

What happened at annual meeting with the Unity Recommendation

by Diane Zaerr Brenneman, Moderator

Many things in today's culture try to tear Christians away from the mission of Jesus Christ. Central Plains Mennonite Conference experienced some of these last year, when same sex marriage became legal in Iowa and an "open letter" and "pink Mennos" surfaced at Mennonite Church USA national convention. Within our own conference, placing a congregation under provisional status had not brought the hoped-for redemption and reconciliation in five years. In 2009, Conference Council indicated its intentions to form a task group with the goal of preserving and enhancing our unity so that we can be the faithful church of Jesus Christ together even though we do not agree on everything. A task group of nine people representing a broad range of geography, age, gender and polar opposite positions on homosexuality was formed and worked together for a year with an outside facilitator. The group was able to experience "church" together; and achieved deep respect and love for one another even though they still do not agree on homosexuality. Conference Council wants conference churches to experience what they did.

This summer, 2010, Conference Council brought a recommendation to annual meeting from the results of this Unity Task Group's work (see Unity Recommendation). Using the kind of process that the Unity Task Group used, table groups at annual meeting gave feedback on the recommendation. Delegates were asked to reflect on the effect the proposal had on them personally and identify both the greatest challenges and the greatest gifts of the proposal. As the Conference Council read this large amount of feedback, it was clear that the proposal confused people. A predominate amount of delegates affirmed the first part: defining the center of our faith, restricting the variance policy's use for three years while we seek to understand congregations different from our own. To Conference Council, it naturally followed that to do this, a congregation that was in provisional status needed to be brought back to full membership and participation. Too many delegates, however, understood such a move to mean conference was changing its position to accept homosexuality.

In the final analysis, Conference Council decided not to call for a vote on the recommendation because it put people in the awkward position of voting against unity (which they wanted) in order to take a stand against homosexuality. Trust was the biggest challenge raised on the green response sheets. And as many delegates wisely said, "Trust-building takes time." In Conference Council's prayers and processing during annual meeting, it seemed like a vote would violate the interest in unity that was beginning to build within the body. Many delegates were very interested in how this Unity Task Group still disagreed yet had achieved love, respect and unity-- and wanted some of that experience themselves. Like the early church in Acts, it seemed "good to us and the Holy Spirit" to continue gathering feedback and taking steps toward unity, rather than "vote against unity" in order to send a message about one of our congregations. So instead of voting, we asked for more table responses to the questions: what do I need to move closer to unity? What has been the gift in this experience for me? Look for summaries of that feedback in upcoming conference communications.

I believe that in this conference the words “St. Paul” no longer stand for the name of a small 10-member congregation meeting in Minnesota, but instead are loaded with history and experience and stands for “our conference stance on homosexuality.” The removal of this recommendation means that St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship stays in “provisional status” with Central Plains for another year, which means they are not allowed a vote at annual meeting. Conference Council does recommend that other congregations interact with and get to know them as a congregation.

What now.

For delegates that wanted a vote to clarify a position on homosexuality: We hold the position articulated in Article 19 of the Confession of Faith, and we have not proposed any change to that position. We challenge you to do the hard biblical, interpretive, hermeneutical work back home in your congregation. Conference Council recommends congregations try doing this work with a congregation that is different than your own.

For delegates that wanted to take a step toward unity: you did! Join conference-planned circles of understanding in your own area or start your own. Come to Quad Cities next year to experience more discernment of what seems “good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”

Conference Council wants to provide the kind of experience Unity Task Group had for everyone who wants it, recognizing there are a few who don’t. All three program committees will focus this year on congregations building relationships with other congregations. We give you this challenge: before annual meeting next year in Quad Cities, **get to know another congregation in Central Plains** that is different than your own, maybe even one close by. We know there are many neighboring congregations in our conference that are not in good relationship or don’t know each other very well. Worship together, study together, do service together, work at a conflict. It is the conviction of Conference Council that prayer and these kinds of activities will move us along toward the goal of “being the church of Jesus Christ together even though we do not agree on everything” and reduce our distraction from keeping mission at the center.

For more information, please contact me or any conference council member. Your congregation has a directory with contact information.

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