

## Responding to invitation from Shirati Diocese

The Missional Leadership Team has been exploring for several years how to respond to an invitation from the Shirati Diocese of the Tanzania Mennonite Church to enter into a partner relationship with Indiana-Michigan Conference. IN the spring of 2018 Dan Miller and Paula Killough made a visit to Tanzania. In 2019 an affinity group was formed to explore the relationship further, and that group hosted a visit from two Tanzanian brothers in March of this year.

In their most recent meeting the affinity group listed the pros and cons of pursuing this partnership, and ended up affirming their recommendation to the MLT and the delegates that we go ahead. Their proposal included this statement: *“We need at least 12 people representing six or more churches, with at least one church in each region (Northern, Central, Southern) for this relationship to be successful.”*

As the MLT has looked at the list of pros and cons, our balance is tipping away from pursuing this partnership. We acknowledge the affirmations and concerns listed by the affinity group. In addition:

- 1) We wonder if the level of commitment they propose actually exists in the conference. We have heard some general interest, but not much energy. We are listening, so if you think you and/or your congregation would be prepared to invest significant energy in this partnership in the next three years, speak up.
- 2) We wonder whether an international relationship is a good way to put feet on our commitment to working at intercultural competency, or does it potentially take energy that would be better spent on conference relationships at this point in our history?

**The MLT has significant enough questions about the partnership and about our own energy and commitment to shepherd this relationship, that we cannot recommend it to the delegates for a vote. We plan to proceed in the direction of encouraging continued relationship but no official partnership.**

To: Missional Leadership Team and congregational delegates to IMMC  
From: The Tanzanian Affinity Group, an IMMC task force: Bess Fitzgerald (Kalamazoo Mennonite), chair; Dick and Nancy Yoder (Berkey Avenue Mennonite), Leighton Miller (Wildwood Mennonite), David B. Miller (Prairie Street Mennonite) and Dan Miller, ex officio  
Date: May 13, 2020

We anticipate a vote at Annual Sessions 2020 on this revised proposal.

We propose to accept the invitation from Bishop Rwanga Chris Kateti for a relationship between Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference of Mennonite Church USA and Shirati Diocese of Kanisa la Mennonite Tanzania (KMT).

Our Conference mission statement contains the aspiration, “engaging the world God loves.” God’s world is around the corner and far over the ocean. This proposal signals a desire and attempt to engage in a different way of relating- personal, corporate, as equals, as God’s beloved, as One Village. MLT is prioritizing intercultural competence. Accepting this invitation is a way to step into the water and be changed.

We propose a mutual relationship with the Diocese of Tanzania for an introductory period of three years (approximately June 2020 through the end of 2023). During that time we will nurture the relationship in several ways. (The goal is a relationship. These activities are illustrative of ways to work at the goal, but will need to be adapted to circumstances such as coronavirus and developments in the relationship.)

1. Each year we plan to
  - a. send one delegation to beautiful, resource rich Tanzania. We imagine a retreat with Tanzania clergy and lay leaders to learn each other’s stories and to mutually seek wisdom on spiritual and practical issues within our purview. OR
  - b. receive one delegation from the Shirati Diocese, welcoming fellow Mennonites, full of the Holy Spirit, with a different history of church life that might inform and enrich our appreciation of God’s big world and God’s awesome variety as God builds God’s Church.
  - c. In lieu of travel, we can imagine adjusting to technology connections, including shared worship experiences, and/or participating in one another’s annual gatherings. We can also see sessions of reading the Bible together interculturally.
3. We will foster youth engagement by making and receiving video chats with youth groups in Shirati and encouraging the sharing of stories of life in these different places.
4. We will exchange quarterly prayer concerns and distribute these throughout the Conference.
5. We will design and distribute a poster for display in Conference Churches to familiarize us all with bare facts of our partner’s location, history and challenges. We would make available periodic updates to display prayer requests, political or weather-related emergencies and words of greeting from far away.

We hope to involve groups and individuals with skills and interests that match those of people who will be involved from the Tanzanian side.

We need at least 12 people representing six or more churches, with at least one church in each region (Northern, Central, Southern) for this relationship to be successful. This relationship will provide insights to and from urban, suburban and rural churches, from one end of our Conference to the other. We will include churches large and small, majority white as well as congregations of color. All are welcome. No one will be required to participate.

Financial expectations are difficult to manage in international relationships. There are patterns of power and colonialism always present. We have no plans to make any financial commitments, capital or otherwise, in this initial time. Any ideas in that direction would be vetted through the Conference office and would be undertaken after very specific consultation with our national missions partners and other development specialists. This will be messy, and we believe that much can be shared to the profit of both partners without capital projects.

There are many ways that all involved can benefit. We all know ourselves better as we learn about the lives of others and as we watch others learn the distinctive features of our culture. For example, David B. Miller traveled to Tanzania in his role as Teaching Associate of the AMBS Church Leadership Center. During his time there, he experienced life in a very different setting. The power would go out. The tap would sometimes not yield water or cold water only. Sometimes he was almost unbearably hot. A short shopping trip might turn into a long one or become impossible. He felt a disturbing loss of control of his comfort and planning. As he prayed, he began to move into a desire for a state of “yieldedness”. The uncomfortable experience was productive as he waited, prayed, sought contentment, and thought about this context. Turning over these ideas with a colleague, he received a further insight: That “yieldedness”, if taken too far was a snare equal to and opposite from his former sense of independent control. People who live without much control of their circumstances can be prone to resignation. The twin traps of over-control and under expectation began to show David and his friend the wisdom of a middle way. Dick Yoder recently summed up the lesson in a pithy way: The Serenity Prayer. “God grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”. We are convinced that talking extensively about our different ways will yield other insights like these, insights into our thinking, use of scripture and blind spots.

There will be evaluation by our committee with input to the MLT after each visit to check on difficulties, benefits and need for fine-tuning goals and logistics of the visiting program. We will keep the Conference apprised of cash flow and of areas of communication needing attention.

## **Background**

A draft proposal was discussed at the IMMC regional meetings, one on March 7 in Kokomo, and three on Zoom due to the Coronavirus – April 9, 13, 15 – held this year:

Delegates affirmed the proposal, while also raising significant questions.

### **Affirmations**

- What we can learn from international relationships
- Exciting to hear report from the team. Learn different ways of doing church
- This could make international connections available to smaller congregations, too.
- Can there be more clarity about what expectations look like for IMMC pastors and congregations?
- We need this, but let's move ahead slowly.
- Appreciate the markers for participation needed to keep moving ahead.

### **Concerns**

- Should we move ahead with what is happening with the Coronavirus?
- Climate change will require less international travel.
- Several congregations already have international connections, thus might not participate.
- Will there be energy and finances available?
- Can we really manage different expectations around money?

Bishop Kateti of the Shirati Diocese of Tanzania Mennonite Church approached our Conference in 2017 with a request to enter into a relationship for the mutual upbuilding of our Mennonite churches. This invitation came when five Tanzanian Bishops visited Mennonite Church U.S.A. in 2017. Paula Killough and Dan Miller visited Shirati Diocese in 2018. The Tanzanian Affinity Group was formed at last year's Annual Sessions and charged with researching the current context, possibilities and advisability of a relationship.

Our committee has been meeting since August to gather information to help us make a good recommendation to the Conference. We have read books on the history of the Shirati area and the coming of the Gospel for the first time through the missionaries of the Lancaster Conference in the 1930's through the 1960's. We have spoken together about our own experiences in East Africa and have interviewed Missions experts, those who have served over the years and several people from Tanzania to learn the current status of bi-lateral relationships. Some trips, relationships and mission giving have not gone particularly well. A short book about some of the key differences between our culture and East African culture, very broadly, was recommended and has proved informative. Initially we hoped to learn enough to avoid misunderstanding and embarrassment for both parties to the relationship. While our studies and coaching will help with this, we have become aware that relating perfectly is never humanly possible. In fact, as the Colossian Forum has taught us, conflict is an opportunity for Christian growth. The fruit of the Spirit grows in situations where we need the fruit of the Spirit. Hosting and being the guests of brothers and sisters in Christ across many miles is the workshop where forbearance, patience, kindness and peace can be made within us.

Knowing our conference and theirs to be gifted in hospitality give us confidence that we can make visits work and be profitable for all involved. The Reverend Tobias Magatti, a resident of Goshen with roots in Shirati, has been appointed as Shirati Diocese's official Public Relations Officer. He has been a wonderful source of insight and ideas for our interactions. We welcome his on-going involvement.

Two of an expected seven delegates from Shirati Diocese arrived for a visit beginning March 10, 2020 – Bishop Chris Kateti and Mr Simon Songe. One other person was expected, but did not arrive in Indiana; the rest were denied visas by the United States. The delegates paid their own travel and donations from IMMC individuals provided for in-country hosting expenses. This was an opportunity to explore the benefits of sharing with these brothers and sisters from far away. It was a marvelous 8 days, complicated by the arrival of COVID-19 in the United States. Halfway through the visit we all decided it was important for them to return home before travel became more difficult.

These activities took place during their visit:

- A lunch visit with Elkhart pastors.
- A tour of Greencroft (families care for elders in Tanzania).
- Two days of discussions of IMMC vision and structure and the importance of transparency in finances.
- A prayer meeting at New Foundation United in Christ Fellowship.
- A first-ever sermon and presentation via Zoom at Benton Mennonite.
- A tour of MennoHof, and a discussion of Amish culture.
- A Zoom call about the parish model for establishing new churches, a viable model in the US?
- A meal and sharing with Fellowship of Hope.
- A small reception with President Rebecca Stoltzfus at Goshen College.

This was a rich time for those who had opportunity to interact with them.