leaving, and that many churches and conferences in Mennonite Church USA are reassessing their relationship to the denomination. We also note, with lamentation, that many LGBT people and their allies have not been able to remain within our denomination.

Policy Recommendations

Our policy recommendations are consistent, we believe, with our desire to be, and to help our conference, be faithful and exhibit the fruits of the Spirit while we address our differences. We acknowledge that deep differences exist, and will likely continue to exist. 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. On the other hand, credentials are held by the conference, and so especially affect the conference as a whole.

Therefore, we make the following policy recommendations:

- 1) Individual congregations may, without fear of censure, receive or not receive LGBT people 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) Credentialing or holding credentials of a person in a same-sex relationship needs to be discerned by conference leadership tasked with licensing (currently the Ministry Credentialing Team) as for any other person. In addition, credentialing or holding credentials of a person in a same-sex relationship would need to be affirmed by the conference leadership (currently the Missional Leadership Team) and conference delegates at annual session.

These policy recommendations will be difficult for some to accept: Some will say we have gone too far, and some will say we have not gone far enough. But we believe these recommendations are the logical result of the confusion and checkered history of our conference and denomination. Other recommendations will suggest ways that we can continue to seek conference-wide clarity on these issues, that we can continue to see these conflicts as opportunities for Christian formation, and that we focus more of our energy on other ways of living out our lives in Christ together, to “let justice roll down like waters,” and to seek to proclaim Christ to a world in great need.

Strengthening Relationships

In light of what we have heard, seen, and learned, we feel it is also important for us to encourage Indiana-Michigan Conference congregations to take care to strengthen relationships within our conference. We believe that some of the divisions that we are experiencing now are due, in part, to a lack of strong relationships as a foundation. As in other areas of life, when we know one another well—when we understand each other’s joys, pains, struggles, and line of thinking—we are better able to be supportive and loving. We don't need to strengthen our relationships to strengthen the conference. Rather, we need to strengthen relationships in order to be the conference and to more deeply engage in kingdom work together. When our congregations are better connected we can serve our communities and the world more effectively. Below are some of our suggestions to help conference congregations and leaders begin to get more connected to each other.

For congregations:

- 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. Learn from each other.
- 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. Have fun 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. Look outward into the community 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. Celebrate God together.

For 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 bivocational, 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.

This is obviously not an exhaustive list, but it is 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.

Conclusion

Again, we proclaim that Jesus is our Lord and Savior! We pray that God will be glorified within all places where the name of Jesus is lifted up. We pray that we may join our hearts and minds to John's Revelation: "Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people." (Revelation 14:6)

INDIANA-MICHIGAN MENNONITE CONFERENCE
HOW SHALL WE LIVE TOGETHER IN THE FAITH COMMUNITY?
PROPOSAL FOR A VARIANCE DISCERNMENT TASK GROUP
(Updated January 17, 2013)

Background and Purpose:

Over the last 20 years significant debate and discussion has continued in Indiana-Michigan (IN-MI) Mennonite Conference regarding issues of doctrinal variance. While questions of clarity and potential change were initially spurred by issues of sexuality other areas include biblical authority, peace and nonresistance, polity, discipline related to congregational and clergy practice, the role of the Confession of Faith, women in leadership, and membership guidelines. A significant number of congregations have left the conference, for various reasons, however many have noted a perceived lack of clarity and shifting views related to sexuality as primary factors in their withdrawal. While much discussion has taken place we feel it is important for the conference as a whole to more directly address these questions of variance in belief and practice as a means of bringing greater clarity and unity to our identity, discipleship and mission. The Variance Discernment Task Group with the Missional Leadership Team shall plan and facilitate a process for all IN-MI conference congregations and leadership to engage issues of variance and give feedback/direction to conference leaders.

Statement of Process:

The Missional Leadership Team will:

1. Develop an initial job description to include goals, expectations, term length, and other parameters.
2. Make appointments to the new Task Group, ensuring that those chosen are process-oriented, acceptable to the majority of our constituency, proficient in facilitating discussion, and able to objectively implement a process for hearing feedback from the breadth of our conference.
3. Provide initial instruction and receive periodic reports from the Task Group.
4. Complete the process in a two year time span indicated by receiving and publishing a summary and analysis.

Plan and Priorities:

1. Design a process to include opportunities for IN-MI conference congregations, pastors, delegates and leadership to engage in dialogue and offer input about areas of variance, the capacity to accept or not allow differences in biblical/doctrinal perspectives and practice, and ways of moving forward to strengthen the mission of IN-MI conference.
2. Develop and utilize tools for candid and respectful feedback such as surveys or other means of gathering significant input for discernment and direction for the conference.
3. Use multiple settings for continuity over the two year process such as annual sessions, regional meetings, area councils, Advisory Council, or special meetings for conference constituents.

Benefits and Outcomes:

1. Greater clarity for conference understanding and practice related to issues of variance.
2. Increase a sense of unity among the conference congregations.
3. Greater clarity for conference leadership to lead by the direction and vision of our community of churches in issues of variance, discipleship, biblical faith, mission and membership.
4. Clearer direction and understanding on specific issues of sexuality as basis for teaching, practice, credentialing and membership in conference.
5. Strengthen the prophetic voice of our conference in responding to the cultural influence of competing values and more effectively witness for Jesus Christ.

Participants:

The Task Group will include a chair and up to four additional members. Other persons may be consulted for resources, expertise, or feedback. The chair will communicate with the Conference Pastor and the Missional Leadership for regular updates or guidance.

The Task Group will be expected to meet with other constituent groups and insure that the process will be accessible and inclusive so that any member of conference has the opportunity to add their voice to the discernment. It is further expected that all participants will engage the process in a prayerful and respectful manner, seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Evaluation:

The Missional Leadership Team will diligently monitor progress and feedback throughout the two years by receiving reports and participating in the different settings for discussion. All feedback and information gathered will be received and prayed over by the MLT. Summary and analysis by the Task Group and MLT will be thoroughly reported back to the whole conference. The MLT will coordinate follow-up steps at the end of the two years to implement learnings and direction indicated in the process.

Realities Acknowledged:

In an effort to be transparent and realistic about the impact of this kind of process we name the following factors that are intrinsic to our community discernment as a conference:

1. We recognize that a spectrum of beliefs and opinions already exists across conference.
2. That **doing nothing to define direction** on difficult issues is not a healthy option for our conference to be effective in our mission, discipleship and witness. We need to engage the challenge of discernment as a means of moving forward together as a community of faith in Jesus Christ.
3. Not every individual, congregation or leader in conference will be fully satisfied with whatever direction emerges from the process. The process will have a significant impact on how members view and respond in conference relationships.
4. The influence of our broader culture will continue to emerge as a factor in beliefs, perspectives, and preferences. It will be challenging for our conference community to shape any direction without the need to define our identity and mission by the transformational culture of Christ.
5. **The current trend across most churches shows people increasingly disconnecting from church structures, denominational ministries, and corporate priorities. The call for our Conference members to invest more in the community as a whole will be a significant challenge.**

**INDIANA-MICHIGAN MENNONITE CONFERENCE
VARIANCE DISCERNMENT TASK GROUP**

Job Description

January 17, 2013

Summary

The Variance Discernment Task Group, with the Missional Leadership Team, shall plan and facilitate a process for all Indiana-Michigan (IN-MI) Mennonite Conference congregations and leadership to engage issues of variance and give feedback/direction to conference leaders.

Organization

The Task Group consists of a chair and up to four additional members. Members shall be selected based on these criteria:

- 1- Process-oriented
- 2- Acceptable to the majority of our constituency
- 3- Proficient in facilitating discussion
- 4- Able to objectively implement a process for hearing feedback from the breadth of our conference

Other persons may be consulted for resources, expertise, or feedback. The chair will communicate with the Conference Pastor and the Missional Leadership for regular updates or guidance. The Task Group will be expected to meet with other constituent groups and insure that the process will be accessible and inclusive so that any member of conference has the opportunity to add their voice to the discernment. It is further expected that all participants will engage the process in a prayerful and respectful manner, seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit. All terms expire at the end of the two- year process.

Task Group Duties and Responsibilities

1. Design a process to include opportunities for congregations, pastors, delegates and leadership to engage in dialogue and offer input about areas of variance, the capacity to accept or not allow differences in biblical/doctrinal perspectives and practice, and ways of moving forward to strengthen the mission of the IN-MI Mennonite Conference.
2. Develop and utilize tools for candid and respectful feedback such as surveys or other means of gathering significant input for discernment and direction for the conference.
3. Use multiple settings for continuity over the two year process such as annual sessions, regional meetings, area councils, Advisory Council, or special meetings for conference constituents.
4. Provide regular updates to the Missional Leadership Team, culminating in a process summary and analysis at the end of the process. This summary and analysis will be thoroughly reported back to the whole conference, at which time the MLT will develop and coordinate follow-up steps as discerned through the process.

Chairperson's Duties and Responsibilities

- Develop Task Group agenda and lead Task Group meetings
- Consult with Conference Pastor, MLT and staff
- Arrange for Task Group representation at MLT, Advisory Council, Regional Delegate Meetings and Annual Sessions
- Coordinate reporting to the MLT, the Conference at large, and the wider community
- Lead a final review of the work of the Task Group.