

South Central Mennonite Conference
Annual Assembly
July 25, 2020

MINUTES

Because of the current pandemic (COVID-19) across the country that has limited large group gatherings, this annual assembly is being held via Zoom connection with remote access from all geographic areas of the conference. The connection was interactive, allowing participants to speak as well as listen.

1. Celebration of Continuing Mission

A. Introduction and devotions

Moderator Tim Sweigart opened the meeting with a welcome to all, located in all areas of the conference. He affirmed the presence and guidance of God during the past year, and in particular during this challenging time when gathering in person is not possible. He outlined the agenda before us, with announcements, reporting, sharing and responding.

In addition to today's delegate session, there will be a "Sunday school session" tomorrow morning, followed by a common worship service available to all.

Tim referred to Isaiah 43:18 ff, which reminds us that God is performing a new thing to and for his people, which we believe is relevant to our own situation. There are 3 components of that relevance: 1) God will do something new; 2) there is a river in the desert; and 3) God wants to be praised by his people. It will require continuing discernment to discover what is new, what the river is, and what is praiseworthy even during dark times such as we now experience.

Tim concluded with prayer for the day.

B. Church planting

The planting of new churches has been one of the stated priorities in the conference in recent years. We continue to ask what the definition of church planting is and should be that may be different from our usual expectations and practice. Another priority has been to strengthen existing churches.

(1) Amani Community Church

Clarence Rempel, Regional Conference Minister, provided some background on the formation of the newest congregation, beginning with the work of Masemo Wakibogo, a refugee from the Congo who has been among us for several years. He has established a new Swahili language congregation in Wichita, serving primarily a refugee population. This work has been supported financially by the conference, and by several congregations and individuals. An elder support team has been formed which provides ongoing counsel and support.

Masemo gave his personal testimony that has included earning a degree in Bible and Ministry from Hesston College, and investing his time, energy and resources in planting this emerging congregation. Challenges during the pandemic have included the loss of employment by many of its participants, but their worship and faith remain vibrant.

(2) Eden Life Church

James Wenger, Regional Conference Minister, provided an update on this congregation in Kansas City, which was a congregation begun in 2016 by Omot and Hannah Aganya with support from the conference. They received a grant from MC USA Mennonite Men JoinHands project to assist in the purchase of a building. Now in its fourth year, this emerging congregation offers four services every Sunday in as many languages.

Church planter Omot Aganya's vision includes the possibility of planting new ethnic churches in three other regions of the country, including South Dakota, Minnesota and Nebraska. A grant from the Schowalter Foundation is providing financial support for this initiative, which initially will involve some weekend Bible conferences in these geographic areas. In these settings, the goal is to find leaders who will continue the witness locally. Progress in this endeavor has been compromised by the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in mid-March.

C. Celebration of New credentials/pastors

Kurt Horst, chair of the Ministerial Commission, reported on the work of the commission as it relates to the granting and maintenance of ministry credentials; resourcing, encouraging, and nurturing pastors; and calling and developing future pastors.

Newly credentialed persons this past year:

(1) Licensed for specific ministry

*Mitch Stutzman, financial stewardship ministry with Everence Financial Services; member of Hesston Mennonite Church

(2) Licensed toward ordination

*Kevin Santiago, pastor of Peace Mennonite Community Church in Aurora, Colorado

*Celia and Israel Solis, pastors of Iglesia Menonita Fuente de Agua Viva in Los Fresnos, Texas

*Zack Batson, associate pastor of Journey@McPherson

*Masemo Wakibogo, pastor of Amani Community Church in Wichita, Kansas

(3) Ordination

*Kenzie Intemann, pastor of Pleasant Valley Mennonite Church, Harper, Kansas

*Abraham Ulises Garcia, pastor of Good News Mennonite Church, San Juan, Texas

*Claudia and Carlos Cedillo, pastors of Iglesia Alfa y Omega in Los Fresnos, Texas

*Maria Alma and Jose Alejo Solis, pastors of Iglesia Menonita Fuente de Agua Viva, Los Fresnos, Texas

*Maria Bennett, pastor of Iglesia Nuevo Amanecer, Brownsville, Texas.

(4) Transfer of credentials

*Jack Norris, pastor of Inman Mennonite Church, Inman, Kansas, transfer from Central Plains Mennonite Conference

*Kay Schroeder, pastoral team member of Hesston Mennonite Church, Hesston, Kansas, transfer from Western District Conference

*Jesse Engle, pastoral team member of Hesston Mennonite Church, Hesston, Kansas, transfer from Ohio Mennonite Conference

D. Pastor Consultation Meetings

Howard Keim, Regional Conference Minister for five congregations, commented on the interactions that occur regularly among that group. Conference leadership has determined that that kind of sharing needs to happen more regularly and directly among the entire pastoral group, which in the north had a pattern of meeting bimonthly. Since mid-March with the onset of the pandemic, three meetings have happened via Zoom, for the purpose of personal sharing and giving counsel to conference leadership on current and future issues and activities of importance to us all. The use of technology has enabled a larger group of pastors to meet together without geographic limitations.

Concerns have included our purpose; our learnings from the pandemic which appears to be extending well into the future; counsel for the conference related to the proposed new structure and the needed staffing, in particular the network director; and how to develop a trustworthy process in examining our ongoing affiliations.

E. Unidad Cristiana de Iglesias Menonitas (UCIM)

Rod Schmucker, pastor of Hope for the Broken congregation in Los Fresnos, TX and a member of the SCC Executive Committee, provided an update on happenings in the southern region of the conference. He represents about a dozen congregations, whose members gather for three group meetings each year: a pastors' retreat; an annual convention; and a youth retreat.

At the beginning of 2020, prospects were good for continuing these fellowship opportunities, but when COVID-19 hit, those opportunities have been compromised, since not all of our congregations have access to the needed technology for remote meetings. As a complicating factor, the Rio Grande Valley is identified as one of the highest incidence of COVID in the entire country. Even so, pastors are working diligently to keep their members in touch and meeting their needs in a variety of ways.

F. Reporting .

(1) Berea Mennonite Church, Birch Tree, Missouri, requested on April 1, 2019 to withdraw its membership from SCC, approved by the Executive Committee in March, 2020.

(2) Southern Hills Mennonite Church in Topeka, Kansas has discontinued its associate membership status in SCC, retaining its primary affiliation with Western District Conference (letter dated June 9, 2020)

G. Thanks and celebration

Two persons are concluding their participation as members of the Executive Committee. Bill Zuercher was recognized for 25 years of service in a variety of positions, both as an employee and a volunteer, and James Wenger was recognized for 10 years of service after moving to Hesston from Baltimore, Maryland, now serving as a Regional Conference Minister. Both are members of Whitestone Mennonite Church in Hesston, and will remain involved in ways to be determined.

2. New Structure

A. Process and Format

Early on as a conference leader, Tim recognized the importance of connecting with pastors and congregational leaders, and how we lead with clarity, taking the next steps that we believe God is calling us to.

Beginning in 2017 and continuing in 2018 and 2019, a series of sessions was organized that brought together pastors and congregational leaders, aided by skilled facilitators. The primary question was what our mission and purpose are, which was fleshed out in a sequence of statements on what we could collectively agree. This resulted in a new vision statement, identifying priorities that include supporting transformative congregations, resourcing pastors, and planting churches.

Additional time was spent in defining who we are, what we believe, and aligning our vision and mission with implementation. This has resulted in the more recent attention to the 'how' of creating the structure that would enable us to accomplish our mission. Small groups were formed to provide some leadership on the organizational pieces (variously called New Wineskins and Luke 5 group), ending with a Strategic Planning Team which did further research and evaluation.

The result of all this work has been the creation of a new structure and staffing plan, which was displayed on the screen. Heading the network leadership team will be a Network Director, supported by a Network Chair and Chair-elect, Financial Resource Team, and Ministerial Leadership Team. Additional support services are provided by Resource Consultants (now called Regional Conference Ministers); Gifts Discernment Team (nominating committee); UCIM representative; and an employed Administrative Assistant.

B. Network Director Job Description

The key staff position in the new structure is the Network Director (for whom a job description, qualifications and accountability were displayed on the screen) who will be the important face of the conference, serving as the primary relational leader in providing services and communication throughout the conference including a regular presence in the southern region (UCIM).

C. What is the same and different

Executive Committee becomes Network Leadership Team; Moderator becomes Network Chair (assisted by a chair-elect); UCIM will continue to function as a subgroup; Ministerial Commission becomes Ministerial Leadership Team; Nominating Committee becomes Gifts Discernment Team; and RCMs become Resource Consultants. The Network Director is a new position, comparable to what we have known in the past as Conference Minister. The Treasurer will be the leader of a Financial Resources Team.

Tim emphasized that this new structure is intended to be a unifying organization that will ensure our continued existence as a network of churches that continue to provide witness and ministry in their communities.

D. Budget Implications

Treasurer Jim Diller referred to the background financial documents that were sent to delegates, which he also displayed on the screen, noting that the proposed new staffing pattern

will necessarily call for additional expenditures above the current fiscal year (September 1, 2019-August 31, 2020).

We project this next year as a trial period to develop the experience needed to do a more adequate job of longer-term financial projections. The largest component of expense will be the people investment. The historical experience shows that revenue from congregations has been essentially level since 2018, resulting in operating deficits during that same period of time. The projection for 2021 includes a deficit of about \$48,000. While this can be absorbed by accumulated reserve funds, it is not a sustainable long-term solution.

E. Optional Q&A breakout rooms

During a general break in the schedule, breakout rooms were offered to those who have specific questions related to the budget presentation and the proposed new structure.

F. Whole Group Question and Answer about the proposed structure

Comments:

- There is always a need for strong leadership, but at a time like this, we are more than ever in need of a strong, cohesive structure and leadership. This proposal seems to provide that. It may be useful to do special fundraising to support the leadership position.
- All biblical language of ministry is removed from the proposal [in the titles and descriptions]. It adopts terminology from the business and secular world, and removes biblical language and the church, seemingly to recreate SCC as a business. It changes the theological and biblical nature of the church. People are drawn by people and relationships. The terms do matter. *Intention is to create even more relationships and connectedness; attention will be given to changing the terminology.*
- Ecclesia (meaning church) was actually a secular term for a gathering of people for a significant purpose. Network Director is an apostolic role. As we live into this transformation, we may want to change the terminology.

Action 1 **M/s/c that the new structure and staffing proposal be approved.** Brent Green/Rod Schmucker

zoom poll results with chat votes added in are below (68 total votes were cast)

Do you approve adopting the new structure and staffing for SCC?

No- 7 (10%)

Yes- 61 (90%)

Tim noted that attention will be paid to revisiting the terminology being used, to recognize the concerns expressed earlier.

3. Final Budget Presentation.

Action 2 **M/s/c that the proposed budget be approved.** Tonia Martin/Kenzie Intemann

zoom poll results with chat votes added in are below (66 total votes were cast)
Do you approve adopting the proposed budget for SCC fiscal year from Sept 2020-Aug 2021.
No- 8 (12%)
Yes- 58 (88%)

Leadership was encouraged to give some thought to what a fair share might be for congregations to consider.

4. Year of Discovery

Tim spoke to the Discovery 20.21 process now getting underway, in an effort to discern together our best move forward in being the people God is calling us to be in fulfilling our mission in our communities and our world. He recalled the expedition of Lewis and Clark who were commissioned to find a river route to the west coast, only to discover they were stopped by the Rocky Mountains. Their experience was chronicled in the book, *Canoeing the Mountains*.

We may find some similarities in our quest for an enhanced mission. We now seem to be facing some mountains, of uncertainty, of shrinkage in membership, being called to discover what it means to overcome the obstacles. We will not abandon all that has served us well in the past, but we will do our best to find the best new way forward.

Discovery 20.21 team members are Howard Wagler, Clarence Rempel, Rod Schmucker and Jeff Selzer. Howard outlined the purpose and process that the team will follow in the coming months that will involve all pastors and one or more leadership persons from each congregation.

They will identify the present situation we are living with, in our own context and that of Mennonite Church USA. This will include some assumptions that we accept in common; our commitments including allowing every congregation's voice to be heard; our expectations that every congregation will participate in the discovery process; and our hope that we will arrive at a place of greater clarity in our best affiliation beyond the area conference.

The format will involve a variety of questions that will go to every congregation, whose responses will come to the Team and then to the Network Leadership Team. This will occur over a several-month period, processing one question at a time.

Discussion:

- Re trusting the process: suppose there are congregations that are in the minority. Will there be punitive measures, or will there be grace? *If we are going to be a real community, we will listen deeply and learn from each other and hear others' perspectives. We will probably not all come out at the same place. The challenge is to continue to love each other in spite of disagreements.*
- Where is all of this coming from? Some of us haven't heard much if anything as background. Discovery is a long process. *This is something that has been developing over the past few years, in an effort to help the conference navigate its relationships outside our own network.*

Action 3 **M/s/c that we support this Discovery 20.21 journey process.** Josh Patterson/Jerry Pankratz

zoom poll results with chat votes added in are below (68 total votes were cast)
Do you approve SCC beginning a year of Discovery 20.21
No- 8 (12%)
Yes- 60 (88%)

More information will be coming soon to pastors and congregational leaders about getting the process underway.

5. Bethel Mennonite Church proposal

Jerry Pankratz spoke on behalf of Bethel Mennonite Church, providing the background for their proposal for the conference to leave MC USA, as they have acted to do as a congregation while remaining with SCC. His presentation included a review of the detailed work done within the congregation itself, which involved a meeting with SCC leaders in January 2020. Jerry has prepared additional pages of background information that will be shared with the Discovery Team leaders.

Action 4 **M/s that South Central Mennonite Conference remove its membership from MC USA.** Jerry Pankratz/Eduardo Hinojosa

Action 5 **M/s/c that the motion be tabled until the Discovery Team has done its work.** Phil Rosenberger/Rod Schmucker (78%)

zoom poll results with chat votes added in are below (64 total votes were cast)
Do you approve the motion to table?
No- 14 (22%)
Yes- 50 (78%)

6. Outgoing Moderator Parting Words

Tim expressed his appreciation for the rich relationships he has developed during the past four years of leadership within the conference, humbled yet gratified by the addition of many new friends. His hope for the conference is that we become more united and become the best version of the church as we live and work together, in spite of Satan's efforts to divide us; he is our enemy, and not we among ourselves. This does not mean there can not be strong convictions. We exist to love and serve our communities as members of Christ's body. He expressed his thanks to all for the fellowship he has enjoyed.

Incoming network chair Gary Wolfer joined Tim, to express the gratitude of all of us for his dedicated, unselfish and generous service for these past years, promising to remain in contact and benefiting from his experience and dedication. A tangible token of appreciation will be provide in due time.

7. Closing Prayer

Howard Keim offered a closing prayer, of thanksgiving, gratitude, confession and benediction.

Bill Zuercher
Recorder