Virginia Mennonite Conference

**CONFERENCE COUNCIL**

**MINUTES**

November 20 & 21, 2015

Weavers – Shady Oak Building

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Scott Beachy, treasurer; Floyd Blosser, Central District; Kevin Gasser, assistant moderator and Southern District; Joseph Jeon, Potomac District; Aaron Kauffman, President-Virginia Mennonite Missions; Leroy Kauffman, TCK District: David King, Northern District; Edith Shenk Kuhns, secretary; Paul Leaman, Eastern Mennonite School; Barbara Moyer Lehman, Constituency Life Council; Mary Jo Lehman, Eastern Carolina; Carl Mericle, Eastern (Virginia) District; Elroy Miller, moderator; Phyllis Miller, chair-Virginia Mennonite Missions; Matt Schwartz, Harrisonburg; H. Michael Shenk, Faith & Life Commission

**STAFF PRESENT:** Clyde Kratz, executive conference minister; and Anieta McCracken, administrative services manager

1. **CALL TO ORDER**: Elroy Miler, moderator, called the November 20-21, 2015, meeting of Conference Council to order at 7:01 p.m.
2. **DEVOTIONS**. Edith Shenk-Kuhns commented on Mary’s crisis pregnancy. How did she tell her momma? How did she tell her story? Mary’s song hints that she had knowledge of scripture even though, as a female, education by a rabbi was not granted her. Mary was probably about 45 or 50 years old at the time of the wedding of Cana, in that culture an old woman. Nothing in this passage is said about Joseph; perhaps Mary was a single mom at this point. Imagine the sorrow Mary felt when her son Jesus was called insane, beaten and nailed to the cross. She was puzzled at times, and she was touched by the Spirit. So may we be.
3. **AGENDA**. The agenda was reviewed and approved as submitted.
4. **MINUTES**. Edith Shenk Kuhns, secretary, reviewed highlights from the minutes of the September 18 and 19, 2015, meeting.
5. **ACTION. On motion minutes of the September 18 & 19, 2015, meeting of Conference Council were approved as submitted. APPROVED**
6. **REPORT FROM THE EXECUTIVE CONFERENCE MINISTER .** Clyde Kratz, executive conference minister, highlighted themes and key points from his written report (attached).
7. **Mountain View Mennonite Church (Southern District, Sherando VA).** Beryl Jantzi and Clyde will be meeting with members of the Mountain View Mennonite Church. The congregation appears to be headed toward leaving the Conference on the basis of "inerrancy of scripture".
8. **Self Care.** Asked about self care given Clyde’s heavy schedule, Clyde stated that he plans to take most of the next week (Thanksgiving week) off; he noted that he has already accumulated an average 50 hours/week for the month of November. Clyde also took a few extra days when visiting the Conference of the Trinidad/Tobago Conference.
9. **A Way Forward for Virginia Mennonite Conference.** Clyde presented a white paper written to provide protocols in response to the resolutions on Membership and Forbearance approved at MC USA last summer. Clyde outlined VMC polity and the historical differences between VMC and Lancaster Conference, differences that make it easier for VMC to stay within MC USA and harder to pull away than it might be for Lancaster.

**DISCUSSION**

* The draft white paper outlines a process for bringing VMC delegates, at the February delegate session, into the discussion, to revisit the Bylaws (including the statement that congregations make decisions on membership), and to share how the Conference remains aligned with the Membership and Forbearance resolutions and is maintaining VMC’s longstanding teaching position.
* As a calming step, an introductory yet definitive statement that VMC is not changing its teaching position might be helpful. Such a statement could provide opportunity to affirm our unity, encourage delegates that VMC remains healthy, and to remind delegates that all are needed.
* We need to maintain integrity in our speech, and be aware of the potential reaction that may arise when delegates are reminded of the statements in the Bylaws, and *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective.*
* VMC has gone through a parallel process before. Then the strength of the VMC polity and teaching was tested as we worked through the military question and came out with a statement on that issue, including a statement that we would not credential a military leader.
* Responding to a question, Clyde stated that his rationale for one-on-one conversations with people self-identified as LGBTQ is to ensure no decisions are made about them without their knowledge.
* Clyde was encouraged to request counsel and preparation before holding these discussions, to encourage FLC to determine the process, and to avoid triangulation as that will diminish pastor-congregation relationships.

**NEXT STEP. By mid-December Clyde will prepare a revised version of the white paper for Conference Council's feedback, the goal to have a document ready to present at Winter Delegate Session.**

**ACTION. By a show of hands Conference Council members affirmed their support (a majority indicated strong support) for moving ahead so long as such conversations are handled with caution, counsel, and a pastoral approach. AFFIRMED**

1. **Mission & Vision Task Force.** The Mission & Vision Task Force report will be sent to Conference Council via email so that there is an opportunity for feedback before Delegate Session.
2. **RECESS.** Conference Council recessed for the evening at 9:00 p.m. and resumed on November 21 at 8:00 a.m., by reading from Psalm 25, and opening with prayer.
3. **GIFTS DISCERNMENT COMMITTEE.** Anieta McCracken, administrative services manager, reported for the Gifts Discernment Committee. Simone Horst has been named to serve on the History Committee, and is available to fill the position. Conversations are in place about a potential nominee for the Gifts Discernment Committee.
4. **FAITH AND LIFE COMMISSION.** H. Michael Shenk, Secretary, reported on behalf of the Faith and Life Commission (see report attached).

Mike also reviewed highlights from the November Pastoral Leadership Consultation, discussed at the last FLC meeting. One observation from Sam Weaver’s historical statistics was a rhythm of churches planted for a time followed by a time of churches leaving. The statistics seem to indicate that missions do create excitement and growth, but also bring their own issues as we learn to minister to new cultural groups.

Another idea coming out of the Consultation was that of congregations of refuge, a place where potential members or leaders can have a safe place for a period of time until issues are sorted out.

**Questions**: How do we ensure that all voices are heard? How do we manage the perceptions developed if we converse, for example, with people self-identified as LGBTQ? How might we engage them in the conversations without setting them up as an advocate if that is not their goal? What is the relationship between costly discipleship and congregations leaving?

1. **EXECUTIVE SESSION.** Council members went into executive session to discuss a matter involving the credentials of a VMC credentialed leader.
2. **HISTORICAL COMMITTEE.** The Historical Committee provided a written report (attached).
3. **REPORT OF VIRGINIA MENNONITE MISSIONS**. Aaron Kauffman, president, reported on behalf of Virginia Mennonite Missions (see attached). He and Clyde continue working on the partnership between VMC and VMMissions, and VMMissions invited Clyde to attend an upcoming board meeting.

Aaron sought counsel on the following:

* In response to VMCs decision to discontinue the funding for the MC USA director position, effective September 1, 2016, what counsel do members have for a direct channel of input to VMC on Skip Tobin’s work and what counsel do you have for soliciting financial support for that position?
* Clyde and Aaron are also working on a church planting strategy; what considerations and counsel do you have for a timeline for developing a comprehensive church planting strategy?
* What other ideas do you have for clarifying the relationship between VMC & VMMissions?
* Recommendations for potential members-at-large to serve on the VMMissions board were also requested.

**DISCUSSION**

* Could the Kids' Clubs ministries be replicated or extended in some way to outlying districts? Who in those areas could help lead and organize events in those areas?
* Oversight for 264 OSH (264 Old South High, and the former Peace House) has moved to Eastside church. The name change to an address provided a clearer understanding and identification of support and marketing strategies, helped clarify the entity responsible for support and oversight, and created a name that more clearly aligned with the original vision. There has been more outreach through that space than happened in the last five years.
* Vision 95, a church planting initiative, was a denominational initiative. The desired outcome for the conversations between Aaron and Clyde is a local church planting initiative. It will be challenging to create plans that align with the forthcoming Visions and Missions Task Force's report.
* Crucial questions include: What can VMMissions do as a missions agency of VMC? At what point does VMMission take leadership? At what point does VMMissions provide support and merely live out VMC vision?
* Can VMMissions continue to operate as both a Commission and a conference ministry? Doing so provides an opportunity for former VMC leaders to stay in relationship in some way with the Conference; one challenge is keeping projects, roles, and lines of authority and communication clear.
* Question: Does VMMissions have VMC support for soliciting funding for Skip's salary? Caution: with a smaller pool of funds, soliciting that support can affect the fundraising pool and ability in VMC, and also for missionaries raising their own support.
* Asked about the separation of publications, Clyde stated that *Pathways* and *Transforming* each provides opportunities for both entities to tell their own stories and provide a greater depth of reporting.
* It is easier to find funds for projects and people, but much more difficult to raise funds for the organizations that administer those projects and people. In Clyde’s fundraising efforts, it will be important to use narrative and story to encourage donor support for the administrative functions needed to orchestrate VMC projects.

**ACTION. By a show of hands, Conference Council noted its strong support for the conversations between VMMissions and VMC, and the intent to retain missional focus. AFFIRMED**

1. **TREASURER'S REPORT** (see report attached). R. Scott Beachy, conference treasurer, handed out the financial report for the first two months of the September 1, 2015, to August 31, 2016, fiscal year.

The Conference is about $2,000 in the red. Congregational giving is down about $26,000 from this time last year; this may, in part, be a timing issue.

Office expenses are under budget as VMC is awaiting a couple bills from VMMissions for rent, and Conference share of salaries.

Scott also presented and explained the endowment report. By consensus members decided the endowment report should be kept confidential. Since the endowment policy regarding funding usage can be confusing, making this report public may be detrimental to the revenue generation process necessary for keeping the Conference solvent.

It was noted that monies paid out through the Ministerial Training Trust Fund (MTTF) are reported to District oversight leaders and chairs via the annual thank you letter and report.

Strong affirmation was given to Scott for the transparency and clarity with which he has provided financial reports.

1. **OTHER BUSINESS**

Lament was expressed over the inability of TCK and Eastern Carolina Districts to be involved in VMC youth ministries; an evening meal and overnight volunteer housing the day before youth events would be helpful.

Respectfully submitted,

Edith Shenk Kuhns

Secretary