

Recommendation for Overall Design for VMC
Restructuring for Mission Committee
January 11, 2019

The Restructuring for Mission Task Force is proposing seven recommendations for the organization of Virginia Mennonite Conference. These recommendations are based on recommendations made by the Polity Task Force¹, the deliberations, alterations, and expansions made by the Restructuring for Mission Committee, and feedback from delegates at Delegate Assembly. It is our hope that the Delegates of Virginia Mennonite Conference can provide general affirmation for these recommendations before new by-laws and constitutional amendments are developed. In the event the Delegates provide general affirmation for these recommendations during the Winter Assembly (February 2, 2019), the By-Laws Committee will draft a revised Constitution and By-Laws for consideration at Summer Assembly 2019 (July 18-20, 2019).

Preamble

Virginia Mennonite Conference envisions that its member congregations will be a sent people representing the reign of God, who is bringing hope, reconciliation and redemption to the world through Jesus Christ. Guided by the Holy Spirit, leaders of each congregation shall facilitate ministries that empower members for worship, discipleship, peace building, service, and evangelistic witness for the redemption of the world.

Virginia Mennonite Conference's *Leadership Handbook for Congregations, Districts, and Credentialed Leaders in Virginia Mennonite Conference (Revised: September 2015)* highlights the nature and mission of the Church (p.3), and also focuses on the Polity for Districts (p.9).² While Virginia Mennonite Conference has benefitted from a robust district polity that has contributed to regional flexibility on matters of faith and practice, this form of polity has also contributed to the diminished role and discernment responsibility of congregational delegates meeting in assembly. As the Polity Task Force recommended, Virginia Mennonite Conference would do well to recapture the importance of a Conference constructed for the benefit of the local assembly of believers.

At the heart of this new overall design is a move toward becoming *a conference of congregations*. A conference of congregations means: (1) the conference is defined not by its structures or staff but by its congregations: a voluntary network that exists for the sake of enhancing the mission of member congregations--singly and collectively--from multiple states in this region to join the redemptive mission of God both locally and globally; (2) the network of congregations, through their representatives, exercises decision-making authority, including the structure, operation, vision, and mission of the conference; (3) the network of congregations, along with their credentialed leaders, are in a covenantal relationship of mutual accountability for communally-agreed-upon faith and practice; (4) a "conference of congregations" does not mean that each congregation operates independently, but cooperatively, while also pursuing its own unique place in God's mission.

¹ Polity Task Force Recommendations, <http://virginiainconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/06-PTF-Rearranged-Final-report-011718.pdf>

² Leadership Handbook (2015), <http://virginiainconference.org/documents/> SEE: Policies:

43 This concept “a conference of congregations” is supported by the biblical and theological
44 understandings of our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Article 9 states:

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46 *“We believe that the church is the assembly of those who have accepted God’s offer of salvation*
47 *through faith in Christ Jesus.... The church exists as a community of believers in the local*
48 *congregation, as a community of congregations, and as the worldwide community of faith.”*

49
50 Article 16 goes on to state:

51
52 *“According to the example of the apostolic church, the local congregation seeks the counsel of the*
53 *wider church in important matters relating to faith and life, and they work together in their*
54 *common mission. ... Authority and responsibility are delegated by common and voluntary*
55 *agreement, so that the churches hold each other accountable to Christ and to one another on all*
56 *levels of church life.”*

57
58 Through this new design we hope to enhance our ability to fulfill our:

59
60 Vision Statement: *“God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit,*
61 *to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to*
62 *the world.”*

63
64 Mission Statement: *“Virginia Mennonite Conference equips pastors, lay leaders, and congregants*
65 *for worship and service, and to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to neighbors near and far,”*
66

67 This new design presupposes that: (1) the local congregation, in accordance with the shared beliefs
68 and practices of the Conference, is responsible to organize its own structure , including the criteria for
69 membership, and the selecting of lay leaders and delegates; (2) congregational leaders, in partnership
70 with the oversight leader, guide the calling of and supervision of a pastor(s); (3) the district
71 representatives from each congregation that comprise a district are responsible to organize its district
72 council in coordination with its oversight leader, and to select an oversight leader in consultation with
73 the Executive Conference Minister; (4) the Faith and Life Commission promotes the Conference’s
74 shared beliefs and practices, and establishes the criteria for pastoral credentials; (5) the Ministerial
75 Leadership Credentials Commission is responsible to determine and grant pastoral credentials (except
76 for termination of credentials, which are decided by Conference Council); (6) persons being ordained
77 shall recognize the conference’s representational role in the ordination, and commit to accountability
78 to the Conference and to the oversight leader, as well as to the congregation; (7) the Delegate
79 Assembly has the authority to censure congregations when the Faith and Life Commission and
80 Conference Council have deemed their beliefs and practices are incompatible with the beliefs and
81 practices of the Conference.

82
83 Throughout this process of revising our Conference structure and polity, we have been guided by the
84 following goals and principles:

85
86 *Goals*

- 87 1. To clarify roles, authority, and decision-making in the conference.
- 88 2. To strengthen accountability within the conference.
- 89 3. To simplify the conference structure.
- 90 4. To strengthen conference unity in mission and spiritual practice.

91 *Principles*

- 92 1. That all authority must have appropriate and workable checks and balances.
93 2. That leadership and representation be as diverse and balanced as possible in terms of
94 gender, age, race/ethnicity, and geographic/social context.
95 3. That leadership be discerned not only for skills and Christian faith, but for a cooperative
96 and supportive spirit toward VMC.
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98 **Recommendation 1 - Delegate Assembly**

99 **Vision.** The Delegate Assembly is the ultimate governing authority of Virginia Mennonite Conference.
100 Congregational delegates meet in the winter and summer assemblies to represent the Virginia
101 Mennonite Conference constituency. The Delegate Assembly functions much like the Jerusalem
102 Council (Acts 15), where the gathered participants gave witness to their learning from their mission
103 endeavors, reflected on their experiences in relationship to their core faith commitments, and sought
104 to discern and follow God's will together. The function of this body is discernment for the good of the
105 community of faith as it lives out its shared vision and mission.
106

107 **Clarifications.**

- 108 1. The major purposes of Delegate Assembly are to: worship and fellowship; build a common
109 culture of faith and life; dream and tell stories of congregational and Conference mission;
110 confer on major issues facing the conference; fill conference leadership positions; ratify
111 positions, policies, and major decisions.
112 2. Delegates to Assembly are composed of congregationally-appointed delegates, credentialed
113 pastors actively serving a congregation, and oversight leaders. Conference Ministries (Eastern
114 Mennonite School, Virginia Mennonite Missions) and other Conference Endorsed Ministries are
115 encouraged to actively participate as non-delegates to Delegate Assembly without voting
116 privileges.
117 3. Reporting to the Delegate Assembly, Conference Council will bring major decisions made by
118 the Council (with the exception of credential decisions) to the Delegate Assembly for review
119 and ratification. In addition, Conference Council will determine if any additional reports from
120 other aspects of Conference life shall be brought to the Delegate Assembly.
121 4. Congregational delegates, active pastors, or district council representatives may bring
122 proposals to the Conference Council for review and possible inclusion in Delegate Assembly
123 deliberations.
124 5. Delegates shall be selected by their congregation for their exemplary Christian character, skill
125 in discernment and leadership, and shall hold a leadership position in the congregation.
126 6. The Delegate Assembly shall ratify the censure of a congregation when the Faith and Life
127 Commission and Conference Council have deemed their beliefs and practices to be
128 incompatible with those of the Conference.
129 7. Delegate Assembly meets at least twice a year.
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132 **Recommendation 2 - Conference Council**

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134 **Vision.** Conference Council will function as the executive body of Virginia Mennonite Conference. This
135 group of leaders carries the responsibility of conducting the work of the Conference in between
136 Conference Assemblies. It functions as a coordinating body for ministries associated with the
137 Conference and seeks to align the various programs and ministries with the mission of the Conference.
138 It is the legal entity of the Conference on all matters and exercises fiduciary responsibilities on behalf
139 of the Conference.

140
141 **Clarifications.**

- 142 1. Conference Council is the governing board of the Conference. It shall make decisions on behalf
143 of the Conference within the scope of authority granted to it by the Delegate Assembly.
144 Conference Council holds the legal and fiduciary responsibility of the Conference.
- 145 2. The Conference Council shall be composed of nine to twelve members including the moderator,
146 and moderator elect. Conference Council members shall serve a 3-year term with a maximum
147 of 2 consecutive terms.
- 148 3. Conference Council members shall be selected in the following way:
 - 149 a. The moderator, the chair of the Faith and Life Commission, the chair of the Gifts
150 Discernment Committee, and the Executive Conference Minister, shall serve as a
151 nominating committee to select up to eleven persons to serve on Conference Council.
152 Nominees shall receive a 66% affirmation by the Delegate Assembly.
 - 153 b. The Faith and Life Commission shall select an Oversight Leader to serve on Conference
154 Council.
 - 155 c. All existing districts shall be represented on Conference Council.
 - 156 d. The membership of Conference Council shall be followed as nearly as possible: 40%
157 minimum representation by gender, 25% persons of color, 25% under 40 years of age.
- 158 4. A moderator-elect will serve two years as moderator-elect and two years as moderator. At the
159 conclusion of a moderator's term, the individual may not immediately be reappointed as
160 moderator-elect.
- 161 5. Selected nominees to Conference Council shall be active members of a Virginia Mennonite
162 Conference congregation who demonstrate faith, knowledge and wisdom in their personal and
163 professional life. The nominating body shall monitor Conference Council membership for
164 gender, age, race/ethnicity, and geographical/social context.
- 165 6. Conference Council's leadership role shall include:
 - 166 a. Approve policies and recommendations for the Delegates to discern and ratify
 - 167 b. Develop Task Forces to achieve ministry and/or leadership objectives
 - 168 c. Final authority concerning termination of credentials that are so recommended by the
169 Ministerial Leadership Credential Commission in consultation with the Faith and Life
170 Commission
 - 171 d. Receive reports from Conference Ministries and Conference Endorsed Ministries
172 associated with Virginia Mennonite Conference and/or MC USA; however, these
173 organizations shall not appoint members to Conference Council
 - 174 e. Responsibility to hire, support, and/or terminate the Executive Conference Minister
175 after consultation with the Faith and Life Commission
 - 176 f. Evaluates the Executive Conference Minister's performance every three years in
177 consultation with the Faith and Life Commission. Council provides an Executive
178 Summary of the evaluation to the Delegate Assembly

181 **Recommendation 3 - Faith and Life Commission (FLC)**

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183 **Vision.** The Faith and Life Commission shall be a leadership body of oversight leaders and other
184 designated individuals who monitor, inform, and guide the faith and life of Conference. This
185 leadership body is tasked with leadership initiative in spiritual, doctrinal, and faith and life issues
186 facing the Conference, its leadership needs, and its constituency. Because the oversight leaders have a
187 direct supervisory relationship with credentialed leaders, it is important for them to provide input and
188 discernment on congregational leadership practices, pastoral practices, clergy competency, ministerial
189 credentials criteria, and ministerial misconduct.

190
191 **Clarifications.**

- 192 1. The Faith and Life Commission retains its present composition of oversight leaders (who
193 represent the districts and clusters to the conference), plus three at-large members selected
194 by the Gift Discernment Committee.
- 195 2. The duties of the FLC are to: promote and strengthen Anabaptist Christian faith and
196 spirituality among conference congregations; design Biblical, theological, spiritual conference-
197 wide studies for guiding congregational faith and life; resource districts, congregations and
198 leaders; provide guidelines for ministerial training, continued education, and
199 qualifications/competencies for ministry.
- 200 3. FLC shall provide the criteria to the MLCC for granting ministerial credentials;
- 201 4. The FLC shall design a process for creating a *Conference Covenant of Spiritual Practices*.
202 [Rather than grounding our unity only in statements of faith (such as *Confession of Faith in a*
203 *Mennonite Perspective*), it may be nurturing to also ground our unity in a commitment to
204 shared spiritual practices. The Covenant would stipulate spiritual practices expected of all
205 congregations and credentialed leaders in the Conference. The purpose of such a covenant is
206 not to foster spiritual legalism, but to foster a spiritual culture that brings us together.] The
207 Covenant would be approved by the CC and Delegate Assembly before implementation.
- 208 5. Oversight leaders report to and are under the supervision of the Executive Conference
209 Minister, who reviews oversight leaders.
- 210 6. The Executive Conference Minister and FLC consult with district councils in the selection,
211 hiring, and renewal of oversight leaders.

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213 **Recommendation 4 - Ministerial Leadership Credentials Commission (MLCC)**

214
215 **Vision.** The Ministerial Leadership Credentials Commission shall be a commission of Virginia
216 Mennonite Conference. As a commission it shall be entrusted with the responsibility of reviewing
217 individuals seeking ministerial credentials and granting ministerial credentials on behalf of
218 Conference. It shall replace and continue the work of the Credentials Committee, currently a
219 subcommittee of the Faith and Life Commission. The value of the Ministerial Leadership Credentials
220 Commission is the importance of this leadership body having a public profile for its leadership
221 procedures, and outcomes. The Faith and Life Commission shall identify the core competencies for
222 credentialed leaders that function as a guide for the Ministerial Leadership Credentials Commission.
223 The MLCC shall be involved in assessing ministerial misconduct, working closely with the Investigation
224 Team, the Executive Conference Minister, and the Faith and Life Commission during these difficult
225 decisions.

226
227

228 **Clarifications.**

- 229 1. The MLCC is a new commission (replacing the current Credentials Committee) to process
230 ministerial credentials. It shall report actions to both the Conference Council and the Faith and
231 Life Commission.
- 232 2. The MLCC is composed of six members. One of the members is an oversight leader selected by
233 the FLC; one is a credentialed minister or professional who works with clergy (such as a
234 therapist or human resources professional) selected by the Executive Conference Minister; the
235 other four are credentialed ministers selected by the Gifts Discernment Committee with
236 attention to gender and ethnic representation. All six require 66% approval by the Delegate
237 Assembly.
- 238 3. Granting Ministerial Credentials.
- 239 a. The FLC shall provide the primary criteria for granting ministerial credentials;
- 240 b. The MLCC facilitates the process of granting ministerial residential statuses including
241 ministerial status changes;
- 242 c. When a candidate's or pastor's credential are being processed, the calling congregation
243 is allowed at least one representative to be present for consultation, along with the
244 candidate's/pastor's oversight leader.
- 245 d. If a person under consideration for credentialing or review objects to the status
246 determined by MLCC, he/she can appeal to FLC for review.
- 247 4. Ministerial Misconduct Review.
- 248 a. The MLCC will review a credential's status under at least two circumstances: (1) when
249 there is a charge of "misconduct": a perceived violation of ministerial ethics as outlined
250 in *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership* (pages 55-70); (2) when there is a
251 charge of "credential misuse": teaching or official conduct by a credentialed person that
252 appears to violate Conference policy or essential positions of faith.
- 253 b. When there is a charge of ministerial misconduct, the Executive Conference Minister
254 selects an Investigative Team in accordance with MC USA policy and the process
255 outlined in VMC document procedures. The Investigative Team reports its findings to
256 the MLCC. The report is also forwarded to the FLC for comment and feedback so as to
257 advise the MLCC on a proper credential status determination and course of action.
- 258 c. When there is a charge of credential misuse, the formation of an investigative team is
259 not normally required. The MLCC will review the credential based on information
260 available, conversation with the credentialed person, his/her congregation and
261 Oversight Leader, the Executive Conference Minister, and in consultation with the FLC.

262
263 **Recommendation 5 – Virginia Mennonite Missions (VMissions)**

264
265 **Vision.** VMissions has been a mission agency on behalf of Virginia Mennonite Conference since
266 1919. During these 100 years of history, the nature of the relationship has periodically changed as
267 circumstances required, in conversation with each organization's leadership body. In the current
268 arrangement, VMissions is considered both a Commission and a Conference Ministry within VMC. At
269 this juncture, a process to redefine and clarify the nature of the relationship is needed to ensure a
270 healthy and robust partnership into the future, as VMC and VMissions seek to engage in God's
271 mission together.

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273

274 **Clarifications.**

- 275 1. Given that VMissions is its own separately incorporated non-profit organization, VMissions
276 shall no longer be designated a Commission of VMC. Accordingly, clarification is needed to
277 define the nature of the relationship, whether as a Conference Ministry of VMC, or some other
278 category. In the meantime, VMissions shall continue to provide reports and seek discernment
279 from Conference Council and the Delegate Assembly.
- 280 2. VMC and VMissions leaders will meet to clarify the organizational, relational, and missional
281 components of their working relationship. Both entities remain committed to operating in
282 ways that contribute to the short-term and long-term health of the other. The process will
283 result in A Memo of Understanding between VMC and VMissions, to be evaluated every three
284 years.
285

286 **Recommendation - 6 Conference Districts**

287 **Vision.** Districts are regional collaborative bodies that exist to undertake joint mission endeavors,
288 credentialed leader resourcing, and fellowship by affiliated congregations. Districts are guided by an
289 oversight leader who provides supervision of credentialed leaders, facilitates collaborative ministry,
290 and represents the ministry needs of the District through participation on the Faith and Life
291 Commission. Districts provide regional collaboration for supervision of pastors, resourcing
292 credentialed and lay leadership, and financial support for the oversight leader. Districts determine
293 their organizational structures to sustain their leadership ministries.
294

295 **Clarifications.**

- 296 1. The Conference is organized into districts, each represented by at least one oversight leader.
297 The oversight leader consulting with the district's pastors and/or lay leaders design a district
298 council.
- 299 2. District councils may organize themselves in ways that address the needs, mission, and goals
300 of their districts so long as they meet the following criteria and functions:
- 301 a. Mutual support for congregations and leadership; resourcing leaders; facilitating missional
302 initiatives within the district; processing and discernment of conference issues; preparing
303 delegates for Assembly.
- 304 b. Selection of an oversight leader (in consultation with the Executive Conference Minister
305 and FLC) and provision for remuneration for services (with a VMC-provided pay-scale or
306 fee-for-service).
- 307 c. Oversight leader has a dual supervisory relationship with the Executive Conference
308 Minister and the District Officers or designee.
- 309 d. Recommendation of a qualified district representative to serve on the VMissions Board.
- 310 e. Completion of an annual report, submitted to FLC, outlining goals (in keeping with VMC's
311 Vision and Mission Statements) for the coming year and an assessment of whether goals
312 were met from the previous year. The report shall include a list of current officers.
- 313 3. Composition: preferably four to twelve congregations. Districts may be based on geography,
314 affinity, or a specific ministry or mission.
- 315 4. Congregations may request a change in their district affiliation or propose the formation of a
316 new district (to be approved by CC, with the support of the congregations making up the
317 district the congregation wishes to join).
- 318 5. Virginia Mennonite Conference provides support and accountability for credentialed leaders
319 with Special Ministry status. Credentialed Leaders with Special Ministry Credentials are placed
320 in one of the following Clusters: Administration, Chaplain, and Teaching. These Clusters will
321 be included in the redesign for the purpose of leadership support and accountability.

322 **Recommendation 7 – Discontinue the Congregational Life Commission**

323
324 **Vision.** The Congregational Life Commission has evolved throughout its history from an educational
325 resource entity, to a collaborating or coordinating body of resource entities, and back to an educational
326 program board; however, as we move into the future, there is a desire to reduce the standing
327 committee function within VMC. It is therefore our recommendation that the Congregational Life
328 Commission be discontinued. The ministry previously filled by the CLC will be filled by Task Forces
329 appointed by the Conference Council and/or the Faith and Life Commission.

330
331 **Summary.** The Restructure for Missions Task Force is submitting these seven recommendations for
332 discernment to the Delegates of Virginia Mennonite Conference. It remains our hope to provide time
333 for table conversation that reflects the significance of these adaptations. The next steps in our process
334 are:

- 335 a. Winter Delegate Assembly – discernment and feedback
336 b. Restructure For Missions – receive the feedback and make necessary adaptations
337 c. By-laws Committee – draft new by-laws for Delegate review
338 d. Summer Delegate Assembly –
339 o Review modifications of the Recommendations
340 o Review and provide feedback to by-laws
341 o Potential ratification of Recommendations

342
343 Restructuring For Mission Committee
344 Elroy Miller, Chair; Ryan Ahlgrim, Pearl Hartman, Beryl Jantzi, Aaron Kauffman, Joe Longacher,
345 and Clyde Kratz, Executive Conference Minister.