

1 **REARRANGED POLITY TASK FORCE REPORT, REQUESTED BY CONFERENCE**  
2 **COUNCIL**

3 **Recommendations**

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6 **Our recommendations seek to meet these basic goals:**

- 7 1. To clarify roles, authority, and decision-making in the conference.  
8 2. To strengthen accountability within the conference.  
9 3. To simplify the conference structure  
10 4. To strengthen conference unity in mission and spiritual practice.

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12 **Delegate Assembly**

13 We recommend that VMC clearly define itself as a *conference of congregations*, which meets  
14 together, through representatives, for various purposes including decision-making. Such  
15 gatherings should be the ultimate locus of authority. As such, we recommend:

- 16 1. That the Delegate Assembly have the authority on an annual basis to review and ratify  
17 major decisions made by Conference Council, in addition to filling conference leadership  
18 positions and ratifying official policies and positions.  
19 2. That the Delegate Assembly be composed of congregationally-appointed delegates,  
20 credentialed pastors actively serving a congregation, and district ministers. This assures  
21 that congregations, through their representatives, have ultimate decision-making  
22 authority. Conference entities and other ministries are encouraged to actively participate  
23 as non-delegates, and may report to Conference Assembly, but without voting privilege.  
24

25 **Conference Council**

26 We recommend that Conference Council be the governing board of the conference, making  
27 decisions on behalf of the conference and its Delegate Assembly. As such we recommend:

- 28 1. That the Conference Council be composed of 7 members, plus moderator and moderator-  
29 elect, selected by Gifts Discernment Committee and affirmed by Delegate Assembly by a  
30 supermajority (percentage to be defined by Conference Council) with gender and ethnic  
31 composition reflecting the diversity of the conference. This strengthens the discernment  
32 of desired abilities for Conference Council, and its accountability to Delegate Assembly.  
33 2. That the Conference Council have the final authority concerning the withdrawal of  
34 credentials.  
35

36 **Congregational Faith and Life Commission**

37 We recommend simplifying conference structure when possible, sharpening the roles of  
38 commissions, and tying the district ministers into the conference's mission in the most natural  
39 and effective way. As such, we recommend:

- 40 1. The discontinuation of both the Congregational Life Commission and the Faith and Life  
41 Commission, and the formation of a new commission: Congregational Faith and Life  
42 Commission.  
43 2. The duties of the new CFLC would be to: promote and strengthen Anabaptist Christian  
44 faith and spirituality among conference congregations; and nurture and resource healthy  
45 districts, congregations, and leaders.  
46 3. The CFLC would not be a policy-making body, but would make recommendations to the  
47 Conference Council.

- 48 4. The composition of the CFLC would be the same as the current Faith and Life  
49 Commission: it would consist of district ministers and other oversight leaders, plus three  
50 members at-large affirmed by Delegate Assembly. District ministers already have the  
51 task of nurturing and resourcing the congregations they supervise, so the responsibilities  
52 of the CFLC would be a natural fit for district ministers.  
53

#### 54 **Ministerial Leadership Credentials Commission**

55 Because of its importance and required time commitment, we recommend that a new  
56 commission be created whose sole function is determining criteria for credentials and processing  
57 credentials. As its own commission it will have greater visibility, transparency, as well as greater  
58 accountability to both the Delegate Assembly and Conference Council. We also want to  
59 strengthen its consultation with congregations when processing credentials. As such we  
60 recommend:

- 61 1. The formation of the MLCC, replacing the current Personnel Committee, a subcommittee  
62 of FLC.  
63 2. The MLCC be composed of six credentialed pastors (including the chair) selected by  
64 Gifts Discernment Committee and affirmed by Delegate Assembly by a supermajority  
65 (percentage to be defined by Conference Council) for stated terms and with attention to  
66 gender and ethnic representation, plus one active district minister selected by the CFLC  
67 for a stated term.  
68 3. The MLCC determines criteria for credentials, processes credentials, and makes the final  
69 decision on credential status (except for withdrawal of credentials). It recommends  
70 withdrawal of credentials to the Conference Council.  
71 4. If there is a charge of ministerial misconduct, the Conference Minister would select an  
72 investigative team that follows the process outlined in the MC USA document:  
73 Ministerial Misconduct Policy and Procedures ([mennoniteusa.org/resource/sexual-](http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/sexual-misconduct)  
74 [misconduct](http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/sexual-misconduct)). The investigative team would report its findings to the MLCC.  
75 5. When credentialed persons engage in conduct significantly different from stated  
76 conference positions or policies, but that are done on the basis of conscience and with the  
77 discernment and support of the congregation, such conduct would be labeled “at  
78 variance” rather than “misconduct,” not requiring investigation by the conference or an  
79 investigative team. The MLCC would review the person’s credential.  
80 6. When processing a candidate’s or pastor’s credential, the calling congregation will be  
81 invited to send 1-2 representatives to be present for consultation, along with the  
82 candidate’s/pastor’s district minister.  
83

84 **Virginia Mennonite Missions**

85 VMM is an important source of vitality and missional purpose for VMC. VMM is both VMC's  
86 mission agency and has been a conference commission. It also links VMC congregations to  
87 broader mission ministries (MMN, EMM, etc) and connects with congregations outside VMC.

88 Recognizing the unique strengths and challenges of VMM's perspective we recommend:

- 89 1. That we strengthen VMM's accountability to the conference through the Delegate  
90 Assembly.
- 91 2. That Conference Council, in consultation with the VMM president and board, explore  
92 ways both to more firmly anchor VMM's ministry within VMC, and to benefit from its  
93 other mission relationships and programs.
- 94 3. That the exploration should include renegotiating the relationship (e.g. partner, affiliated  
95 agency, or...) and determining the persons responsible for the relationship and the specific  
96 mechanisms for VMM's reporting to VMC.
- 97 4. That we enhance VMM's ministry to VMC congregations, offering resources and  
98 guidance for congregational mission and evangelism.

99

100 **Conference Districts**

101 Surveys and focus groups revealed that congregations and individuals often feel a stronger  
102 connection to their district than to the conference or denomination; therefore we recommend that  
103 VMC continue to make use of districts and connect districts meaningfully to the conference. As  
104 such we recommend:

- 105 1. As stipulated in the present bylaws, districts typically are composed of four or more  
106 congregations. We recommend that current districts of less than four congregations be  
107 disbanded, and those affected congregations choose other districts to join. This will  
108 strengthen ties among congregations and may strengthen ties between some peripheral  
109 congregations and the conference.
- 110 2. Discontinue using district representatives as the basis for Conference Council. The  
111 districts are connected to the conference through their district ministers who will serve on  
112 the CFLC, and a primary role for CFLC will be to resource districts, congregations, and  
113 leaders.

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115 **Conference, Congregational and Pastoral Authority**

116 Issues related to human sexuality and church membership, marriage, and leadership have  
117 highlighted the need to clarify authority roles in VMC. We recommend approaches that will  
118 respect the discernment and mission of the local congregation, maintain mutual discernment and  
119 accountability between congregations, and be based on careful biblical, theological, and spiritual  
120 reflection. As such we recommend:

- 121 1. That designing biblical, theological, spiritual conference-wide studies be the  
122 responsibility of the CFLC.
- 123 2. That criteria for membership in the local congregation, and selecting lay leaders, be the  
124 responsibility of the local congregation.
- 125 3. That criteria and decision-making for ministerial credentials be the responsibility of the  
126 MLCC (except for withdrawal of credentials, which needs approval of Conference  
127 Council).
- 128 4. That in the ordination covenant, the one being ordained commit to accountability to the  
129 conference as well as the congregation.
- 130 5. That the (newly formed) Conference Council be encouraged to (1) review the current  
131 policy, which states that pastors conducting same-sex marriage ceremonies will have

132 their credentials *suspended* followed by a review by the credentialing body; and (2)  
133 consider whether conducting a same-sex marriage based on conscience and supported by  
134 the congregation should result in *withdrawal* of credentials. As with all major policy  
135 decisions, this would be reviewed and ratified by the Delegate Assembly.  
136 6. That the Delegate Assembly have the authority to censure congregations whose beliefs  
137 and practices are deemed incompatible with the beliefs and practices of the conference.  
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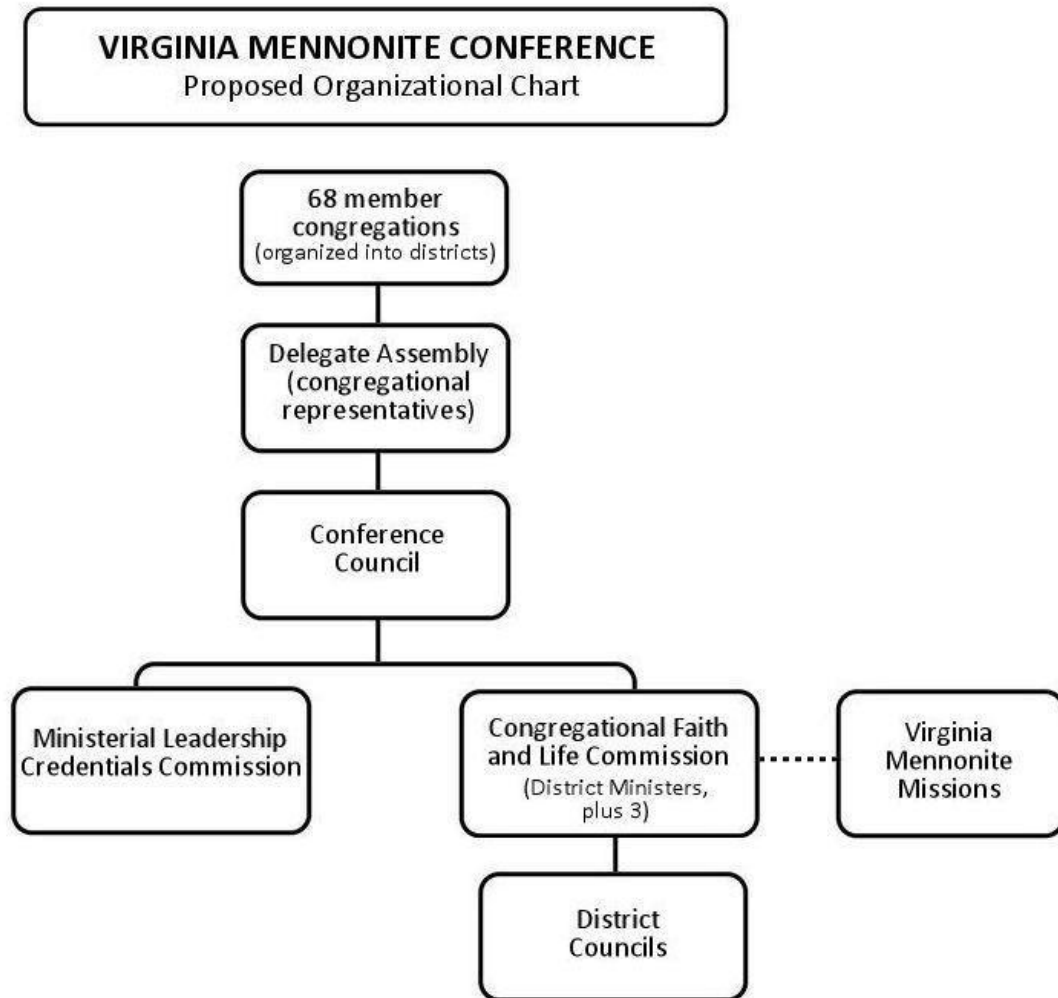
### 139 **Unity**

140 VMC, like all conferences in MC USA, has been experiencing stresses around theology and  
141 practice that have threatened to divide the conference. We recommend a process that strengthens  
142 unity through a commitment to shared spiritual practices. As such we recommend:

- 143 1. The CFLC design a process for creating a Conference Covenant of Spiritual Practices.  
144 The Covenant would stipulate spiritual practices expected of all congregations and  
145 credentialed leaders in the conference.  
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147  
148 Respectfully submitted,  
149 **VMC Polity Task Force**

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167 **APPENDIX B**

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170 **Additional details from results of information-gathering phase**

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173 **Highlights from the 14 Focus Groups:**

- 174 1. On a 1 to 5 scale ranging from “not at all engaged” to “completely engaged,”  
175 participants reported that their congregations were most engaged with their districts  
176 (3.4), followed by decreasing levels of engagement with the conference (2.8) and with  
177 MCUSA (2.5).
- 178 2. The most frequently mentioned functions of the conference were pastoral  
179 credentialing, facilitating fellowship between congregations, leadership development,  
180 and resourcing.
- 181 3. The conference contributions most often mentioned by focus groups were “missions  
182 and conference related ministries,” “pastoral consultations,” “credentialing (of  
183 pastors,” and “district ministers and (the) district structure.”
- 184 4. Regarding how to increase diverse ownership of the conference, the suggestions ranged  
185 from “be open to radical restructuring and change” to “have a compelling vision of why  
186 we exist.”
- 187 5. When asked “what changes in VMC authority and structure” might be needed the most  
188 common response focused on the need for greater clarity about structural relationships.
- 189 6. In terms of credentialing and ministerial conduct, the majority of focus groups agreed  
190 that the conference is the appropriate locus for such decisions. However, several groups  
191 called for greater involvement by districts and congregations in the process.
- 192 7. A third of the focus groups expressed concern about strong accountability for *pastors*  
193 but weak accountability for *congregations* (*vis-à-vis* the conference).
- 194 8. A final question offered 14 different areas of possible congregational-conference  
195 interaction, and asked participants to rank how much conference authority they would  
196 like to see in each area (ranging from “none” to “connecting,” “advising,” and “ruling.”)  
197 While conference “connecting” and “advising” functions were welcomed in nearly all  
198 areas, the only area receiving a strong majority of “ruling” responses was “taking  
199 disciplinary action in situations of pastoral misconduct.”

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201 **Highlights from 404 Individual Surveys:**

- 202 1. On a 1 to 5 scale, respondents reported fairly high levels of engagement by their  
203 *congregation* with their District (3.66), the Conference (3.56), and MCUSA (3.43), but  
204 only moderate levels of *personal* engagement with the Conference (2.70). Respondents  
205 from Harrisonburg District were a full point higher than respondents from other districts  
206 (3.91 compared to 2.92) in terms of congregational engagement with MCUSA, although  
207 district and conference engagement scores were similar.
- 208 2. Respondents most frequently mentioned “pastoral credentialing,” “resources,”  
209 “accountability,” “fellowship” and “mission” as the “essential functions of VMC.”
- 210 3. In terms of VMC’s contributions to congregations, the most frequent themes (in order)  
211 were “collaborative missions,” “help with pastoral transitions,” “connection with

- 212 something larger than a single congregation,” “publications/communication,”  
213 “accountability/guidelines,” “fellowship/relationships/networking,” and “continuing  
214 education for pastors.”
- 215 4. Regarding strategies to increase diverse ownership of the conference, key themes  
216 included ideas to increase leadership diversity and a call to listen to and values stories  
217 and voices.
- 218 5. It was difficult to identify common themes in response to the question about possible  
219 changes to VMC’s authority and structure. There was an overall sense of confusion  
220 about the current structure, and a tension between voices calling for more conference  
221 authority and others for more congregational autonomy in decision-making.
- 222 6. In terms of authority for ministerial conduct and credentials, about 42% of respondents  
223 thought it should lie with the conference and about 23% with the congregation. Another  
224 20% preferred a blended approach, either as a joint decision (by the congregation and  
225 the conference) or with a primary/secondary approach. A few voices called for  
226 credentials to be vested with the denomination.
- 227 7. Regarding pastoral and congregational accountability with the conference, the most  
228 common response was that pastors and congregations should follow conference  
229 policies. However, a number of respondents also called for “mutual accountability”  
230 between the conference and pastors/congregations.
- 231 8. A final question offered 14 different areas of possible congregational-conference  
232 interaction, and asked respondents to rank how much conference authority they would  
233 like to see in each area (ranging from “none” to “connecting,” “advising,” and “ruling.”)  
234 While conference “connecting” and “advising” functions were welcomed in nearly all  
235 areas, no area received a *majority of “ruling” responses*. (Albeit the highest in this  
236 category was “taking disciplinary action in situations of pastoral misconduct,” where  
237 nearly 40% of respondents indicated “ruling.”)  
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#### 239 **Comparison of Focus Groups vs. Survey Results:**

- 240 ● Both focus group participants and survey respondents view their congregations as most  
241 engaged with their districts, but survey respondents see higher levels of engagement  
242 with the conference and MCUSA than do focus group participants.
- 243 ● In terms of conference functions and contributions as well as strategies to increase  
244 diversity, there is considerable agreement.
- 245 ● Focus group participants were generally more aware of the current conference  
246 structure than were survey respondents.
- 247 ● While focus group participants and survey respondents generally agree that the  
248 conference is the proper locus for decisions about ministerial conduct and credentials,  
249 there was an even stronger call from survey respondents for greater congregational  
250 involvement in such decisions.
- 251 ● Focus group participants were more concerned about “congregational accountability”  
252 (to conference) and survey respondents about “mutual accountability” (between  
253 congregations and conference).
- 254 ● Focus group participants were clearer than survey respondents that the conference  
255 should have “ruling” authority in terms of situations of pastoral misconduct.  
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258 **Appendix #C – PROCESS STATEMENTS**

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260 **How we viewed our work**

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263 The Conference Council of Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) appointed the Polity Task  
264 Force to research our current polity and authority structures, to report our findings, and to make  
265 recommendations for future polity and structures. Our task was not to “wet our finger” and hold  
266 it up to find out which way the ecclesiastical wind is blowing. We sought to listen deeply and  
267 carefully to members of Virginia Conference in order to discern our underlying theology of the  
268 church (ecclesiology), our organizational culture (why we do what we do as an organization),  
269 and our varying levels of comfort and frustration with our life together as VMC.

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271 One reality of the past half century is the shifting understanding of where “church” primarily  
272 exists. Up into the 1950s membership was held not by the local congregation, but by the districts  
273 of VMC. Members were free to attend any congregation, and although pastors were chosen by  
274 lot in a local congregation, credentials were held by the Conference, and pastors could be sent to  
275 other churches by the bishop of the district for preaching assignments. Bishops conducted the  
276 ordinances of the church (baptism and communion), and were the recognized leaders of the  
277 church.

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279 In the mid-1950s membership moved to the local congregation, and pastors were called by local  
280 congregations. Delegates to district and conference assemblies were expanded to include non-  
281 ordained delegates. Gradually, the understanding where “church” primarily lies shifted from the  
282 district to the local congregation. Notably, the ordinances (communion and baptism) were shifted  
283 from the bishop to the local pastor. Several decades ago, the title of “bishop” was mostly phased  
284 out, with a few exceptions, and in its place “overseer” was adopted. Presently, “district minister”  
285 is the preferred designation.

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287 These structural and ecclesiological changes brought some shifts in our organizational culture,  
288 but culture is much more difficult to identify and to change. This can be seen in the retention of  
289 the cultural artifact of the bishop board now renamed the Faith and Life Commission.

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291 Experts in organizations and structures all warn that organizational culture is far more resistant to  
292 change than most recognize. Functionally, our strategy has been to move the center of the church  
293 to the congregation, but there is a saying, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast!” Culture is a  
294 significant way that we make sense of who we are and why we do what we do. Organizational  
295 culture will only change when things no longer make sense. Our current structure makes perfect  
296 sense for some, and for others it makes little sense and creates frustration because the church is  
297 resistant to change—particularly change in power distribution.

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299 Therefore, our report and proposals attempt to seriously grapple with our expressed  
300 congregational ecclesiology and our strong conference culture of a hierarchical power structure.

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## 302 **How we did our work**

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305 After our initial organizing meeting in February 2017, we planned a 3-month information-  
306 gathering process (April-June). Members of the Polity Task Force committed to five distinct  
307 methods of information-gathering prior to drafting recommendations, as follows:

- 308 1. **Listening to God and Each Other**—through devotionals and prayer at each of our  
309 meetings, and through a careful and respectful group process
- 310 2. **Listening to Districts and Key Groups**—through holding focus group meetings with  
311 each district and with other key groups in the conference
- 312 3. **Listening to Conference Constituents**—through a survey distributed to individual  
313 conference constituents through their local congregations
- 314 4. **Listening to VMC Leadership**—through individual interviews conducted with the  
315 conference moderator and conference staff
- 316 5. **Listening to Other Conferences**—through interviews with leaders from sister  
317 conferences that had also undergone polity review processes

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319 The Polity Task Force met a total of 15 times during 2017 to prepare questions for the  
320 information-gathering phase, to review the results of our information gathering, and to draft  
321 recommendations. The task force met in meetings from 1½ to 2½ hours, on the following dates:

- 322 ● February 3 and 23
- 323 ● March 10 and 24
- 324 ● April 7 and 20
- 325 ● June 2 and 16
- 326 ● September 1, 22, and 29
- 327 ● October 11 and 20
- 328 ● November 3 and 10

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## 330 **Who we talked to**

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333 **Focus Groups.** A total of 128 persons throughout VMC participated in one of the 14 focus  
334 groups. In addition to meeting in person with all nine districts (pastors and delegates), additional  
335 meetings were convened with the following groups:

- 336 ● Credentialed women clergy
- 337 ● Young pastors
- 338 ● Faith and Life Commission
- 339 ● VMMissions Executive Committee
- 340 ● An ad hoc pastor's group
- 341 ● Conference Council

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343 **Individual Surveys.** A total of 404 individuals completed a survey. Survey results were  
344 compiled by Bex Simmerman, an alumna of the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern  
345 Mennonite University with significant experience in data analysis. The demographics of survey  
346 respondents were:

- 347 ● 52% male, 47% female, 1% no response
- 348 ● 71% were age 50 or over

- 349 ● 92% identified as “White” or “Caucasian,” 2% identified as “Black,” “Native American,”  
350 or “Asian,” 6% no response  
351 ● 41 congregations represented, with 51% of respondents from Harrisonburg District, 19%  
352 from Northern District, 12% from Eastern Virginia District, 17% from the remaining six  
353 districts, and 1% unable to identify  
354 ● 10% pastors, 10% district ministers or members of a district council  
355

356 **Individual Interviews.** Task force members conducted a total of 7 individual interviews, both  
357 to pilot test the questions and to gain the perspective of leaders of VMC and other conferences.  
358 The results of these interviews were not compiled as part of the survey results, but were  
359 reviewed by task force members. The individuals interviewed were:

- 360 ● David Boshart, Conference Minister, Central Plains Mennonite Conference, and  
361 Moderator of Mennonite Church USA  
362 ● Doug Kaufman, Conference Pastor for Leadership Transitions, Indiana-Michigan  
363 Conference  
364 ● Dan Miller, Conference Pastor, Indiana-Michigan Conference  
365 ● Clyde Kratz, Executive Conference Minister, VMC  
366 ● Anieta McCracken, Administrative Services Manager, VMC  
367 ● Elroy Miller, Moderator, VMC (pilot test)  
368 ● Lay leader of a local congregation (pilot test)  
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## 370 **What We Learned**

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373 After processing these multiple levels of listening, we identified several primary learnings.

- 374 ● There is considerable concern for and interest in Virginia Mennonite Conference,  
375 reflected by the approximately 500 individuals who either responded to the survey and/or  
376 participated in one of the focus groups.  
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378 ● Overall, individual congregations are most connected with their *districts*, but also feel  
379 moderately connected with the conference and the denomination. The closer a given  
380 congregation is to Harrisonburg, the more connected it tends to feel to the conference.  
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- Virginia Mennonite Conference is most *appreciated* for the resources, leadership development, and connections it provides to congregations and pastors, as well as for the missional energy from Virginia Mennonite Missions and other conference-related agencies.
  - In general most lay members have only a *vague sense* of the overall structure of the conference, although many pastors and district leaders have a somewhat greater awareness of the conference structure. There is no broad consensus around any one specific change that might be needed, but a widely held perception that improvements are needed.
  - We heard diverse perspectives on the role of the Faith and Life Commission (FLC), with some affirming and others critiquing the commission’s role, composition, and accountability. We also sensed significant pain from some respondents around conference decisions regarding ministerial credentials, with some other respondents affirming FLC’s decisions.
  - There is broad support for continuing to vest the responsibility for credentialing and ministerial accountability within the *conference*. We also heard a clear desire for more communication and coordination with local congregations in the process of credentialing and/or accountability.
  - Although we did not ask about views on current theological or ethical issues that are being discussed within the broader church, some survey respondents and focus group participants did refer to them. There was a general recognition that a *diversity of views* will be the norm for the foreseeable future, and that Virginia Conference will likely continue to look to MCUSA guiding documents and relationships for help in responding to such issues.
  - We benefitted from conversations with other conference leaders regarding their experience of managing structural changes within their conferences. The major lessons are that listening broadly, taking time, and focusing on shared practices as well as beliefs contribute to *successful change*.