

Congregational Meeting Minutes

Sunday, April 28, 2019

Allegheny Mennonite Conference Membership Proposal

Attendance: Amy Hochstetler, Mark Michalovic (Elder), Matt MacNeill (HRC), Ken Beidler, Drick Boyd, Brent Hershey, Ezra Beidler-Shenk, Michael Wiebe, Cynthia Boyd, Linford Martin, Cindy Cassel, Elaine Shenk (HRC), Ariel Ressler MacNeill, Baby Rowen, Katie Tan, Ethan Tan (Elder), Elizabeth Hamilton (Facilitator), Lorie Hershey (Pastor), Tim Martin Johnson (HRC), Alex Esh Bouwman, Amanda Esh Bouwman (Elder), Sherri Michalovic, Dave Lapp, Maggie Lapp, Emma Martin Zimmerman, Linda Meyer Esh, Sheldon Rich (Elder), Dorianna Lordi (Administrative Assistant), Carol Martin Johnson, Jeff Knightly (Deacon)

Proposal: Church Council proposes that WPMF apply for membership in Allegheny Mennonite Conference

Facilitator: Elizabeth Hamilton

Minutes Recorder: Dorianna Lordi

- Elizabeth called meeting to order at 11:40 a.m. and explained that the purpose of this meeting is to consider Church Council's proposal to seek affiliation with Allegheny Mennonite Conference (AMC) outlined in the proposal (see addendum)
- Elizabeth explained the consensus process:
 - All congregants breaking into CDM's to discuss and each group will either affirm or reject proposal. If all CDM's affirm the proposal then meeting is concluded. If any of the CDM's reject the proposal, proposal will then be voted on by members only with a two-thirds majority
- Tim briefly explained the proposal and referenced the proposal document (see addendum)
 - Noting the following: 34 congregants participated in the survey that was offered after the visits from Allegheny Mennonite Conference and Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). The survey was one way that council was able to better understand congregants' opinions of the visits. 88% of survey participants were in favor of concluding our membership at Franconia Mennonite Conference (FMC). Both AMC and ACC are good options to consider seeking membership with. ACC may be the more practical choice, as they are a larger and closer conference though less affirming of our theology which includes our welcoming and inclusive stance of members of the LGBT+ community. Whereas AMC is more aligned and accepting of our theology which includes our welcoming and

inclusive stance of members of the LGBT+ community, though smaller, geographically further, and less ethnically diverse. Considering what each conference has to offer and the survey results, Council agreed to propose that we seek membership in AMC.

- Congregants were invited to ask questions and comments. Questions and responses are summarized below:
 - Both conferences are a part of Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA)
 - Some congregants felt that the proposal included two parts: If we should leave FMC and if we should join AMC
 - Some congregants expressed their feelings toward leaving Franconia conference which included allowing FMC to not have to deal with their stance regarding church leadership and inclusion of members of the LGBTQ+ community
 - Tim explained that if proposal is not affirmed today then Council will then consider an alternative proposal. If proposal is accepted then WPMF will apply for membership with AMC and notify FMC of our intentions. WPMF would be presented at AMC's conference in August then voted on in November. During this time, we will write a letter to FMC congregations informing them of the reasons for our decision to leave, asking for their blessing, and whatever additional information we would like to communicate to congregations
 - We must be members of a MCUSA conference to be included in MCUSA's denomination
 - Congregants expressed concern that staying at FMC will hinder our Pastor's ability to care for all members of our congregation fully
 - A congregant asked why it is necessary for us to join another conference right away, noting other Mennonite congregations that are not formally affiliated with a conference. Council members responded by outlining some benefits of being a member of a conference and the MCUSA denomination. Such benefits include health insurance resources, theology and worship resources, pastoral and congregational support. Church council does not recommend WPMF being independent of a conference
 - Congregants noted concern that we would no longer be included in Mennonite World Conference if we were no longer a member of MCUSA. Some also noted that we have other resources such as Kingdom Builders that may offer relationships and some resources
 - Congregants noted that it may be common in situations such as this, that the pastor may chose to leave the conference or congregation rather than the

congregation. It is important to us as a congregation, to approach this together because the church takes this position - not just the Pastor

- Some noted that if we stay with Franconia Conference then consequences will be directed toward our Pastor instead of congregation. The same-sex couple that our Pastor marries will also be placed in the spotlight which is unfair to them
 - Congregants expressed the importance that we are clear in our letter - explaining that it feels as though we are being pushed out of the conference
 - Some congregants were concerned that we are avoiding conflict by leaving. Others expressed their concern for becoming a “one issue church”
 - There are congregations within Franconia conference who are supportive of us and will be affected by us leaving
 - Some congregants felt that it may be necessary for us to leave but we will need to understand our role in the denomination and continue to advocate for inclusivity, challenge other congregations, and allow congregation to be challenge
 - AMC allows (and may also desire) their member congregations to be theologically diverse
 - Some congregants noted the historic background of conferences/churches splitting over theological differences. Difference that are now widely accepted such as women in leadership
 - Leadership has been addressing this concern for several years and have not taken this proposal lightly
 - It is important that we take care in the letter we send to FMC congregations, being clear about our decision and perhaps asking for support
- Congregation broke into CDM's at 12:35 p.m.
 - At 12:42 p.m. congregants needed more time to discuss. CDM's paused and the congregation took time for further comments or questions with the larger group. Some comments included that FMC will need formally to release us to another conference, FMC Minister informed leadership that there will be some opportunities for us to partner with them and that our ties do not need to be broken, previously mentioned concerns were further discussed
 - Congregants resumed CDM's and were unable to reach consensus
 - Those who were unable to reach consensus shared briefly shared their reasoning. One group noted that they were unable to reach consensus because

of the aforementioned concerns of joining AMC, such as distance and size. An individual noted concern for leaving FMC and a second individual explained that two members were willing to abstain from their CDM decision, but ultimately felt that it was important for these voices to be noted. Those who did not reach consensus also expressed that they would respect the decision if the church voted in favor of the proposal

- Because CDM's were unable to reach consensus, the congregation needed to take the proposal to a members-only vote. Elizabeth briefly reviewed the process of moving to a members-only vote and asked who was in favor of the proposal and who was opposed to the proposal
 - 20 members were present, 17 members voted in favor and 3 members voted opposed
 - Church Council's proposal that WPMF apply for membership in Allegheny Mennonite Conference was accepted
 - Congregational meeting concluded at 1:03 p.m. with prayer

Addendum:

PROPOSAL

from WPMF Church Council

concerning conference affiliation

for consideration at a congregation meeting to be held Sunday, April 28, 2019, 11:40 am

Church Council proposes that WPMF apply for membership in Allegheny Mennonite Conference

History

July 2017 - At a congregational meeting we decided that our understanding of being a welcoming and inclusive congregation encompassed support for our pastor officiating at same-sex marriages, and the understanding that sexual orientation and gender identity does not have a bearing on who the congregation would call into pastoral leadership. This created a potential conflict, in view of the Franconia Conference (FC) stated policy that clergy who do so will have their credentials reviewed and possibly revoked.

August 2017 - February 2018 - Council held conversations with FC leaders to discuss whether WPMF's continued membership in FC was viable. The discussions were inconclusive, but left Council dubious about the outcome when our pastor, present or future, officiates at an LGBTQ wedding.

March 2018 - Council decided to make contacts with conference leaders, pastors and lay leaders in Allegheny Mennonite Conference (AMC) and Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC)

March 2019 - Representatives of AMC and ACC visited WPMF to get acquainted with us and to make presentations about their conferences. After the visits a survey was conducted asking congregants to state their preference. These are the results:

Option	Number	Percentage
I am in favor of leaving FC and believe AMC is the best fit for WPMF	18	53%
I am in favor of leaving FC and believe ACC is the best fit for WPMF	4	12%
I am in favor of leaving FC but don't have a strong sense that one is a better fit for WPMF than the other	8	23%
I am undecided as to whether or not leaving FC is a good idea	2	6%
I am in favor of remaining in FC	2	6%
Total	34	100%

Many respondents to the survey added comments, some of which are incorporated into the following summary (on back...)

The perceived strengths of Allegheny Mennonite Conference:

- A commitment to “place based ministry”
- A general sense that AMC is well aligned with “who we are”
- A theology of inclusion, emphasizing the center of our faith as Jesus Christ, without attention to boundaries stating who is in and who is out
- A positive attitude toward LGBTQ inclusion, including acceptance of pastors officiating at marriage ceremonies of LGBTQ persons and congregations calling LGBTQ persons into pastoral leadership
- An active and strong program of peer mentorship and support for pastors
- AMC is a small conference where we might be able to know others well (although some people saw the small size of AMC as a negative)
- An active conference youth ministry program

The perceived strengths of Atlantic Coast Conference:

- Closer proximity to WPMF
- ACC’s larger size might provide more institutional support and resources for us
- About a third of ACC congregations are welcoming, meaning that they accept LGBTQ persons into membership
- ACC includes several urban congregations, and has at least some racial diversity
- Possible involvement of WPMF members on conference committees, given the proximity

It is noted here that some respondents raised the question of why it is necessary to belong to a conference at all. Germantown Mennonite Church, for instance, does not belong to a conference. Under the current structure of MCUSA, a congregation can only belong to the denomination by virtue of its membership in a conference. Both Council and Pastor Lorie believe that there are significant benefits of belonging to the denomination, as well as to a conference, so we are not recommending this option.

Church Council is recommending Allegheny Mennonite Conference based on:

- Significantly stronger support for AMC than for ACC in the congregational survey
- Council’s belief that the theological and philosophical alignment of WPMF’s values and identity with AMC provide a stronger potential connection than the proximity and size that ACC offers

On Sunday, April 28 at 11:40 am we will have a congregational meeting to consider this proposal. There will be time for questions and discussion. We will use our customary decision process, striving for consensus first. If consensus is not achieved, a vote will be taken, and requires a 2/3 majority to pass. Non-members and members are welcome to participate in all

aspects of the process, with the exception that if a vote is taken only members of WPMF may vote.

Child care will be provided for the meeting.

Please plan to attend. You may feel free to speak with members of Church Council or with Pastor Lorie beforehand to offer your thoughts and questions.