



September 2016

Delegates of Eastern District and Franconia Conference,

We have maintained two separate conferences for 169 years, after a split in 1847. However, in recent decades we have begun to work more closely together. As moderators of these two conferences we have found that now is the time to look intentionally at the possibility of reconciliation. At our respective business sessions at Fall Assembly we will discuss and discern together whether or not to move forward with developing a process for reconciliation. This would begin with exploration of the items that may still differ among us and thus need to be addressed for reconciliation to occur in a God honoring way. The intent is that should reconciliation be possible our two conferences would then look to reunite to be one conference as we originally were.

Both of our conferences began when the Mennonites of Eastern Pennsylvania were first permitted and encouraged by letter from ordained leaders in Europe to hold the Lord's supper in Germantown in 1708 and for 139 years we "kept house" or maintained our fellowship. But in the mid 1800's changes occurred that led to two wings of the family, which became known as Eastern District and Franconia Conferences. "Historians will explain why in terms of their favorite social, cultural, economic or even ideological paradigms. For our purposes, might we paraphrase the Proverbs to say that when there is too narrow a vision, the peoplehood polarizes?" stated historian John Ruth in his book *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*.¹

The reason for the division between our two conferences may best be seen in how we observed communion. "In 1947 the two conferences were trying to express the meaning of the church in two opposite practices of communion: Franconia by requiring that it include acknowledgment of a lengthy code of rules, and be limited to people of "like precious faith"; Eastern by inviting Christians to approach the Lord's supper after consulting their private consciences. If the latter was not Anabaptist, neither did it reduce communion to the question of a mustache. But could either of these procedures reflect the right fellowship?"²

Ruth concludes his book noting that "both sides of the divided family, along with their failures, had important insights into this question. Each side would have to listen, if anything was to be learned, keeping in mind that the differences were real. A shallow ecumenism covering over these differences would show little respect, on either side, for the right fellowship of their common heritage."³

The reasons for the division were complex, so too will be any process we undertake toward reconciliation. Yet, in recent decades there has been a stirring of the Spirit for reconciliation throughout both conferences. We shared a joint assembly worship in the spring of 1997.

In 1999, conference leaders started talking intentionally together with representatives from Franconia and Eastern District meeting a couple times a year. Additionally, between 1999 and 2010 a representative from each conference was often invited and did attend the other's assembly bringing greetings. 2011 brought a fall joint assembly meeting and our fall assemblies have been a joint venture ever since. At the 2011 assembly the

¹ Ruth, John, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*(Harold Press, 1984), 535

² Ibid, 540

³ Ibid, 540

delegates were asked to respond via color coded cards expressing how they felt about continued cooperation between the conferences: green—keep exploring; yellow—move cautiously; red—don't continue. With around 200 people present most raised green cards, about six persons raised yellow cards, and no red cards were raised.

Forums were held in 2012 to educate both conferences on our shared history. It was reported at that time that many in our conferences had been cooperating in recent year: carpooling to meetings, beginning Indian Creek Foundation, and supporting Christopher Dock Mennonite High School. In addition, as our former denominations (Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church) began moving toward transformation into Mennonite Church USA in the late 1990s, people from both Eastern District and Franconia worked with people from other conferences on a joint hymnal, confession of faith, curriculum, and shared polity. Furthermore, it was mentioned that Franconia and Eastern District were talking about similar values, nurturing, planting, and creating more intercultural identity.

Since then our conferences continue to work together. In 2012, Eastern District and Franconia Conferences held their first joint board meeting. We have also enjoyed shared office space; weekly bulletin announcements; regular meetings of conference moderators and executives; shared staffing; joint conference ministry resource events for pastors/leaders, meetings of Anabaptist chaplains, SisterCare Seminars, and Formation Seminars; Shared coaching and consulting for missional development; Joint administrative service; among other things.

There is a beautiful demonstration of love when two or more parties, who at one time separated, are brought back into fellowship. Not just in a truce, but genuine care and concern for one another. When that happens among Christians it is truly inspired by God's love given to us. True reconciliation can only be possible through Christ.

For years there has been the suggestion that Franconia and Eastern District Conferences reunite. The differences that divided are no longer as apparent if they even remain, while other challenges may still exist. As we look toward reconciliation there is diversity to contend with, theological expectations and the aligning of two organizational structures to deal with. A reconciliation of this magnitude can only be successful if it is God's leading and call for us. It is a consideration that must be saturated with prayer and guided by Divine discernment. We do not want to repeat the divisions that occurred when our denominations, Mennonite Church and General Conference reunited. Nor do we wish to have years of tension focused on our differences.

Our reasons for exploring this now include the signs that God is calling us together as our increased cooperation amongst the conference staff, congregations, and individuals continues. Yet, as was mentioned earlier, this coming together will only succeed if God ordains and blesses it. That also includes our humble submission to Him and to each other. In addition, we are seeing unity among our churches. Over the years we have crossed the conference boundaries and collaborated with each other on shared community ministry. As our relationships grow stronger our divisions grow weaker. Together we can streamline our efforts at fulfilling the Great Commission. Also, with the shared resources of both conferences' gifted individuals and finances we can work more effectively to help save the lost, train the saved and send the trained to be the church God has called us to be.

This process of reconciliation must start with prayer, asking God for wisdom and discernment. We must list our fears and anxieties and ultimately surrender them to the Lord. We must be open to counsel and help from beyond ourselves; an outside resource that can help us with our blind spots. Then we must continue to pray.

As we look for counsel in this journey, the leadership of both conferences has sought out the assistance of a fellow Mennonite brother and sister to help us work at a possible reconciliation. Both David Brubaker and Roxy Allen Kioko are professors at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) with extensive experience between them on organizational leadership and working at Church conflict. Dave is both the Director of the Master of Business

Administration and Master of Organizational Leadership Programs at EMU and Associate Professor of Organizational Studies for EMU's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. Roxy, has over 10 years of experience in the social change sector and currently is a doctoral student at James Madison University's School of Strategic Leadership Studies with a concentration in nonprofit and community leadership. A reconciliation process like this has never been attempted before and we have faith that these two are uniquely qualified to assist us in exploring this path.

The first step on this path toward reconciliation would be to engage with Roxy and Dave to explore if reconciliation is possible. At our respective business sessions this fall we will discuss and discern regarding their proposal for this first step. The proposal requires the formation of a reference team representing both conferences diversity. With this group Roxy and Dave would develop a process to include:

1. Information-Gathering (such as surveys, focus groups, and some individual interviews) proposed to take place between January-March 2017.
2. Analysis (working together to summarize what they have learned) to take place between April-May 2017.
3. Recommendations (developing clear recommendations as to how both conferences might move forward together in a shared future) to be developed between June - August 2017 and refined in September - October with Key Stakeholders.

The reference team would be appointed by the boards of each conference to include diversity in age, gender, and ethnicity that reflects the diversity of our conferences. The hope is to have a reference team identified by assembly to present to you.

At assembly through our time of discussion and discernment should you as the delegates of our conferences agree that we should move forward in this exploration of reconciliation then the work of the reference team along with Dave and Roxy would begin in January of 2017 with recommendations to be presented to you at the Fall 2017 Assembly.

We ask that between now and assembly you join us in prayer regarding this process. As mentioned above, we will have a time of discernment around this together at our respective business sessions at fall assembly. Both Eastern District and Franconia Conference boards have approved the proposal from Dave and Roxy to explore reconciliation, however we will not move forward with this unless it is approved by you, the delegates.

So, let us be challenged to prepare our hearts and minds for God's leading. Let us pray for our separate business meetings as well as our joint worship times at Fall Assembly. Let us come prepared to meet God and each other in faith, humility and love.



Rodger Schell, Moderator
Eastern District Conference



John Goshow, Moderator
Franconia Mennonite Conference

For a more complete review of how our Mennonite family became two different communions please see chapters 8-10 of the book, jointly sponsored by Eastern District Conference and Franconia Conference, titled *Maintaining the Right Fellowship* by John Ruth. Copies available at the Mennonite Heritage Center and for loan from the Conference Library. A PDF of these chapters has also been made available by John Ruth. They can be accessed here:
<http://franconiaconference.org/media-uploads/pdf/Maintaining%20the%20Right%20Fellowship--1847%20Split.pdf>