

# Let's Hit Pause, Then Refresh!

## PASTORAL GREETING

I am tempted to wax poetic in greeting you, brothers and sisters in the Shenandoah District. I deeply respect the integrity with which you function in day-to-day living. I view you with deep and abiding affection and am proud to be your District Executive Minister.

It would be foolish not to acknowledge the rocky road we have walked together these past three years. We have engaged in painful and rancorous debate over same-gender marriage. I have observed “up close and personal” the rending of the fabric of our community. I have experienced the pain of watching brothers and sisters, for whom I care about deeply, become separated by the abyss of the same-gender marriage discussion.

Here is the contradiction that haunts me daily. We have a multitude of thriving congregations, reaching out in the name of Jesus in effective and powerful means. At the same time, our communal life is marked by disunity and disarray. How we live together as a body of Christ is the central question.

The specific impetus for this letter emerges out of the context and events at the 2017 Annual Conference. We are at a critical moment in our denomination and District. In the context of Annual Conference and preceding events of the past three years, I will do my best to articulate a way forward for your review and consideration.

## ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The year of 2017 has seen a slow growth in the re-building of communal trust. This does not mean that demanding work will stop or all will end well. No, the future is still as unpredictable as it was. It does mean, however, that we gained some ground in forming bonds that could assist us in making tough decisions in the years ahead. Listen to these stories:

We had, by most accounts, the best Pastors Appreciation Dinner in recent memory. Well-attended and well-represented from the entire District, we laughed until we could laugh no more. The comedy routine of Bil Lepp held us all engrossed and enchanted. It was good to be together.

We also had a total of 40 pastors register for the Christology conversation in the spring of 2017. That, again, represented the District's theological diversity. Although not perfect, it was affirmed with requests for more of the same during the winter of 2018.

We had a record-breaking year with the Disaster Ministries Auction. The final number of \$225,214.29 net income broke all records.

We are indeed grateful.

At Annual Conference, the Shenandoah District delegates largely voted as a bloc for Unfinished Business Item 4, “The Authority of Annual Conference and Districts Regarding the Accountability of Ministers, Congregations and Districts.” This could well be an historic moment as there

was agreement, albeit somewhat reluctantly, that this represented the best path forward. At the center of the item was a call to pivot toward working at a compelling vision together. This pivot was affirmed across the spectrum of belief in the Shenandoah District. We fully acknowledged together the struggles and uncertainties that lie in cooperating in forming a denominational vision. However, a number of folks, including myself, hoped that such a process could occur and bear fruit.

Thus it was with dismay that I view the overall impact of Annual Conference on our District. The fragile sense of agreement regarding the need to vision together is being threatened, if not destroyed, by events at Annual Conference.

The specific event causing the deepest consternation was the introduction of a same-gender pastoral couple, a female pastor and her wife, during the introduction of new fellowships at the beginning of Annual Conference. The congregation introduced was from the Pacific Northwest District, in direct opposition to the 2002 paper on credentialing same-gender couples. Shenandoah District's reaction to Pacific Northwest District's decision seemed to fall into three categories:

1. It is the right of Pacific Northwest to interpret/enact Annual Conference guidelines as it sees fit.
2. The most dominant Shenandoah District expression was bewilderment, despair and feelings of betrayal. Not anger, but anguish. There is uncertainty about where we go from here.
3. I also have heard tiredness, exhaustion and frustration over years of debate, parliamentary rulings and Standing Committee recommendations with still no end in sight. I will speak to this more fully in the section on process.

I too experienced anguish of the soul and feelings of betrayal. I have struggled long and hard as how to give voice to those feelings. Following is my attempt to do so:

My response to Pacific Northwest is not meant to debate same-gender marriage. That debate is over and settled in almost all minds. Neither is it to debate the power of Annual Conference vs. the authority of districts. That is a legitimate conversation, but not what is at stake here.

Rather what is at stake is covenant, and covenant was broken at Annual Conference with the action of Pacific Northwest. The 2002 paper, "Licensing/Ordination of Homosexual Persons to the Ministry in the Church of the Brethren," speaks clearly to the official guidelines prohibiting credentialing of pastors in a same-gender relationship. Districts and congregations do indeed have the authority to interpret Annual Conference guidelines in keeping with their own practices and theology. That has become even more apparent with the passage of Unfinished Business Item 4.

However, when we are gathered together at Annual Conference, there has been a generally respectful adherence to the guidelines/statements we have agreed on together. For example, we have said that "All War Is Sin." Although Districts vary in their understanding and practices, e.g. some congregations fly flags in the sanctuary and military veterans may be honored in varying degrees, Annual Conference has faithfully adhered to those guidelines in our gatherings. For example: In 2002, Paul Grout, moderator, requested a flag be removed from the convention center in Louisville. Our public space, worship and resolutions recognize "All War Is Sin" as a gathering point of community, despite disagreement with the statement by some members of our District and de-

nomination. This respecting of “All War Is Sin” at Annual Conference is as it should be. That needs to be reflected in our communal gatherings.

As much as some may believe that the 2002 paper is outmoded and a form of injustice, it still represents the will of Annual Conference in our gatherings as one body. That is the covenant that was broken and needs to be engaged and addressed at that level of conversation.

However, this ultimately is not about individuals or congregations. This finally is not about Pacific Northwest and responses to that decision. The issue goes far beyond individual and congregational stances and is deeply enmeshed in the way we conduct business. It has to do with the very nature of how we gather during this time in our lives.

## **PROCESS**

The current process is failing us. John Paul Lederach in his blog, *Practicing Compassion in Church-Wide Disagreements*, (<https://themennonite.org/opinion/practicing-compassion-churchwide-disagreements>) speaks of the unintended tyranny of process. Tyranny is defined as that which dominates or controls and sets the agenda. I would take this a step further and assert that the current process is in danger of becoming our idol. We are in danger of giving our allegiance to a process at the expense of giving our allegiance to God and God alone.

As we work at trying to bring resolution through queries, process, polity and other mechanisms, we have reached the end of what’s possible. There is no language or method in the current process which can take us further. This is not a question of conspiracy or blaming others, but rather an acknowledgement that we have come as far as we can with the processes in place. We are “queried” out, and it is not possible to address the deep issues of covenant, conviction and relationships through our present means. The process has become our master.

We must shift the trajectory of how we work and talk together. The issue at hand is not unity, it is not reconciliation, and it is not all the other statements/resolutions/queries which occupy our time. The issue is one of identity and whose we are in Christ. Our conversation at District and Annual Conference, including table talk, must begin with Jesus Christ to discover what sort of core identity holds us together.

## **CHANGING DIRECTION**

It is not simple to pivot quickly. However, we are standing in the shadow of four tumultuous gatherings, the 2015 and 2016 Shenandoah District Conferences and the 2016 and 2017 Annual Conferences. Prior to that have been years, indeed decades, of debate, queries and resolutions over same-gender relationships. We must act to change the trajectory of that conversation.

We are beginning to divide by attrition with members leaving, with battle fatigue and weariness being the dominant feelings. At the very least, our life together is being controlled by process, procedure and debate. I/we are simply tired of a process that enslaves us and is dividing us. This must stop.

However, it is not enough to simply stop. We must act together to design a way forward that offers the opportunity to covenant anew. This covenant must be formed with Christ at the center. Anything less than that will not produce the fruits and power that we need.

Hear me on this. We have so long been immersed in a process that has encouraged political divisions that we are in danger of losing sight of whom we serve. Our view of Jesus is increasingly skewed through the lens of our pre-existing loyalties.

Thus, I share the following reflections as a skeleton framework for your response. I have chosen well-known Church of the Brethren statements as a means for identifying steps together.

### **On Christ the solid rock we stand...**

We must have an identifiable center to begin our reflections/discernment together – a rock upon which we can stand. In the Anabaptist/Pietist tradition, we confess that Jesus Christ is the foundation of our life together. That must be our beginning point.

John 1:1 tells us that Jesus was co-eternal with God from the very beginning.

John 1:12 tells us that this “eternal Word” became flesh and walked among us.

These two images of Jesus the eternal son of God and Jesus as the incarnate one go hand-in-hand in shaping our life together. Specifically that means centering our conversation around **On Christ the Solid Rock We Stand** for a period of two years beginning with this year’s District Conference. (See attachment). The following familiar Church of the Brethren resolutions provide the specifics of such an effort.

**All other ground is sinking sand.**

### **No creed but the New Testament**

This understanding of scripture goes hand-in-hand with Christ the foundation. We are known as people of the Book, and it is in scripture we find this Jesus portrayed. We study scripture, not to buttress arguments but to provide authority and guidance on how we live our lives. Let’s study together afresh with the focus on Christ, his birth, life, death and resurrection. This year’s District Conference will feature outstanding preaching reflecting the diversity of the District. As many as five or six individuals will be asked to deliver short sermonettes. The preaching will be “On Christ the Solid Rock We Stand,” with speakers given assigned texts for preaching and reflection. Further studies will be designed to assist our reflections about Jesus together throughout the next two years.

### **All War Is Sin**

We must lay down our weapons. We suspend queries, resolutions and statements at District Conference for a two-year period of discernment. These methods have become weapons where we win or lose and adversaries are identified. They no longer serve as a mechanism of discernment. In

order to focus on our foundation, we must say “No” to processes which prevent the Spirit of Christ from moving anew in our midst.

We also must adhere to the traffic warning which protects highway construction workers: **“Give ’em a brake.”** My son has a saying that describes our political scene as “being addicted to indignation.” This addiction to indignation also is true in our District and denomination. We respond too quickly, take offense easily, and pass judgments with little regard for the people we are judging. We need to engage in a period of time in which we provoke to good works. (Hebrews 10:28) This two-year period is not about debating same-gender marriage. That debate has been addressed by the actions of District Conference of 2016.

I also suggest we focus energies on our own process as a District. The greatest witness we can be to the denomination is to demonstrate how we work together. Let’s provide a model that assists others who are likely to be engaged in a similar manner. To be direct: give our denominational leaders and processes a “brake” as well. The trajectory of our conversation needs to shift to conversation about Jesus. Discerning from those conversations whether it is possible to remain intact as a District and, if not, how we shall organize new communities of faith in a peaceful manner.

### **No force in religion**

If All War Is Sin (Matthew 5:38-48), then the following also must be true. (I Corinthians 6:1-11 and Matthew 5:23-26). Do not take your brother/sister to court. I understand the necessity of having property laws in place to prevent rogue pastors from leading a congregation astray. I am grateful for such protections.

However, this is not our current context. To use coercive measures to ensure a congregation stays in the Church of the Brethren violates values traditionally held by Church of the Brethren people. To name a few:

- Do not take your neighbor to court
- Living, peacefully simply together
- Love your enemies

It is inconceivable to me that we would engage in taking property from our brothers and sister. In the Shenandoah District such action would, for many, be viewed as confiscation of property. Thus, I heartily endorse and will advocate for the development of a process by which unified congregations may peacefully take their property and leave with blessing. The work on this needs to begin immediately after this year’s District Conference.

This abdication of property rights by the District cannot be done without a carefully-developed exit strategy. There are many questions to be answered, not the least of which is the landing spot for congregations who choose to exit. Full participation would be asked for “On Christ the Solid Rock We Stand” for this two-year period. A careful design, taking into full account internal congregational processes and legal and fiduciary responsibilities, would begin to be developed immediately after District Conference. Some initial thought and consultation with legal professionals already has begun.

Hear my heart. I hear the anguish of those who believe their convictions are threatened by the current process. My deepest desire is for congregations to continue to thrive and flourish, no matter what context they are in.

And so I will do my very best to ensure that all land safely and with resources intact on the other side.

Here is what I also believe with all my heart. I believe a new covenant of belonging together in Christ is absolutely essential and achievable. What happens if coercion is taken out of the equation and we re-covenant together out of freedom? What new thing might the Holy Spirit do among us? Let the Holy Spirit work, knowing there is no force in religion, and trust the providence of God for the outcome.

## **BENEDICTION**

I shared from the platform of Annual Conference that I sometimes feel like Don Quixote tilting at windmills.

If you were to ask me to provide a clear strategy for the next two years I will tell you “I don’t know.” What I and others have to offer is joining hands with Jesus as we cross the street together. That is where we must begin.

However, much thought already has gone into strategy and process. It has and will continue. We will call on the very best and creative minds in the District to help guide us for these next two years. That will begin immediately after District Conference.

It is with a keen sense of awareness that I realize how we are dependent upon Jesus during this time. I/we are entering uncharted waters. I do so with a keen sense of my/our own human limitations and ability to see only in part. I believe deeply that if we approach this time with a shared attitude of humility we will be amazed at what God can do.

In Christ there is no longer conservative or progressive, Master of Divinity or Christian Growth Institute, male or female, rural or city, professional or blue collar, bi-vocational and full-time for we are all one in Christ Jesus. (Paraphrase of Galatians 3:28 NIV)

May we live into that hope with passion and fervor.

Your Brother in Christ,

John Jantzi

District Executive Minister