

Central Plains Mennonite Conference  
Consultant Report to Conference Council

John Gehm

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Summary: The annual meeting of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference convened at Mountain Lake, Minnesota, June 24-27 (2010). The Final Report / Proposal of the Unity Task Group was presented and discussed formally and informally by the conference delegates. Part of the discussion time included processing in small groups at delegate tables. Delegates were instructed and encouraged to utilize a version of the circle process.

Delegates to the conference received copies of the Proposal drafted by the Unity Task Group. Following the general presentation by the Unity Task Group describing the process, the outcomes and the reflections of the participants, delegates were asked to respond during table talk using a series of ‘framing questions’ or ‘prompts’ intended to focus the discussion and allow each member of every table to respond. These included, in the first round (June 25<sup>th</sup>), the following:

1. *“As I’ve read and reflected on the proposal—including how it was developed and how it’s been presented—the part of the unity proposal that has the most effect on me personally is...”*
2. *“As I listen to people and continue to reflect and discern, the part of the proposal I feel presents the greatest challenge for the church is...”*
3. *“The message of the document that I feel provides the potentially greatest gift to the church is...”*

Following the first day of discussion—from feedback provided by informal conversations, questions and comments directed to the consultant, committee and council and initial review of delegate responses from the prior day, leadership council determined that additional processing of the issues and concerns raised by the delegates would be useful. A similar process allowing delegates to respond during was again used, with the addition of two more framing questions devised by the consultant:

1. *“What do I need to move closer to unity?”*
2. *“What has been the greatest gift in this experience for me?”*

This report summarizes the themes and issues reflected in the written comments of the delegates over the course of a two-day period. Worksheets provided to the participants were collected and reviewed by the consultant. Conclusions are based on qualitative analysis of eighty-five pages of data: two separate worksheets compiled over two days, reflecting 452 separate comments<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of the analysis was not only to identify ‘categories of concerns’ but to quantify them on

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<sup>1</sup> Data analyzed do not represent 452 unique individuals since most people participated in filling out two worksheets in the table groups; however responses are unique to the degree that they represent an individual’s response at T<sup>1</sup> and T<sup>2</sup> with the “intervening variable” being the presentation of the Unity Task Group Proposal and subsequent formal and informal discussion.

a relative basis in order to focus on the issues, questions and concerns raised most frequently by respondents.

Following a series of initial analyses, a basic system of classification was developed, reflecting common patterns and identifying emergent themes. Following Lofland & Lofland (1995) great effort was made to be comprehensive in constructing categories but balancing that construction with utility<sup>1</sup>. (*“What is interesting vs. what is important.”*) The construction of categories focused on creating mutually exclusive yet manageable groups sharing common meanings, acts, and expressions.

Responses coalesced around eight major themes. The core concept expressed by each theme is represented by the quote, question or phrase below.

1. Positive reaction to the concept of the circle process and how it facilitated listening [POSITIVE CIRCLE]
2. Discovery of the need for continuing conversation, valuing and becoming aware of the importance of deepening relationships with ‘otherness’ [RELATE TO OTHER]
3. Frustration: continuing failure to resolve, implications for our futures [FRUSTRATE]
4. Defining ‘unity’ [UNITY]
5. Balancing ‘authority of scripture’ with personal interpretation [BALANCING]
6. Next steps ... what now? ... specifics for moving forward... [STEPS]
7. Impressed with the example provided by the work of the unity task group [UTG WORK]
8. “The problem of St. Paul” [PROBLEM]

*1. Positive reaction to the concept of the circle process and how it facilitated listening*

Delegates expressed appreciation for the use of the circle process as a tool for talking about difficult issues. This was expressed in such comments as

Would like to see circle model used everywhere.

Could circle be used to soothe feelings after difficult votes?

How do I bring the circle process back with me?

I like how the circle process helps both talking and listening without hurt feelings.

I am excited for the possibilities for using this model in churches and in my personal life to help walls come down.

This process definitely enhances communication as well as empathy.

I think the circle process worked. I hope our church gets a chance to use it...before we split up.

Telling our stories is a very powerful experience.

Circle process intrigues me. I see great potential for it. How can we extend it?

I think the part about 'speaking from the heart' was important for us to hear.

Circle process has been a gift.

I hated the circle process—it stifled good discussion.

Circles force you to listen. It forced me to set aside or at least re-examine my assumptions. That is a positive.

A circle is all about unity—I liked the symbolism.

The circle process helped our table be more unified. How far can we extend it?

Circle process puts faces on the issues. That was my biggest discovery.

Experiencing the circle process was a gift—providing a way to talk about hard issues in unity without needing to agree on the issue. I think we learned something important by using this process.

## ***2. Discovery of the need for continuing conversation, valuing and becoming aware of the importance of deepening relationships with ‘otherness’***

There was a clear recognition of the value of engaging in dialogue with those who are perceived as different or ‘other’. Associated with this was the awareness that because of geography, ‘history’ or ‘agenda’ there is a lack of contact that obstructs the process of getting to know fellow Mennonites better.

I needed to hear personal stories from those I normally wouldn’t.

Need opportunities to know and bond with new people I wouldn’t ordinarily talk to.

Need to encourage and challenge of more conversations with people from different backgrounds and perspectives.

Getting information is important to getting a fuller understanding of where everyone’s opinions and perspectives are coming from. They’re not ‘wrong’ they’re just ‘different than mine.’ That’s a problem we haven’t addressed well over the years. This seems to sum it up in a nutshell.

Who are we dealing with in other congregations and communities? I don’t know. I wish I did.

It’s easy to collaborate with people you agree with; it’s harder but more important to work with those you don’t agree with. That’s the only way to resolve this.

I never met a homosexual that I was aware of. It was eye opening.

I think we all need to know better what other racial or ethnic groups are thinking. We isolate or marginalize ‘others’ who don’t fit our stereotypes. But then we are stereotyping them. I know I benefitted from this experiment.

Community is being able to feel someone else’s pain.

If we don’t know how others’ think, how can we be an inclusive church?

We should spend time with more people we ordinarily wouldn’t—if we do, we learn. I did.

I got a better understanding of the wideness of God’s mercy: I came in with a clear understanding that homosexuality is wrong, but this process made me consider: “Why?”

### *3. Frustration: continuing failure to resolve, implications for our futures*

Through a variety of comments, delegates expressed a sense of frustration over the ongoing nature of the dilemma, a need for closure, and the implications long-term of what it might mean if the issues that separate us cannot be resolved. Representative comments included

We are going in circles.

This has been going on for 10 years.

We keep letting a small minority obstruct closure.

Continuing to 'process' this topic until everyone just gets worn down would be the real tragedy.

We can talk and talk and talk and agree and disagree (in love) but how can we come closer to consensus? Frustrating to feel like going in circles all the time.

Hats off to Diane and the leadership for taking a risk—moving forward is worth it.

There is no direction—continue to wander in the wilderness. What will it take?

We must be patient. But for how long?

Unity is not possible—so why are we beating a dead horse. We are never going to all agree.

Can we ever 'agree to disagree?' Is that even an option? Should it be? What are the implications? Do we all have to be settled?

I think someone is going to need to force us to resolve these controversial issues vs. continually running away by committee.

Ironic: use circles because we're going in circles.

We should vote and let the chips fall where they may. Our church is welcoming enough.

Do we discuss 'til we all agree? Good luck with that.

I'm struck by the paradox—if we vote and it's not unanimous, are we unified? I'm glad the motion was tabled. But I feel like we've just put things off for another year.

Conflicted!

#### *4. Defining “unity”*

Delegates were uncertain what ‘unity’ means in the context of the document proposal as well as in a larger sense as it applies to the conference or the church writ large. Some representative comments in this category include things like

Does unity mean all people believe the same thing?

Does unity mean we all have the same vision or does unity mean we all have to live by the Confession of Faith? And who decides if we are in unity?

What does ‘unity’ mean in plain English? If you can’t define it you can’t achieve it.

If we define unity as “I know it when I see it” then we’re all talking about separate things, aren’t we?

Does unity mean abandoning authority of scripture?

Our table had unity. But what about the other tables? What if they all have unity but do we have unity throughout the room?

Someone needs to describe what unity looks like. Become united with sin?

Conference Council should define unity and then we can debate.

Have we ever been unified?

We need someone to state a definition of it that we can debate and vote.

Maybe unity means ambiguity. Is that okay?

Unity is a moving target since it’s about being open in relationship.

Circle process is not Biblical; God’s word is unity. Nothing else.

## 5. *Balancing 'authority of scripture' with personal interpretation*

Process removes reliance on discernment.

Can we discern what God means?

We must balance this with making room for prayerfully considering the Lord's guidance.

Didn't hear much about authority of Scripture.

I haven't heard the word 'discipline'. Does MC USA discipline anyone anymore?

Who decides what the authority of Scripture says?

The Bible says that homosexuality is a sin. That leaves little room for interpretation and processing in circles.

As pastor, how do I minister to my congregation that this doesn't affect directly but is out there in society?

Homosexuality is not the only problem with 'Scripture being authoritative.'

We each want to be right. Scripture gives us the justification. I can't see this circle process working in our church. It's too easy to pick verses to make your point.

How does "Biblical authority" influence how we talk to each other?

Effort is expended but no scripture has been presented to justify positions!

Are we supposed to become all inclusive or more Godly? If we reinstate SPMF then I hope CPMC as a body will take the opportunity to renew its search for understanding scripture together and sharpen its hermeneutical skills.

## *6. Next steps ... what now? ... specifics for moving forward...*

People expressed concerns as to what concrete actions might result from the work done at conference. As sense of, ‘all well and good but now what?’ People expressed positive experiences with regard to the circle process, positive conversations held, increased understanding of others’ positions and perspectives, and a greater appreciation of the intent of the leadership for moving things forward. Clearly people are not expressing satisfaction with the status quo but rather a genuine curiosity as to where next? There were two aspects to the comments which I’ve combined because they both are expressing two sides of the same coin. People expressed confusion as to what the implications of adopting a unity policy would be as well as what such an adoption would mean in real terms for the conference as well as individual congregations. Examples of these expressions included:

I’d like to see concrete proposals for keeping us moving beyond our comfort zones.

I don’t want to come back here next year and start over again.

People aren’t going to really see the value of moving outside their circle of comfort.

I want an opportunity to experience what the task force experienced.

Council should announce intentions to organize a process for promoting understanding.

Greatest challenge is follow through.

Some programs need to be done to help us continue to get to know each other better; how do we keep doing this? And whose responsibility is it?

Would like to see this done at the individual congregation level—but how?

How far can we push this circle process?

Pastors need to be involved in moving on with this. And they also need to be supported in those efforts.

How do I ‘motivate’ my congregation to seek out others who are different?

It may be difficult for congregations to simply ‘trust the process’.

What happens next?

Passing or not passing doesn’t solve anything—we need to come up with a third way.

What are some specific activities we could do to foster more unity?

## *7. Impressed with the example provided by the work of the unity task group*

I benefited most from hearing how the Task Group was able to work through these issues that we apparently could not.

The Unity Task Group provided a very powerful model for us all.

That nine polar opposites could come together and be willing to work to reach consensus was amazing.

Task force worked so hard to make a proposal that would avoid the abuse that was directed to Faith Mennonite of Minneapolis [?] which raised the way CP Conference treats brothers and sisters who disagree. It was truly a gift to see the way the task force worked on this.

Seeing the Unity Task Force testify to the Holy Spirit working through the circle process and then experiencing that same Spirit in our own table circle process which mirrored their work to a smaller extent. Their work was inspiring. Or should have been.

The process worked for the Unity Group and it gave me hope that it will work for our conference. They have showed the way.

Unity Group showed that 'bullying' and 'coercive conversation' doesn't have to be the norm. Frankly I was shocked that they were able to come together.

Hearing the unity task force report was a precious gift—a glimmer of hope.

That the members of the Unity Task Force were able to produce such a document given their varied and divergent backgrounds.

I was encouraged to hear the experience/witness of how creative collaboration can point us toward a solution.

The group didn't run away from this and I thought they might. It was a miracle. Their testimony was inspirational.

## 8. *“The problem of St. Paul”*

Irrespective of what was said, some people equated the adoption of the unity proposal with the approval of homosexuality. Some comments were very direct about it, and others referred to the ‘problem’ in a more roundabout manner. Others recognized that a small group existed which believed this, but felt it necessary to move forward anyway. Some felt that removing St. Paul from being at variance meant the conference represented an abandonment of the current denominational position. For this group, feelings ran deep but not wide. Some in this group also were concerned that the issue of variance had not been addressed by the task force.

I and others are VERY upset at conference. We trusted you to follow through with the processing, correcting, and restoration of SPF. Why wasn’t this done? Why was the SPF part not offered separately? It feels ‘snuck in’ to an otherwise positive policy.

One congregation should not be allowed to destroy the entire conference.

If we allow the reinstatement, where do we draw the line? Is everything “subject to interpretation?” Where do we bring Scripture back in?

How can we vote on SPF without having any details of how they have changed? How can you expect us to blindly welcome them back with hugs?

It will be hard to remain true to our stated belief that we believe marriage is to be between one man [and one woman] if we do this.

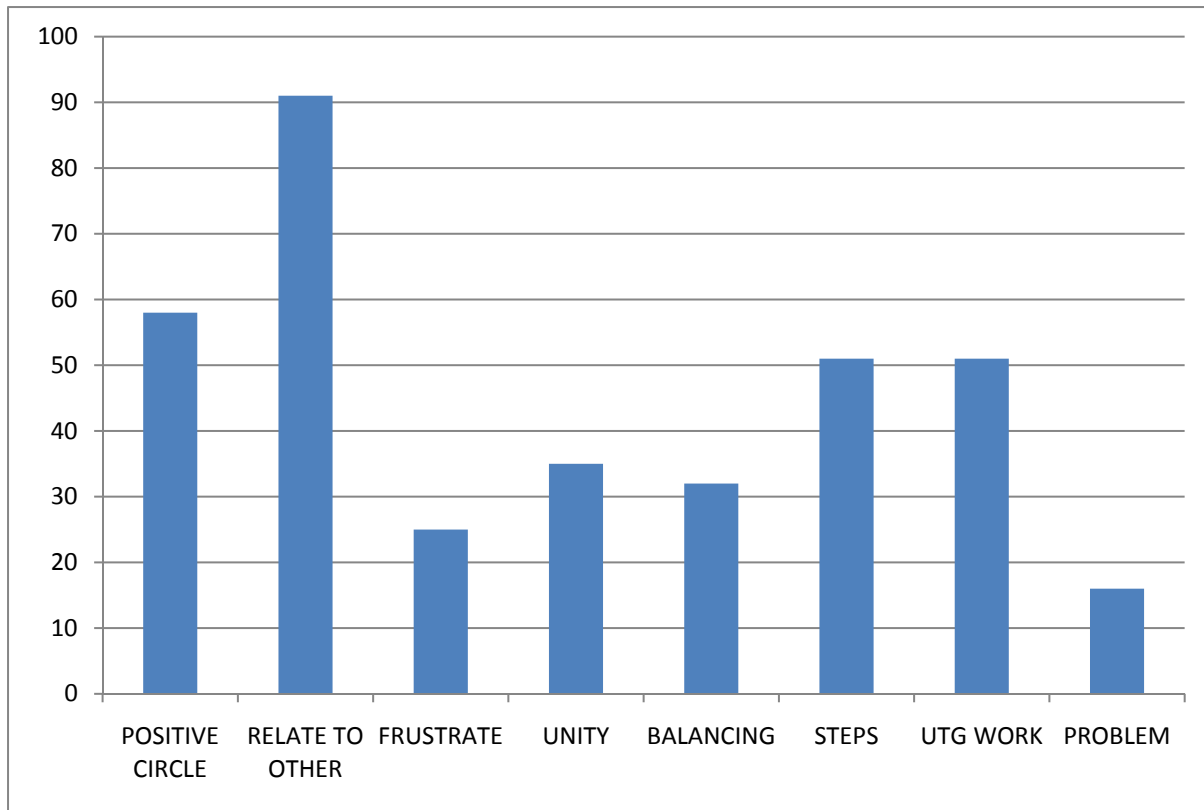
My biggest fear is that if we adopt this part of the document we will lose other churches.

Sinful differences should never be made ‘normative’.

Reinstating SPMF is the absolute right thing to do.

## SUMMARY DATA

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Relative weight</b>
Positive reaction to the concept of the circle process and how it facilitated listening [POSITIVE CIRCLE]	48
Discovery of the need for continuing conversation, valuing and becoming aware of the importance of deepening relationships with ‘otherness’ [RELATE TO OTHER]	91
Frustration: continuing failure to resolve, implications for our futures [FRUSTRATE]	25
Defining ‘unity’ [UNITY]	35
Balancing ‘authority of scripture’ with personal interpretation [BALANCING]	32
Next steps ... what now? ... specifics for moving forward... [STEPS]	58
Impressed with the example provided by the work of the unity task group [UTG WORK]	51
“The problem of St. Paul” [PROBLEM]	16




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<sup>i</sup> **Typology** - a classification system, taken from patterns, themes, or other kinds of groups of data. (Typological Systems: John Lofland & Lyn H. Lofland (1995). *Analyzing social settings*, 3rd ed. Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth.

Ideally, categories should be mutually exclusive and exhaustive if possible, often they aren't. Basically a list of categories. For example, Lofland and Lofland lists: acts, activities, meanings, participation, relationships, settings.