

West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship
Congregational Meeting
Sunday, June 4, 2017

- Alex Esh Bouwman began meeting at 11:22 a.m. with prayer.
- Pastor Lorie Hershey briefly explained some reasoning for meeting at the children's community school and not Calvary center. A main reason was a more practical space for childcare.
- Alex explained the meeting agenda and meeting process.

Part One: Affirmation of Rebecca Weber and Elaine Shenk

- Tim Martin Johnson (HRC) introduced Rebecca Weber for the open deacon position. Explained that Brooke Blough had resigned from deacon position a few months prior to her term ending in May 2017. During this interim period, Rebecca has been a supportive role to the deacons, not officially an authorized signer for the accounts.
- Rebecca briefly shared that she is willing to help as she is able.
- Congregation noted that she was previously a deacon for six years. She is an accountant and serves as a consultant to the administrative assistant and deacons.
- Rebecca was asked to leave the room and the congregation broke into CDMs.
- Congregation reached consensus. Rebecca returned to the room and was affirmed as deacon.
- Tim introduced Elaine Shenk for position on the human resources committee. Elaine would replace Reuben Wetherbee whose term expired in May 2017.
- Elaine briefly shared that she would like to explore skills that are consistent with the position.
- Elaine left the room and the congregation broke into CDMs.
- The congregation reached consensus. Elaine returned to the room and was affirmed as a member of the Human resources committee.

Part two: At 11:39 a.m. part one of the meeting concluded and the meeting was turned over to the elders

- Nick Lordi (Elder) shared that this portion of this meeting is to discuss the congregation's acceptance of Lorie officiating a same-sex marriage. No official decision will be made during the meeting.
- Pastor Lorie shared some background, explaining that after the church decided to become a welcoming congregation, Lorie contemplated officiating a same sex marriage but felt her role was to be more of a bridge.

- Officiating a same-sex marriage is inconsistent with Franconia's expectations for licensed pastors. Therefore, if Lorie did officiate a same-sex marriage, her credentials would be reviewed by the credentialing committee of the conference and Franconia's board would make the final decision if disciplinary action was called for.
- There is a possibility that Lorie's credentials would be suspended or removed.
- We cannot make a final decision today because two weeks' notice was not given prior to the meeting.
- Lorie explained and read through the letter that was emailed out to the congregation, which further explains Franconia's expectations and Lorie's discernment process (See Addendum).
- Some congregants asked questions, such as questions in relation to timeframes, the process of review, consequences, and congregational participation.
- Noting that there are other congregations in Franconia conference and other conferences who are in similar situations as us.
- There are other Mennonite USA conferences that are welcoming.
- Lorie noted that it is valuable to be a part of a conference for various reasons, including that it is consistent with the Mennonite faith and offers various areas of support.
- Nick asked the congregation to break into smaller groups and discuss this question: "Is offering marriage for same-sex couples by our pastor part of our calling as a welcoming and affirming congregation?"
- The congregation then broke into groups to discuss for approximately 20 minutes.
- A summary of each small group's response is as follows:
 - Group 1 felt that by not officiating a same-sex marriage we are placing conditions on being welcoming. They also felt concern for placing a same-sex couple in a difficult situation. Perhaps there is another way of addressing this with Franconia, such as confronting it now rather than waiting for the repercussions after officiating.
 - Group 2 shared that they felt that when previous decision was made, this was a part of that. There is also a need to recognize that not all would agree with that and perhaps we need spaces for individuals to process.
 - Group 3 said yes to the question being asked and we should now consider next steps. Acknowledged that all the weight is on Lorie. Perhaps there is a third way to be considered?
 - Group 4 would support Lorie and felt for her. Would like to try and ensure that she can stay licensed and we can be a welcoming congregation.

- Group 5 shared that having this discussion now removes pressure later. Pastoral care for a congregant is different than a community member. Now need to consider logical next steps. We need to provide care for Lorie.
 - Group 6 shared that it is important to be in the conference. We can push forward and offer accountability for the conference. Thought that officiating a same-sex marriage was already assumed in our congregation. Perhaps there are opportunities to learn more.
 - Group 7 shared that yes, they would affirm Lorie's decision. We have two options going forward: we look for another conference home or we prepare for a "fight" with Franconia conference.
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- It was noted that this question was on the congregational review form that received 27 responses in the fall. The responses were aligned with what was just shared.
 - The congregation asked a few questions for Lorie and others. Some thanked Lorie for her openness and willingness.
 - It was noted that Pastor Lorie does currently officiate heterosexual marriages for non-attenders and there is a process which includes counseling for all marriages.
 - Nick concluded meeting with prayer at 12:47 p.m.

43 people in attendance.

Minutes recorded by administrative assistant, Dorianna Lordi

Addendum:

May 2017

Dear WPMF,

When our congregation discerned that we would be a welcome and affirming congregation in 2012, I spent time discerning whether God was calling me to be available to officiate same-sex unions or blessings (marriage wasn't yet an option). I sensed that I wasn't to step in that direction at that time, despite my belief and deep desire to ground our commitments and covenants within the context of God's people. What I felt strongly called to at that time, was to be a bridge between the various beliefs and convictions our broader denomination had around same-sex relationships. And so to do that with integrity, I felt that I was to live within the commitments of my credentials, and not officiate same-sex ceremonies.

That call has served me and our congregation well in the relationships we have, both within our denomination, and within the Anabaptist network here in Philly. I can see the fruit of being a bridge for those years, even though the policies have not changed.

Since 2016, I again have been discerning, both the calling to be a bridge and whether to step outside the commitments of my credentials and into the commitments of my beliefs. What I am sensing from God is different than what I sensed in 2012. While I continue to feel called to be a bridge across differences (i.e. theology, racism, urban/rural), I also feel God calling me into the commitments of my beliefs and to do so with a sense of peace, despite the reality of the consequences.

And so I have come to a place of being willing to officiate a same-sex wedding, even though in Franconia Conference that could mean my credentials will be suspended or terminated. But I would not do so without the blessing and discernment of the congregation I serve.

This provides an opportunity for us as a congregation to discern this step together. Over the years, we have reminded one another to continue to "live into our welcome" and consider the places within our midst that are barriers for the LGBTQ community. We have named that membership, baptism, communion, and leadership positions are not closed to someone based on their gender identity or sexual orientation. Now we have an opportunity to name whether the ordinance and pastoral care of marriage is also part of our welcome.

If this is a step we discern God is calling us to, we step out together.

I want you to know that I do not take this lightly, and my motivation to offer my pastoral care in the act of officiating a wedding, is not to make a statement, but to live into the beliefs and calling of my faith. I am also not making a decision to stay or leave WPMF based on the outcome of our discernment.

So, I invite you to be in prayer over this next week, and to attend the congregational meeting on June 4th, or commit to praying for the meeting. Below is some information about Franconia Conference and role of conferences in our denomination, Mennonite Church USA. Please take time to look that over before the meeting.

It is a joy to be your pastor, and I look forward to continuing our journey together.

God's grace to you,
Pastor Lorie

Conference structure in the Mennonite Church:

One of the main purposes of our conference structure is to create and enact community beyond a single congregation. Mennonite theology does not see isolated individuals or congregations as good discipleship, but rather that we need one another to be able to walk in the ways of Jesus and to be a living example of God's reign here and now. While getting to know others within a conference is not the same as in a congregation, being a part of a conference continues to provide opportunities for joint collaboration and relationship building.

Conferences also provide resources to both pastors and congregations. A few examples of how Franconia Conference has supported our leadership or congregation over the years:

- Counsel/Guidance: being a resource to ask questions and receive guidance during a pastoral search process, LEADership Minister checks in quarterly with pastor (self-care as well as guidance as needed)
- Opportunities for continued learning: Worship Workshop for congregants, pastor seminars on various topics; Child Protection Policy workshop when PA changed it's laws
- Places for encouragement and renewal: Women's Day Retreat with Eastern District, Pastor's Retreat Day
- Financial support: 2016 received a \$5000 grant to prepare ourselves to partner with Redemption Housing; 2017 paid part of our team's registration cost for Crossroads Antiracism Training

Conferences are also the place of accountability within the broader Mennonite Church. There are systems in place at a conference level to make sure a leader is not abusing their power financially, sexually, emotionally, or spiritually. A pastor's credentials are held by the conference, not the denominational office.

Franconia Conference holds the following statements as the guide for conference accountability around same-sex relationships. These were affirmed by 73% of the congregational delegates (18% not affirming, and 9% abstaining) in 2015.

1. **We commit to making our churches places of radical hospitality, inviting and engaging all people regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, lifestyle, or socio-economic status.**
 - a. God desires to bring transformation to all people; therefore, we will welcome all people and call all people to repentance and holy living.
2. **We call ourselves, individually and corporately, to repent of all sin.**
 - a. We confess that we are all sinners who fall short of the glory of God. We recognize that while we don't all struggle in the same ways, we are all in need of the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of Jesus.
 - b. We confess our failure to provide balanced, biblical teaching on healthy sexuality, marriage, singleness, and celibacy.
 - c. We confess that topics such as premarital sex, extramarital sex, lust, pornography, and sexual abuse have far too often been neglected in our discussions of human sexuality.
 - d. We confess that our churches have not always been safe places for LGBTQ persons and that many have been hurt by our lack of grace, compassion, and Christ-like love.
 - e. We confess that we have failed to remain in dialogue with those who hold differing views. We have not been intentional enough about cultivating relationships with those in our conference with whom we disagree.

In all these areas, we humbly repent, seek God's forgiveness, and commit to action. We desire to be communities of faith that are full of grace and full of truth.

3. **We uphold our existing policy that pastors holding credentials in Franconia Mennonite Conference may not perform same-sex covenant ceremonies.**
 - a. Pastors in Franconia Mennonite Conference who perform a same-sex ceremony will have their credentials reviewed according to existing conference guidelines
4. **We uphold Franconia Mennonite Conference's existing policy to not credential persons living in same-sex relationships, and call on conference churches not to hire persons living in same-sex relationships to serve in pastoral leadership.**
 - a. Franconia Mennonite Conference churches who hire persons living in same-sex relationships to serve in pastoral leadership will have their membership in the conference reviewed according to conference guidelines.
5. **We commit to a time of prayer and fasting for the purpose of listening to God's voice on these matters, recognizing that it is only through the unifying power of the Spirit that we can discern his will.**