

Final Report
Eastern District and Franconia Mennonite Conferences
Exploring Reconciliation Reference Team
September 30th, 2017

Background:

Eastern District Conference and Franconia Mennonite Conference may have come apart 170 years ago, but they've been coming back together in recent decades. The reasons for the original division are clear to some older members in the two conferences, but are lost on younger generations. In their November 2016 joint assembly, delegates of both conferences voted overwhelmingly to approve a process to “explore reconciliation” between the two conferences. The “Exploring Reconciliation Reference Team,” comprised of six members from the two conferences supported by two consultants, worked over the last nine months to discern where God was calling the conferences at this point in their historic relationship.

The purpose of the “Exploring Reconciliation Reference Team’s work was, “*To explore reconciliation between Franconia Mennonite Conference (FMC) and Eastern District Conference (EDC), including the possibility of ultimately forming a joint conference.*” Our team also set forth a process timeline, as follows:

1. Information-gathering and analysis from January to May 2017 with an Interim Report submitted by July 1, 2017;
2. Draft recommendations in August and September with final recommendations submitted by October 1, 2017.

This report provides an overview of what our Reconciliation Reference Team learned during the information gathering and analysis phase of the work, as well as our conclusions and recommendations for next steps.

Information-Gathering Process:

Data were collected by means of focus groups, individual interviews, and an online survey. The six reconciliation team members conducted a total of 16 focus groups with an average of seven participants between March and May, 2017. Consultants, David Brubaker and Roxy Allen Kioko, interviewed a total of seven individuals, and 101 persons completed the online survey between April-May.

Focus Group Participants

- Sixteen total groups with a range of three to 12 participants per group (an average of seven participants per group) and approximately 104 total participants, representing 13 different congregations as well as a group of LEAD ministers from FMC.

- Significant effort was made to reach (1) multiple age groups, (2) women and men, (3) clergy and lay persons, and (4) individuals from many congregations and both conferences.

Individual Interview Participants

- Barbie Fischer—Staff Member
- John Goshaw—Moderator, FMC
- Steve Kriss—Conference Minister, FMC
- Jim Lapp—Former Conference Minister, FMC
- Scott Roth—Conference Minister, EDC
- Rodger Schmill—Moderator, EDC
- John Stoltzfus—Conference Youth Minister for EDC and FMC

Survey Participants

A total of **101 persons** completed the online survey in April-May 2017, representing 35 different congregations from both conferences. A summary of the demographics of survey respondents, including a list of congregations represented, is attached to this document.

Our Learnings:

All focus group, individual interview, and survey participants were asked the same nine questions developed by the Reconciliation Team. The focus group responses were paraphrased by the facilitator or interviewer and along with the survey and interview data were coded and themed by Bex Simmerman, an experienced qualitative researcher working with Roxy and David. The coding report was reviewed by Reconciliation Team members at their June 17th meeting. Following is a summary of the key findings from reviewing the coding report. The “themes” were identified by the coder (Bex Simmerman), and the comments that follow each theme emerged from our review of the coding report. We developed our recommendations from our analysis of these themes and our own prayerful discernment and discussions.

Theme #1 – Historical wounds and conflict roots, modern tension and differences:

Most respondents understand that the existence of two conferences is due to a split 170 years ago, but that other significant issues arose since that event. Generations of congregants perceive the effect of the split and ensuing reconciliation needs differently.

Theme #2 – Narratives and Attitudes:

Each conference has its own narratives and attitudes about the issues that arose over the last 170 years. Some perceptions that each have of the other may need to be addressed in order for reconciliation to take place. These include perceptions of authentic Mennonite faith, pacifism, and treatment of veterans after WWII.

Themes #3-4 – Significant Progress and Differences & Commonalities:

In recent decades, the conferences have made significant progress on reconciliation and respondents generally believe that there are more commonalities between the conferences than there are differences. We affirm this progress and believe that continuing to name and recognize commonalities will be key to the ultimate success of the reconciliation process.

Theme #5 – Opinions on Unifying:

The great majority of respondents seem favorable to the two conferences becoming one. The general opinion was summarized by this statement, “Make (the union) a means to a greater end, not an end in itself....Move forward deliberately, but not forced or rushed.”

Theme #6 – Structure, Leadership, & Organizational Culture:

Significant concern was expressed that any move toward a new conference ensure that EDC not feel like it is being “swallowed up” and that the new organization reconcile the varying structures of EDC and FMC. “Marriage” language may be useful in this process, whereby the two become one but uniqueness remains.

Theme #7 – Balancing Needs for Autonomy, Unity, and Identity:

Many respondents wondered how to balance the need for unity in a new conference with the need to honor unique congregational and conference identities. We discussed the possibility of planning ceremonies around the evolving identities during a potential merger process—such as a ceremony of letting go and a celebration for something new.

Theme #8 – Resources, Networking, and Joint Mission:

Leaders and congregants want support, resources, mission, and accountability from a conference. This suggests a need to focus on what a joint conference could do together, as well as more exploration around the expectations of what a conference should provide in terms of support and accountability.

Theme #9 – LGBTQ Issues and Other Theological Divisions:

One area of tension that was noted often by respondents is the differing beliefs and practices regarding inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in the life and leadership of the church. We noted as much difference *within* each conference as *between* the conferences on this question, and the real challenge may be how we live with and make decisions within that diversity.

Theme #10 – Ownership in the Transition Process:

Leaders and congregants desire communication and anticipate that the process of unification will take time and work. We believe there will need to be champions to carry forward the recommendations to implementation.

Our Conclusions: Purpose of and Vision for Reconciliation

A Brief History

In 1847, after more than a century of life in Pennsylvania, members of the Franconia Mennonite Conference (FMC) polarized over how to respond to the challenges of social and technological change. Because no consensus could be reached a split soon followed, and over a third of the FMC membership moved on to establish the “Eastern Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America,” now known as Eastern District Conference (EDC). Angry alienation was felt on both sides of the division.

With the passing of time, the significance of the issues surrounding the 1847 division has continued to lessen, and there have been increasingly frequent conversations on the possibility of a changed relationship. Among the options discussed are (1) declaration of mutual forgiveness, (2) reconciliation and / or (3) merger.

Purpose and Vision for Reconciliation

The hope for reconciliation between EDC and FMC has been growing since 1947, when the conferences held a peaceful joint conference celebration. In subsequent years many (though not all) of the original issues of the division have been forgotten, or have never even been known by the members of new congregations. As early as 1974 the historical societies of EDC and FMC merged into one, and members from both conferences have been serving on each other’s boards. The fact that the conferences share a common office space and have been collaborating on projects for a number of years now is evidence of reconciliation efforts that have already been made. We recognize that in addition to the advantage of sharing our God-given gifts and abilities, we have the opportunity to show a Christian example of unity and peaceful resolution of division in an increasingly polarized society.

Spiritual Components of Reconciliation

The Sermon on the Mount, to which Mennonite founders looked in 1525, makes reconciliation a priority. If while at worship you “remember that your brother has something against you,” you should first “go and be reconciled...and then come” and worship. Jesus himself also prays that those who believe in him “may all be one.” “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:21). The writings of Paul are equally clear: those “who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.” This is what salvation is actually about: “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself ... and has committed the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19).

Naming Real Differences, Hurts and Failures

Yet as we look toward a shared future, it is important to address the actual and perceived differences between Eastern District Conference (EDC) and Franconia Mennonite Conference (FMC) and the wounds we may have caused each other. Although there is a long history of conflict dating back to the 1847 split, many former sources of tension are no longer issues for us today. There are, however, more recent conflicts that have impacted congregations, families, and individuals in both conferences.

Over the years several congregations split over theological or ecclesiological differences or disagreements related to structure and tradition. In some cases one half of the congregation remained part of FMC while the other half joined EDC. These splits were generally contentious and dramatic, causing the fracturing of families and communities. Although many of our churches with this history have taken great steps to reconcile and build bridges, there is still pain from these fractures among us that affects our perceptions of each other today.

Issues of Power and Authority

Since before WWII, some families left FMC churches because a family member who served in the military was expelled from membership in an FMC congregation. Many of these families were embraced by EDC congregations who were less authoritative in structure and welcomed members regardless of military involvement. Although some FMC congregations now welcome military veterans as members, they maintain pacifist convictions that put Christ before country. Some in FMC voiced concern about EDC congregations who fly the American flag and other possible theological differences, while many in EDC worry about FMC's history of top down authority. As the two conferences look toward a shared future, special care must be taken to ensure that EDC as the smaller conference is not simply swallowed up by the larger structures and policies of FMC, but that both conferences feel a sense of ownership as we work together to create something new.

Recognizing the Unique Identities of Each Conference

Historically, EDC has demonstrated a willingness to try new things and embraced a culture of innovation, while FMC has placed a higher value on preserving theological and ecclesiological tradition. These differing approaches may seem like a recipe for conflict, but they can complement each other and strengthen our ministry. FMC brings a rootedness in historical Anabaptism that keeps us centered while EDC brings an open spirit of innovation as we look to the future of the church. As we pursue further reconciliation it will be important to continue to recognize and celebrate the unique gifts each conference brings to the table.

Acknowledging Theological Diversity Within Both Conferences

In naming theological differences that exist between EDC and FMC it is important to recognize that there is just as much diversity within each conference as there is between them. Congregations in both conferences range across the spectrum on issues like scriptural interpretation, atonement theology, women in ministry, and LGBTQ inclusion. These differences within conferences challenge us as we seek to follow Jesus together in the present without creating additional splits and divisions.

Both EDC and FMC have experienced losses related to the theological diversity. EDC experienced significant loss when a number of congregations left to join AMEC (The Alliance of Mennonite Evangelical Congregations) due to theological differences with Mennonite Church USA and the recently adopted 1995 Mennonite Confession of Faith which they believed to be irreconcilable.

In October 1997, Germantown Mennonite Church lost their membership with FMC due to their stance on LGBTQ inclusion. Germantown's relationship with EDC also changed. Although the congregation was invited to remain in fellowship with the conference, they lost the right to vote at EDC assemblies. The conflict with Germantown deeply affected many individuals and congregations in both conferences and is remembered by some as a tragic part of our past that is yet to be reconciled.

Implications for a Shared Future

Theological differences can be a source of anxiety and conflict, but they can also create opportunities for self-reflection and growth. Although we will never resolve all our differences to the point of unanimous agreement, we can reconcile the relationships that we have broken by humbly listening to each other's stories and coming together over shared practices and core convictions. If we are to have a future together we must recognize that true discipleship only occurs through relationships of mutual respect in which theological differences are points of discussion, not division. As with a healthy marriage, we must relinquish our tendency to try and control each other and choose to value each other instead.

Our Recommendations:

The Exploring Reconciliation Reference Team based our recommendations on three levels of discernment, as follows:

- 1) What we learned from the three month process of listening to multiple constituencies in both conferences.
- 2) What we discerned from listening to each other and the experience of other conferences that undertook significant restructuring processes.

- 3) What we believe God is calling our two conferences to at this time in our history, discerned through our times of prayer and Bible study.

Our core recommendation is as follows:

“The Exploring Reconciliation Reference Team recommends that EDC and FMC enter a formal engagement process for the purposes of healing and reconciliation and with the intention of becoming a single, unified conference by November 2019.”

In order to achieve this recommendation, we suggest that EDC and FMC create a “Healing and Reconciliation Team” and an “Identity Development and Structural Implementation Team” to work towards reconciliation and unification. We also recommend that the conveners of the “Healing and Reconciliation Team” and the “Identity Development and Structural Implementation Team” be instructed to share minutes of their respective team meetings with each other, and to plan monthly conversations where they would update each other on the work of their respective teams. The makeup and responsibilities of these two teams are outlined below.

1. Form a “Healing and Reconciliation Team” to Address the Spiritual and Emotional Components of Reconciliation

Purpose and Composition:

That the two Conference Boards form a “Healing and Reconciliation Team” comprised of both EDC & FMC members to continue the process of healing and reconciliation begun in recent years. This team of 6-8 people would have the primary responsibility for implementing the following recommendations including the freedom to delegate certain tasks to teams of qualified individuals. This team should represent the racial, ethnic, generational, and theological diversity of both conferences so that relevant past and present issues will be well represented. The members could include:

- At least one of the 2018 Spring Assembly worship service planners
- A representation of at least two ministers from the various conferences and congregations with strength in leading prayer practices across congregations and providing congregational/pastoral support
- Three or more ministers or lay leaders experienced in ritual and arts-based worship to represent the diversity (racial, ethnic, generational, theological) within the two conferences with the ability to highlight and facilitate the reconciliation practices of the diverse groups
- One member nominated by the 6-8 appointed members (above) to serve as facilitator of the team.

Responsibilities:

- Plan a worship service of lament and hope for a joint Spring Assembly in 2018. The service will create an opportunity for conferences to come together to name past failures but also to affirm the unique gifts and progress toward reconciliation between the diverse communities.
- Listen to the concerns of congregations and pastors and provide support throughout the transition process.
- Organize prayer partnerships between congregations of differing affiliations or identities and encourage them to commit to praying for each other's ministries. For example, pair an urban church with a suburban church, an EDC church with an FMC church, or churches from different places across the theological spectrum. Partnerships between groups that are different can help strengthen relationships with one another.
- Invite congregations to be in prayer for conference leaders as we discern the way forward.

Additional Ideas:

- Create a display or video that celebrates the stories/roots of the conferences from across the generations, including the multiple racial/ethnic groups that comprise the conferences.
- Create and share visuals/displays/ graphics based on the gifts of each conference that are displayed at related worship services.
- Plan a shared meal and celebration that includes cultural/ethnic foods from various groups within the conferences. The meal and celebration would point to the future as well as honor the past.

Theme Verse for this Team:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." **Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)**

2. Form an "Identity Development and Structural Implementation Team" to Create a Unified Conference

Purpose and Composition:

The purpose of the Identity Development and Structural Implementation Team will be to manage the process of forming a single, unified conference, with particular attention to the structure, staffing, financial, and cultural realities of creating a single conference from the two existing conferences. Although this team would have primary responsibility to follow through on the following recommendations, they may find it helpful to assign some tasks to sub-committees or teams of qualified individuals. This

team should represent the racial, ethnic, generational, and theological diversity of both conferences.

We recommend that the Identity Development and Structural Implementation Team consist of seven members, as follows:

- Two members appointed by the Conference Board of Franconia Mennonite Conference and two members appointed by the Conference Administrative Board of Eastern District Conference, with at least one member from each conference being a staff person.
- Two members with experience in organizational realignments/mergers (such as the recent Dock Mennonite Academy merger) selected by the previous four members. Ideally, at least one of these members would possess a legal background.
- One member nominated by the six appointed members (above) to serve as facilitator of the team.

(Note: The Exploring Reconciliation Reference Team is prepared to provide a list of names for consideration by the conference bodies that will make the initial appointments.)

Responsibilities:

The following two areas of responsibility should be carried out sequentially with the work of identity development preceding any work regarding the creation of new organizational structures.

Identity Development:

- Communicate the purpose of and vision for reconciliation and forming a unified conference at this point in history (see the above section, “Purpose of and Vision for Reconciliation” for background and sample language). The team needs to communicate regularly with congregations and pastors about the transition process so that they can be in prayer for specific challenges as they arise.
- Draft Mission, Vision and Values Statements for the new conference. This would include clarity regarding the expectations of what services the conference would provide to member congregations.
- Name gifts and strengths of each conference identity such as organization, support, encouragement, accountability, and relationships; incorporate these strengths in new structure.
- Propose a name for the new conference, congruent with the mission, vision and values statements. The name for the newly merged conference should be symbolic of a new identity while respectful of historical identity elements. The name could be a logical

extension of the current names or a new entity completely. The option of moving beyond geographic descriptions is encouraged.

Creating New Structures:

- Establish new policies for the new organization including procedures that ensure the voice of all racial/ethnic groups.
- Develop an organizational chart showing board/staff relationships and staffing positions in the new conference.
- Draft an initial budget for the new conference showing projected revenue and expenses for the first full year of operation (2020).
- Convene a spring 2019 assembly devoted to processing the recommendations of this team, including the proposed name, Mission/Vision/Values statements, and budget.

Theme Verse for this Team:

*“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” **Ephesians 4:11-13 (NIV)***

We believe that it will take considerable love and grace on the part of many to achieve the vision of establishing a new, unified conference by November of 2019. However, it is not only the final destination that matters, but also what we learn and how we treat each other on the journey to the destination.

Respectfully Submitted to the EDC and FMC Governing Boards by the Exploring Reconciliation Reference Team:

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Ron White

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John Ruth

Roxy Allen Kioko (consultant)

David Brubaker (consultant)

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF PARTICIPANT CONGREGATIONS (Surveys & Focus Groups)

1. Alpha
2. Ambler Mennonite Church
3. Bethany
4. Blooming Glen Mennonite
5. Boyertown
6. Christ Fellowship*
7. Church of the Good Samaritans
8. Circle of Friends*
9. Covenant Community Fellowship
10. Deep Run Mennonite Church East
11. Deep Run Mennonite West*
12. Doylestown Mennonite
13. Fairfield Mennonite
14. Finland Mennonite*
15. Franconia Mennonite Church*
16. Frederick Menn.
17. Grace
18. Lakeview Mennonite
19. Member at former Bethel congregation
20. Methacton Mennonite Church
21. Norristown New Life*
22. Nueva Vida Norristown New Life
23. Perkasie Mennonite Church*
24. Perkiomenville Mennonite Church*
25. Philadelphia Praise Center (young adults)*
26. Plains Mennonite Church
27. Ripple-Allentown
28. Rockhill Mennonite Church
29. Rocky Ridge
30. Salford Mennonite Church*
31. Souderton*
32. Spring Mount
33. Springfield
34. Swamp
35. Upper Milford*
36. Vincent Mennonite Church
37. Wellspring Church of Skippack
38. West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship
39. West Swamp Mennonite Church
40. Whitehall
41. Zion Mennonite*

*Focus groups were conducted at the congregations shown with an asterisk.

APPENDIX 2: DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS (n = 101)

GENDER:	# OF PERSONS
MALE	57
FEMALE	44

AGE	# OF PERSONS
18 to 29	2
30 to 39	5
40 to 49	10
50 to 59	35
60 to 69	26
70 to 79	20
80 or older	3

RACE / ETHNICITY (open ended question)	# OF PERSONS
WHITE / CAUCASIAN / EUROPEAN DESCENT	94
HISPANIC	2
ASIAN	1
REFUSED TO ANSWER ^s	3
BLANK	1

# OF YEARS	PERSON HAS BEEN PART OF THEIR CONGREGATION	PERSON HAS BEEN PART OF THEIR CONFERENCE
0 to 9	10	20
10 to 19	10	11
20 to 29	15	14
30 to 39	13	15
40 to 49	3	7
50 to 59	22	17
60 to 69	15	10
70 to 79	9	3
80+	3	2
BLANK	1	2

CONFERENCE	# OF PERSONS
Eastern District Conference	24
Franconia Mennonite Conference	77