

**REPORT OF THE
TASK FORCE FOR A FINANCIALLY SUSTAINABLE
VIRGINIA MENNONITE CONFERENCE**

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PROCESS: LISTENING TO LEARN

LISTENING FOR GOD IN THE FAMILY OF VIRGINIA MENNONITE CONFERENCE

*The loftier the building, the deeper the foundation must be.*¹
—Thomas a Kempis

Inception & Commission

Virginia Mennonite Conference (the Conference) collected less financial contributions from congregations and individual donors than it spent during the operational years of 2007—2011. Deficits ranged from \$2,939 to \$29,734. As the 2011-12 fiscal year approached, the Conference Finance Committee put forward a responsive budget utilizing endowment funding to underwrite anticipated deficits. After discussion in session, July 6, 2012, Conference Council decided to appoint a task force to recommend changes for the financial sustainability of the Conference. They envisioned a six-month period for fact-finding, analysis, and reporting. The Conference Minister and Coordinator were tasked with setting up the task force. Naming it the *Task Force for a Financially Sustainable VMC*, Owen Burkholder, Conference Minister, and Sarah Bixler, Conference Coordinator, invited and appointed the following individuals to participate.

James Åkerson, Chair (at-large member; Pastor—Beldor MC)
Daryl Brubaker (Virginia Mennonite Missions board member)
Matthew Hunsberger (Congregational Life Commission member)
Glen Kauffman (Conference Treasurer)
Joe Longacher (past Faith and Life Commission chair)
Regina Schweitzer (at-large member).

Early Reframing of the Task Force Commission

The first meeting of the task force took place September 14, 2012. Owen and Sarah provided documents and presentations to orient the members to their task. The members set up subsequent meetings beginning that month. Early in the process, they reckoned that the issue facing the Conference was not primarily financial, but rather of perceived value² and support. Simply put, people prioritize and pay for what they hold dear. As such, the job of Conference Council should not be to convince constituents to pay the bill for running the Conference but rather to (1) help districts, congregations, and agencies appreciate the value added by the

¹ Source: Quotations Book website, accessed February 2, 2013:
<http://quotationsbook.com/assets/shared/pdf/tag/planning.pdf>

² “Perceived value” falls within a business motif. As the task force proceeded, they came to appreciate a motif of family or church where loyalty and desire for oneness is key.

work of the Conference office, (2) measure constituent responses, and (3) within the broad platform necessary for leadership, adjust Conference staffing and services to better meet district and congregational needs.

The task force envisioned a listening process by which districts and agencies would be provided information regarding Conference services and operations while they were surveyed about their perceptions. That broadened approach was accepted first by Conference staff and then Conference Council, October 19, 2012. A survey form was created to facilitate the listening process; it is found in the appendices under the “District Surveys” section.

District Surveys

All nine districts were approached for listening and survey. Two district bishops chose to conduct the process without involving their delegates. Bishop Francisco of Calvary District completed the survey and emailed the results to the task force. Bishop Schrock-Hurst of Potomac District met with a task force member and completed the survey in conversation. The remaining seven districts scheduled times in their district delegate sessions for conducting the survey. The process typically required 40-50 minutes to complete. Several districts extended that time with their conversation and input. In typical fashion, one task force member facilitated the conversations while a second took notes. There were two occasions when only one member facilitated and took notes, including Eastern Carolina and Tennessee-Carolina-Kentucky districts. The “Schedule of External Task Force Meetings” is found in the appendices under the “District Surveys” section.

Agencies and the Conference Office

A subcommittee of the task force met with current Conference staff during the period November 9—30, 2012. The objective was to become more familiar with office organization and function, and to gain staff input about core functions and ideas for improvement. An outline for conversation was used to initiate those interviews. Two former staff members were also interviewed, in November 2012 and February 2013. Those were more in the style of open-ended conversations with a few prompted questions. Results of both are included in an appendices section, “Conversations with Virginia Mennonite Conference Staff.”

Separately, Virginia Mennonite Missions representatives were interviewed. Loren Horst, VMM President, Skip Tobin, Director of VMM USA Missions, and VMM board members overseeing USA Missions participated in a survey meeting, November 16, 2012. That interview was open-ended, conversational, and engendered helpful thoughts as among working peers in mission. Additional conversations with the VMM President took place at other times.

The task force desired to understand what other conferences within the Mennonite Church USA (MC-USA) were experiencing regarding financial support and organizational change. Owen accepted the task of contacting several conferences with a set of questions germane to our study. He recommended contacting Western, Central Plains, Indiana-Michigan, Ohio, and Franconia conferences; and fashioned

the set of questions they would each receive. His email to the conferences went out September 19, 2012. With follow-up telephone conversations he gathered what you can find in the last section of the appendices, "Questions for Other Conference Ministers." Franconia alone did not respond.

Timeframe of Activities

- Internal task force meetings, September 14, 2012—March 5, 2013
- Meetings with districts and agencies, November 3, 2012—January 24, 2013
- Interviews with present and former staff members, November 2012—February 2013
- Email and telephone conversations with conferences by Owen Burkholder, September—December 2012
- Formulation of Findings, January 2013
- Formulation of Recommendations and other documentation, February—March 2013
- Progress reporting to Conference Council, October 19, 2012 and January 11, 2013; report of findings to the Winter Delegate Session, February 2, 2013; and final reporting to Conference Council, March 16, 2013.

Challenges of Committees Within the Conference

One of the challenges noted in our fact-finding surveys is that Conference committees find it hard to convene since committee members are spread out over the large geographical area of the Conference. We too faced that challenge. Ours was perhaps not a good model but may reflect the norm. We always met in the Harrisonburg area and utilized teleconferencing to help bring us together.

Synthesis and Conclusions

The survey and fact-finding process was not perfect. Nonetheless, we solicited input from the diverse personalities and locales that make up our Conference's history and cultures. The responses were vigorous, allowing significant learnings. Our process allowed us to meet face-to-face with district delegates and pastors, Conference staff, and affiliated agencies. We believe the efforts were much appreciated where district and agency representatives and staffing felt pleased to express their joys and frustrations regarding the organization.

The task force met on several occasions to gather items of information, and make sense of the whole. The telephone, email, and teleconferencing helped us to complete in our tasks. This document represents a consensus of our thinking.

We all are Virginia Mennonite Conference. Every congregation, district, and agency is part of the church family to one other. We pray the process of arriving at these conclusions, and this final document, can be used to bless the Conference.

FINDINGS: IDENTIFYING THE STRANDS

FINDINGS FROM LISTENING TO THE FAMILY OF VIRGINIA MENNONITE CONFERENCE

*Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty.
Anyone who keeps learning stays young.*³
—Henry Ford

It should not surprise anyone that Mennonites are a diverse lot. In spite of Harold Bender's best intentions and work to fashion a unified denomination⁴, we remain a gathering of individuals. Recognizing our call to express our radical faith in Jesus Christ by living out the precepts of his Sermon on the Mount, we speak of peace and love in fundamental, ethical ways instead of as broad ideals. For a variety of reasons we are no longer the *quiet in the land*. Our best impulses now run toward engaging the world for Christ. That engagement, however, changes us too. To be faithful, we must evaluate those changes for good and ill, and it causes lively discussions. Amid them let us hold tight as a family of God, being the church to one another.

Initial Findings

1. The Virginia Mennonite Conference By-laws, Article II, Section 4 (Staff Officers), 4.2 stipulates that the Conference Coordinator shall report to the Conference Moderator. The current arrangement of having the Conference Coordinator report to the Conference Minister is therefore not supported.
2. The precipitating event for this study was most likely the recessing national economy and its impact upon individuals and families in our congregations. So-called belt-tightening took place that impacted support donations to the Conference. That said the task force believes the pressing issue facing Conference is of perceived value. Simply put, people prioritize and pay for what they hold dear—in good times and bad.

Findings Via District Conversations

3. General Perceptions
 - a. In the broadest sense, Virginia Mennonite Conference is an association of congregations relating to each other.

³ Source: Brainy Quote website, accessed February 3, 2013:
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/henryford103927.html#ypvQJZKB0Th74rFx.99>

⁴ Cornelius J. Dyck. *An Introduction to Mennonite History*. 3rd ed. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993; and Albert N. Keim. *Harold S. Bender: 1897-1962*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998.

- b. The Conference office identity is composed of its functions, including: credentialing oversight, convening Assemblies, resourcing congregations on a variety of topics (especially missions), assisting congregations to relate to one another, and acting as the formal connection to MC-USA. These are universally recognized as part of the Conference identity.
 - c. Districts appreciate the mission-mindedness of Conference and especially enjoy the presence of VMM within Conference. VMM is seen as a very positive force in Conference affairs.
 - d. Congregations and districts feel very well served by their Overseers and district structure. By contrast, there is far less perceived involvement by Conference in district and congregational life. Conference suffers by the success of its several implemented ideas (independent district structure, VMM, etc.). By nature, an individual and organization intent on cheering, guiding, and resourcing the good ideas of others cannot gracefully toot its own horn.
 - e. There is a general desire that Conference step up to provide vision and focus for districts and congregations. The sentiment comes in many forms. "The Conference needs to be church to us." "We need to create a culture of owners." "We need to reclaim our sense of family [at Assemblies]." "How will [Conference] lead us in the Great Commission?"
4. Responses Specific to the District Surveys (responses of one-to-several but not all districts)
- a. The greater the distance from Harrisonburg:
(1) the greater is the feeling that Conference is not mindful of them and that congregations close to Harrisonburg absorb all Conference services;
(2) the greater is the desire among district representatives for youth retreats, youth programming, and youth ministry resourcing.
 - b. Relations between people and congregations are enhanced by the Conference. It is seen as the glue holding diverse congregations together.
 - c. Districts would like more "face time" with Conference staff.
 - d. There is appreciation for connection and direction provided by Conference. However, a voiced minority is wary of Conference's "agenda." Another voiced minority does not feel well connected to the center.
 - e. Districts acknowledge that VMC is healthier and more cohesive than what they know, and have experienced, of other conferences.
 - f. Why have the Conference? Make it a line item within VMM.
 - g. Conference services used most frequently (in ranked order):
 - retreats for pastors, youth, women, men, etc.

- planning and planting new churches
 - credentialing of pastors/ministers
 - resourcing, encouragement and help
 - connecting congregations
 - Assembly
 - offering and managing the ministry training trust funds
 - assisting congregations in stress
 - facilitated scriptural discernment and conversations on hot topics
 - youth ministry
 - the Congregational Resource Center
 - helping congregations to be more effective in missions
 - connecting us to MC-USA
 - coordination of the pastors' Ministerial Training Trust Fund (MTTF)
 - forwarding contributions to proper agencies
- [See other responses in the Synthesis document of the appendices].

- h. Conference could have been more helpful in the following ways (in ranked order):
- Conference should be mindful that districts close to Harrisonburg receive more assistance by merely being close to the office. There is desire by districts far from Harrisonburg for increased Conference attention. There is a call for teleconferencing so that district representatives may participate without travel.
 - Conference should become more active and involved, not waiting for an invitation to reach out to congregations/districts in stress.
 - Institute regular visits to districts by Conference staff.
 - One district felt that past Conference involvement seemed unhelpful, not culturally sensitive, and punitive.
- [See other responses in the Synthesis document of the appendices].
- i. Complaints against Conference:
- "Why have it?" It is unnecessary. District provides our services.
 - It's old, full of "white-hairs" and too liberal
 - It caters to congregations near Harrisonburg
- [See other responses in the Synthesis document of the appendices].
- j. The "face of Conference" is (in ranked order):
- Diane Bowman
 - Owen Burkholder
 - District Overseers
 - receptionists
 - the website
 - Earlene/Gloria/Skip
 - Sarah Bixler
 - their own pastor.

Findings Among Agencies (VMM)

5. Virginia Mennonite Missions is an independent mission commission of the Conference. It feels secure in its relationship with Conference. Its President, Loren Horst, believes VMM's health and identity is closely linked to Conference's constellation of congregations.
6. Ninety percent of VMM USA Missions' activities are conducted within the Conference.
7. VMM is very concerned that adjustments in Conference staffing and programming will impact its own operations due to the many shared positions, shared expenses, and operational aspects.
8. VMM wonders if Conference understands the varied cultures of its districts. Looking from the outside, Conference seems to cater to the several districts surrounding Harrisonburg.

Findings Among Conference Staff and Board Members (Current & Past)

9. Staff members believe the primary functions of Conference are the following:
 - a. Connectivity: congregations to each other, to districts; connecting districts to Conference Council and Faith & Life Commission; conference and conference staff to MC-USA; congregations to the agencies birthed by Conference; and communication and networking.
 - b. Continued development and promotion of the mission/vision. VMM and Conference work well together; Conference may not be recognized for being the entity that gives VMM its platform.
 - c. Helping individual congregations do larger things than they could alone, i.e. mission work.
 - d. Encouraging, resourcing and supporting congregations.
 - e. Retreats/Assembly.
 - f. [The task force would add another section here to note the activity of credentialing pastors and ministers, and continuing oversight of such as district organizations call for assistance. It is possible the staff viewed this activity as part of "d. Encouraging, resourcing and supporting congregations."]
10. Comments by staff (or board) members on Conference services:
 - a. Leadership credentialing and placement is the one concrete service that Conference provides.
 - b. Developing districts and the role of overseers in providing support to pastors is highly beneficial.

- c. Conference serves as the “regulatory” body for the churches and is the link with MC-USA.
- d. While there is value in Assembly, there is a decreased attendance. There is no longer the family emphasis or camping component. Among staff, there is no vision or energy to enliven or increase it.
- e. There is perceived value in retreats (pastors, youth, women, etc.) and topical seminars (human sexuality, suicide prevention, aging, etc.).
- f. There is uncertainty among staff whether the layperson understands the roles of districts and conference.
- g. There is uncertainty among staff whether the layperson knows the difference between Conference and VMM.
- h. The Resource Center at EMU is underutilized but has many repeat users.
- i. The Conference Minister position has been molded around the gifts of the incumbent. The CM creates and prioritizes position responsibilities and tests them with the Moderator. The CM serves as a pastor and friend to the system as the new generation of bishops and overseers seeks more resources from the CM.
- j. Conference provides minimal staffing support to the Resource Center but patrons have full-time access due to EMU funding sources.
- k. Regarding the archives, when congregations send “too much” material it requires a heavy workload to sift for the essentials.
- l. The staff workload increases around Assembly. The flexing of work time and between Conference/VMM during that period is beneficial.
- m. The annual collection of information and data from congregations is a large workload using hardcopy media. Is hardcopy gathering still needed? Does Conference (or MC-USA) actually use the information and data?
- n. The Conference office has benefitted from shared facilities and staffing with VMM. *Connections* magazine would not be as professional if it was a stand-alone publication of Conference. However, shared staffing roles within the organizations can also create challenges as an employee may work for several persons.
- o. Conference uses 100-percent of the income and capital gains generated by their reserve funds during a given budget year. That is unlike most nonprofits that use a very small but stable portion of total endowments.

Findings Among Other Conferences

(Western, Central Plains, Indiana-Michigan, and Ohio conferences)

- 11. a. Other conferences within MC-USA are experiencing financial strain and have attempted reorganizations in response.

- b. Their methods are highly varied. The results of their attempts do not generally seem successful at this time.
- c. Four conferences similar to VMC cut back staffing between 1 – 2 FTE (they had ranged 5 – 7 FTE). Two have since added back staff by 0.5 FTE. Learning: well-planned and vetted adjustments are needed to avoid conference turmoil.
- d. All of these conferences employ regional leadership (bishops/overseers) out of their offices. (VMC has 1 FTE conference minister out of the conference office while 15 part-time bishops/overseers are employed through the district structure.)
Learning: the VMC dispersed bishop/overseer system keeps the services of Conference closer to the congregations with less financial responsibility at the Conference office.
- e. One conference's moderator and conference minister are visiting the financial leadership of every congregation to gain back their support. Learning: "It is like turning a big ship," says that conference minister, to successfully adjust conference affairs.

Findings That Flow From the Mennonite Church USA—*Our Purposeful Plan*

12. MC-USA has developed, in *Our Purposeful Plan*⁵, a rich set of desired outcomes and goals that are worthy of our discernment and energy. Striving to achieve those outcomes will benefit the Conference as a whole.

Our Purposeful Plan

The Mennonite Church USA developed a set of desired outcomes and goals to strive for in the denomination, area conferences and congregations. Listing the desired outcomes here is a means of connecting us to the larger body of our denomination in our Conference deliberations.

Desired Outcomes (pages 21-26)

1. Christian Formation. Outcome we seek: to increase our capacity as a community of faith to use the scriptures as a faithful guide for daily living.

2. Christian Community. Outcome we seek: the Church makes visible the reign of God by reflecting the gracious presence and power of God in all of its corporate gatherings as we deepen our capacity to engage in discernment and deal with differences in a Christ-like manner.

3. Holistic Witness (includes peace and justice witness, evangelism and church planting, health and other service ministries. International ministries are engaged by congregations and conferences primarily in collaboration with Mennonite Mission

⁵ *Our Purposeful Plan* website, accessed February 6, 2013: http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/PurposefulPlan_2012Feb22_ApprovedByEB.pdf

Network. Outcome we seek: the church witnesses to the wholeness of God's salvation made possible through the gospel of Jesus Christ via an interwoven fabric of activities.

4. Stewardship. Outcome we seek: as stewards, we will reflect God's abundance through our generosity in achieving missional goals across all parts of the church.

5. Leadership Development. Outcome we seek: church members with leadership gifts are called, trained and nurtured in Anabaptist theology and practice, and work together in various teams so that both credentialed and lay leaders can be empowered to fulfill the church's missional vocation.

6. Undoing Racism and Advancing Intercultural Transformation. Outcome we seek: to overcome antipathy and alienation among different cultural groups through a dismantling of individual and systematic racism in our church, making the way for people from every Racial/Ethnic group to have just and equitable access to church resources, positions, and information as manifestations of the one new humanity we have in Christ.

7. Church-to-church Relationships. Outcome we seek: to give and receive gifts within the body of Christ as a witness to the unity to which God calls us as we pursue God's mission in the world. We will nurture relationships with others in the Anabaptist family, both in the U.S. and globally, and with the broader body of Christ.

RECOMMENDATIONS: MOVING FORWARD

UNITING THE FAMILY OF GOD IN VIRGINIA MENNONITE CONFERENCE

*A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus.*⁶
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

This report and set of recommendations is most likely the beginning of a longer discussion. It is our Mennonite way. The task force encourages the Conference to make its way boldly and in great hope. In the end it will not be the adjustments of an office that carry the day. Hope is in the leadership, unity, and keen energy of a family and church to one another, serving as Jesus Christ leads.

These recommendations are grouped into the categories that we find best describe the modal activities of the Conference office. Those categories of activities include the following:

- Conference Office Organization and Leadership
- Celebrating Conference as Church, Family, and Owners
- Promoting Missions and Missional Thinking
- Leadership and Resourcing for Pastors
- Resourcing Congregations
- Connecting Outside Virginia Mennonite Conference.

Findings from the previous chapter are cited in brackets to indicate from where these recommendations flow.

Conference Office Organization and Leadership

Observations and Affirmations

We applaud the professionalism, hard work, and collaboration of the Virginia Mennonite Conference office staff. Their dedication and hard work results in outputs of high quality, making the overall Conference a highly functional and effective unit. We believe that with any organization there are improvements to be made. We recommend the following.

Recommendations

1. **Refine the Conference vision and mission to reflect our next chapter of organizational identity. With that foundation, develop a strategic plan that serves as the roadmap to fulfill the vision and mission for the next 3-5 years. Enhance Conference Council identity and function.**

[Findings: 3e, 4f, 4i, 9b, 9g, 9i]

⁶ Source: Brainy Quotes website, accessed February 1, 2013:
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/martinluth166528.html#hWBEmq1Wk1s8Fywq.99>

Steps to Implementation:

A. Proceed to retain a Conference leader in one of two ways. Either (1) hire an interim Conference Minister/Executive Director for an 18-24 month period to guide a planning process or (2) hire a permanent Conference Minister/Executive Director with the primary initial duty of producing a Conference vision and strategic plan. In either case the planning process should be with the full involvement of the Conference Council. Additional responsibilities of the CM/ED include Conference administrative oversight, fundraising, and networking.

Discussion: Question: Can't this document be the Conference strategic plan?

Answer: This document has many elements of a strategic plan if fully adopted and embraced by Conference Council. As it stands it has not had the full involvement of Conference Council in its thinking and creation.

Conference Council should therefore either embrace components of this plan or create one of its own that will guide the way forward with clear vision, full buy-in, and keen energy.

B. Consider adopting and expanding the missional vision statement of Mennonite Church USA. Recommended wording:
God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world. As congregations and districts within Virginia Mennonite Conference we remain connected to support and nurture one another in God's missional call.

Discussion: The first sentence is wholly from MC-USA. The second expands the vision specific to Virginia Mennonite Conference (and may be helpful in light of recent events).

C. After adoption of a Conference vision and strategic plan, evaluate the Conference staffing model and modify it to ensure the structure will support implementation of the plan.

D. Conference Council is the essential nexus for organizational functioning. It is in a unique and strong position to advocate for the organization. To leverage that position, the following should take place.

i. Increase the advocacy provided by Conference Council members and bishops/over-seers.

ii. Consider how these individuals can be fully invested in the Conference organization as they internalize their call to serve and promote the Conference missional vision.

iii. Provide periodic training to Conference Council members on the needful functions, duties, and advocacy role of board membership.

iv. Consider reducing the number of Conference Council board members by halving the representatives from each commission and eliminating the

Conference Secretary position (since the current Staff Assistant takes care of much of the Secretary's workload).

Discussion: Typical of group dynamics for any group, there may be a temptation with a very large board, such as the Conference Council, for some members not to be involved and invested in the organizational process and vision. By reducing the overall board size this implementation step increases the need for each member and increases his or her contribution potential.

v. The Moderator or chair of Conference Council must facilitate meetings in such a way that draws input of all members during points of discussion.

2. **Make specific staffing changes through position realignments, updated position descriptions and collaborative workload approaches. Also, prepare to make programmatic adjustments.** VMM and the Conference office express benefits from sharing specified staff positions and offering flexibility around organizational needs. From the staffs' perspectives, this can mean having several supervisors and questioning if each agency receives its appropriate work share. The existing job descriptions are outdated and do not reflect current responsibilities and employment status. Efficiencies can be gained by repositioning Conference staff structure with redefined job descriptions. Attendance at committee meetings by staff should be reduced with participation restricted to resourcing and defined tasks.

[Findings: 3c, 5, 6, 7, 9b, 10g, 10l, 10m]

Steps to Implementation:

A. Blend the existing Conference Minister and Conference Coordinator positions into a single Conference Minister/Executive Director role, with accompanying reduction from 1.5 to 1.0 FTE. Responsibilities would include:

Administrative oversight including staff leadership and accountability; strategic planning and implementation; budget preparation and operational adherence;

Serving as Pastor of Conference: public relations, networking and resourcing with bishops/overseers and district councils (with a goal of attending each district council once/year), and involvement in credentialing;

Fundraising and relational outreach; identify and foster relationships with potential constituents to fund endowment opportunities;

Conference commissions representative; and

Providing due attention to all congregations and districts.

B. Create an Administrative Support Manager position to assist the Conference Minister/Executive Director. This could occur by expanding the current Staff Assistant role from 0.67 to 1.0 FTE. Responsibilities would include:

Functioning as the "hub" for Conference information sourcing;

Providing administrative support to Conference Minister/Executive Director and Conference commissions; updating applicable manuals;

Managing logistics (retreats, Assembly, databases, conference mailings, grants); and

Discerning value of information usage by congregations, districts, and MC-USA and revamping data collection tools and reporting methodologies.

C. Reconfigure the Youth Minister positions to form a Conference Youth Coordinator role to serve children, youth, and post-high young adults. We recommend reducing the workload from 0.75 to 0.5 FTE. Responsibilities would include:

Resourcing and equipping district and congregational youth leaders;

Planning gatherings and retreats for both youth and sponsors—creating opportunities for connections between youth from varied congregations and districts; and

Connecting with congregational leaders, utilizing technology for support.

D. Access to the Communications Associate by other Conference staff is limited during the production of *Connections*. Conference should work with the Communications Associate to evaluate this workload constraint along with the other organizational needs (such as producing other publications and expanding the use of technology within the Conference).

(See recommendation #3.)

E. If EMU terminates their financial support of the Congregational Resource Center, the Conference should also discontinue ongoing funding of the Director of Congregational Resource Center. We believe that Web access to pertinent information reduces the future utilization of the Resource Center. An intentional process should identify what materials from the Center will be saved at what location(s), and what manner of database will allow for access of existing and new materials.

F. Continue financial support of the Conference archives. The Conference Archivist should create suggested guidelines for Conference churches and members to streamline archiving material content and influx. Educating congregational representatives on archiving priorities would create added value to constituents.

G. Promote collaboration between Conference and VMM by creating funding sources within Conference for the VMM USA Ministries Director (since 90% of these ministries occur within Conference congregations). Leverage the credibility of the Conference missional outreach by promoting this position as a church planting coach.

- H. Volunteers and interns are an underutilized resource for Conference and can assist with lightening the load. The staff experiences additional responsibility around Assembly and welcome receptionist tasks interrupt workflow. Utilize volunteers to augment staffing assignments and explore Eastern Mennonite Seminary summer internships to assist with Assembly and retreat planning.
- I. The Bishop/Overseer system is greatly affirmed by Conference constituents and places the financial support at the district levels. Continue this leadership model. Conference can enhance its visibility and collaboration in the system by providing continuing education to bishops/overseers on essential topics such as conflict management, congregational spirituality, and missional coaching, among others.
3. **Expand and enhance the use of communications technology.** Staff and district constituents identified expanded utilization of technology for enhancing the mission of Conference and reducing the physical distance between members.
[Findings: 4a(1), 4a(2), 4h]
Steps to Implementation:
- A. Deploy an electronic calendaring system such as Outlook.
 - B. Utilize social media to expand awareness, especially from outlying districts; use collected data to tap donors aligning with their interests.
 - C. Gather church data electronically and interface with MC-USA, eliminating manual collection and input. Evaluate the utilization of each data set.
 - D. Reduce hard copy mailings and send electronically when possible.
 - E. Utilize interactive communication, i.e. Skype and video conferencing, to promote individual and collective connectivity and reduce travel expenses.
 - F. Provide information through the Conference website on available grants through Conference and include on-line applications.
4. **In Conference budgeting, rather than planning to use 100-percent of projected annual income and capital gains generated by reserve funds during a given year, we recommend that Conference annually plan to use 4.5-percent of the current reserve funds.** This will provide Conference a dependable (stable) income stream in both good and bad market years and still allow for modest growth of the reserve.
[Finding: 10o]

Celebrating Conference as Church, Family, and Owners

Observations and Affirmations

Conference is made up of over 6,600 members, 70-plus congregations, and nine districts. Conference leadership has done a good job of shepherding our diverse interests.

Providing assistance to congregations in time of stress has been appreciated and well received.

The Conference organization, including FLC, provides valuable service in the credentialing process of pastors and ministers. Continue that essential work.

VMM has been an excellent collaborator with the Conference. VMM has expertise in intercultural understandings.

Recommendations

- 5. Strive for open and healthy communications and cooperation within the Conference that is akin to being “church” to one another.** In the mind of businesspersons, we must create a culture of owners. In the mind of socio/psychologists, a functional family. And in the context of our denomination, we must be an attentive church body to one another.

[Findings: 3a, 3e, 4c, 4f, 4g, 8, 9d, 10b, 10f; and *Our Purposeful Plan* outcomes #2, 3, 4, and 5]

Steps to Implementation:

A. The Conference Council and Office must enunciate a clear vision and goals for spiritual development, missional outreach, and Conference operations. Make these the essential center for Conference.

B. Learn from the VMM organization to recognize cultural sensitivities among districts and congregations. Stand firm on the vision, goals, and policies of the Conference, but consider ways to accommodate cultural sensitivities.

C. Use the language of church and family in all aspects of planning and operating Conference programs and activities.

D. The Conference Minister/Executive Director should make regular telephone calls to each district chairperson and overseer(s) for two-way communications.

E. Conference staff should conduct personal visits with each congregation for various purposes with the goal of visiting every congregation once every three years.

6. Make summer Assemblies family-oriented events that capitalize on interpersonal interactions and appropriate activities for all ages.

Celebrate the “Conference family” and missions outreach at Assemblies.

[Findings: 3a, 3b, 3c, 3e, 4a(2), 4b, 4g, 5, 6, 9e, 10d; and *Our Purposeful Plan* outcomes #1—7]

Steps to Implementation:

A. Convene planning committees for summer Assemblies that contain representatives from all districts with varying expertise in missions, youth, music, and current points of church deliberations, among others.

B. Select either an outdoor or college venue for summer Assembly. Determine from that experience if future venues of that nature are desirable.

C. Resist calling for Assembly voting that merely assents to recommendations of committees/commissions. Create sessions where summer Assemblies are venues for important deliberative exchange.

7. Nurture pastors, districts, and congregations as members of a family.

Keep in contact sufficient to assess the need for interventions.

[Findings: 3a, 3b, 3d, 3e, 4a(1), 4b, 4g, 4h, 9d, 10a, 10b, 10c, 10f; and *Our Purposeful Plan* outcomes #1, 2, and 5]

Steps to Implementation:

A. Re: pastors and ministers, encourage districts and bishops/overseers to enhance their nurturing of already credentialed and ordained pastors and ministers to include regular encouragement, mentoring, and evaluations for needed professional guidance, continuing education, spiritual mentoring, and personal counseling. Districts must be free to form their own support structures to achieve these ends.

B. Re: districts and congregations, the Conference Minister/Executive Director should keep in monthly contact with district chairpersons and bishop/overseer(s) regarding district and congregational operations. Determine the need for interventions. Offer direct assistance or resourcing as need arises. Allow districts to function as the first line of support and intervention, but do not wait to be called to offer assistance.

Promoting Missions and Missional Thinking

Observations and Affirmations

Generally, there are positive feelings about Conference and its missional approach. This should continue to be fostered in a way that engages congregations individually and the Conference as a whole.

Congregations do have their own goals for missions, but look to the Conference to help resource those endeavors (i.e., church planting). Continue to support this activity while maintaining a cohesive and connected Conference.

Events focused around missions are well received. These should continue to be utilized whenever possible to connect congregations and encourage a collaborative approach to missions (i.e., festivals and promotions).

Members and districts of Conference widely appreciate the relationship between Conference and VMM. Continue to foster the strong working relationship between the two organizations.

Recommendations

8. **Redraft statements of Conference vision, mission, and values to clearly define the missional goals of the Conference.**

[Findings: 3c, 3d, 3e, 6, 9b, 9c, 9g; and *Our Purposeful Plan* outcomes #3 & 6]

9. **Develop a comprehensive strategic plan following the redrafted statements specifically to include clarifications of the intersection and overlap of VMM and Conference.** This should define how the resources of VMM could be used within the Conference while allowing each organization to embrace and maintain their own independent missional identity and goals.

[Findings: 3c, 3d, 3e, 6, 9b, 9c, 9d; and *Our Purposeful Plan* outcomes #3 & 6]

10. **Increase Conference involvement in missional outreach programs.**

[Findings: 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e, 6, 9b, 9c, 9d; and *Our Purposeful Plan* outcomes #3]

Steps to Implementation:

- A. Fund a portion of the VMM USA Ministries staffing and program costs.
- B. Provide missions coaching at district and congregational levels.
- C. Continue to provide workshops and special training for practical missional outreach and new church planting.

Leadership and Resourcing for Pastors

Observations and Affirmations

The Virginia Conference system of bishop/overseer districts has worked very well, providing pastors the oversight and support described in the Conference mission statement. Having surveyed four other conferences within MC-USA, we have not sensed an interest in, or the need for, alternative arrangements.

Input from the nine districts reveals significant affirmation for the ways in which pastors are credentialed, supported, and resourced by their bishop/overseer and the Conference Minister, by means of programmed activities such as the annual Ministers' Retreat, and through the availability of funds available in the Ministerial Training Trust Fund (MTTF) in each district.

Special appreciation was expressed for the role of the Conference Minister in maintaining relationships as well as connecting the Conference to MC-USA and

its various emphases such as missional church efforts and the *Purposeful Plan*, with its seven priorities.

Recommendations

11. **Continue the present system of pastoral oversight, with the Conference Minister/Executive Director, district bishops/overseers, and other FLC members working together.** We also recommend that if the current system is retained, its effectiveness and potential need for modifications or adjustments should be monitored over time.
[Findings: 3d, 4g, 4h]
12. **Continue the regular interaction between the Conference Minister/Executive Director and the bishops/overseers, and with individual pastors as appropriate.** We also recommend that all current bishop/overseer functions be continued. As possible, these contacts should be regular, proactive, and to the extent possible, face to face. Consideration should be given to conduct several follow-up visits with new pastors following their initial orientation.
[Findings: 3d, 4g, 4h]
13. **The annual Ministers Retreat should be continued, along with additional retreats, seminars, or workshops, to address relevant needs and topical interests.** Webinars for one or more districts, perhaps in collaboration with Virginia Mennonite Missions or MC-USA, should also be considered.
[Findings: 3b, 3c, 4g, 4h, 7, 9a, 9c, 9d, 9e, 10e, 12(2), 12(5)]
14. **Vigorously promote the MTTF within each district, both to apprise potential donors of its purpose and function and to inform pastors as to how the funds may be accessed and utilized.**
[Finding: 4g]
15. **Inform all pastors and district bishops/overseers of the Ministry Effectiveness Training & Experience Reflections (METER) system.** METER was designed to provide pastors with a regular self-assessment of their initial commitment and subsequent experience as a pastor. This tool is for voluntary use by pastors under the guidance of their bishop/overseer.
[Findings: 4g, 9d]

Resourcing Congregations

Observations/Affirmations

Bishops/overseers are doing a great job of serving the congregations in their districts.

The Youth Retreats and youth worker resourcing events are much appreciated.

Conference retreats for both men and women are well attended.

Congregations appreciate the assistance they receive from Conference during times of stress.

The workshops and seminars planned by Conference for Assemblies and other special topics were mentioned by numerous persons as being valuable.

Both pastors and delegates have appreciated the conversations that take place on the district level.

The Congregational Resource Center provides many useful resources.

The Conference Youth Minister coordinates and encourages congregational youth ministry.

Congregations appreciate the Bible Quizzing program that was recently developed.

Conference provides both expertise and support for pastoral search process.

Congregations/districts appreciate the assistance of Conference in their church planting efforts.

Recommendations

The most crucial task currently facing the Conference is the development of a clear vision that will unify its congregations. (See recommendations #1, 5, 8 & 9.) The following recommendations will move Conference congregations towards the goal of nurturing and cooperating with one another.

16. Build stronger relationships with pastors and congregations.

[Findings: 3a, 3b, 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, 4g, 4h, 4i, 8, 9a, 9b, 9c, 9d, 9f, 10c, 10f, 10g, 11e]

Steps to Implementation:

A. The Conference Minister/Executive Director should visit districts and congregations on a regular basis.

(See also recommendation #2.A.)

B. Enhance the Pastor Orientation program for new pastors.

(See also recommendation #7.)

C. The Conference Minister/Executive Director and other staff members should increase their visibility in the congregations and districts farthest from Harrisonburg.

(See also recommendation #5.E.)

17. Provide resources to congregations.

[Findings: 3a, 3b, 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, 4g, 4h, 4i, 8, 9a, 9b, 9c, 9d, 9f, 10c, 10f, 10g, 11e]

Steps to Implementation:

- A. Provide resources to congregations that want to minister to the perceived needs in their local communities.
- B. Reinstitute the Winter Bible School program.
(See also recommendation #2.C.)
- C. Provide training or resourcing events that help to equip laypersons for congregational ministries and organizational roles.
- D. Offer resources that serve children, youth and young adults.

18. Create opportunities that connect congregations.

[Findings: 3a, 3b, 4a, 4b, 4d, 4g, 4i, 9a, 9b, 9c]

Steps to Implementation:

- A. Reinvigorate Conference Summer Assembly.
(See also recommendation #6.)
- B. Use technology to shrink the distances between the Conference and its districts and congregations.
(See also recommendation #3.E.)
- C. Offer Conference mini-assemblies/mission events in outlying districts.
- D. Facilitate interactions between Conference congregations. Use existing forums in this effort such as Youth Retreat, Women's Retreat, Men's Retreat, and workshops. Also, encourage connections through cooperative missional outreach. Highlight Conference agencies such as Highland Retreat and Eastern Mennonite School as means for cooperation and connections.
(See also recommendation #3.)

Connecting Outside Virginia Mennonite Conference

Observations and Affirmations

Conference leadership has done a very good job acknowledging and utilizing MC-USA expertise and initiatives for the benefit of Conference.

Recommendations

19. As new Conference leadership takes over, those individuals must become knowledgeable of MC-USA denominational resources and initiatives for appropriate use.

[Findings: 3b, 4g, 9a, 9c, 9d, 10c; and *Our Purposeful Plan* outcomes #1—7]

20. **Conference leadership should follow the lead of MC-USA to reach out to other denominations for better understanding and potential collaborative efforts.**

[Findings: 3b, 4g, 9c; and *Our Purposeful Plan* outcomes #3 and 7]