

Introductory Remarks about the Compelling Vision Process Shared at Annual Conference 2018

Samuel Sarpiya (Moderator) and Donita Keister (Moderator-Elect):

Forty years ago in 1978 our debate surrounding Biblical Inspiration and Authority took the form of the 1978 Annual Conference statement of the same name highlighting and encouraging acceptance of both our agreements and our differing views of Scripture. Around the same time, cultural shifts regarding homosexuality were impacting the church and we took our first steps to determine together how we, as a denomination, would respond. The passing of the 1983 Statement on Human Sexuality, rather than resolving a question, seemed to lead us into a wilderness of ongoing debate and division where our differing views on Biblical authority and interpretation particularly as regards homosexual practice have kept us wandering for nearly 40 years. In this wilderness we have found many oases of vital ministry in areas such as disaster relief and international partnerships in mission with Brethren around the world. We have been a voice for peace and have worked for justice in places where others are hesitant to go. Our congregations have had fruitful labor as they have brought a faithful authentic presence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to their communities. Even as we have exciting ministry to celebrate, we have grown weary in this wilderness of division as we long for green pastures of unity. We wonder how we will overcome an internal culture of “us against them” and of mistrust for one another that seems to permeate our life together, sapping our strength and ability to thrive.

Forty years is a generation. Most of us sitting here have not known the ministry of the Church of the Brethren without the existence of this struggle. We cannot know how much this struggle has truly impacted us because we will never know how much work for the Kingdom of God was thwarted because of conflict and division. We **do** know, however, that when an organization and its members are excitedly focused and united around a vision and purpose the effectiveness of that organization’s work is exponentially more than that of an organization whose members are focused on conflict and divided on how to best live into a vision and purpose together. While the development of a compelling vision is not designed to resolve deep conflict, if it’s purpose is fulfilled a compelling vision will move our focus from that which divides us to that which unites us.

At our 2017 Annual Conference in Grand Rapids we once again faced a decision surrounding homosexuality and same gender relationships, specifically marriage. The item of business entitled “The Authority of Annual Conference and Districts regarding the Accountability of Ministers, Congregations, and Districts” came to the delegate body with recommendations emphasizing mutual accountability and the authority of districts to address matters of ministerial accountability and conduct. This statement, which reaffirmed previous statements surrounding homosexual practice and also reaffirmed district and congregational autonomy, was accepted by the delegate body. The report concluded by saying: “To stay on the journey together, it is also crucial that the church discern the compelling vision that this body of Christ is called to pursue. This will be a matter of further work by the Leadership Team and Council of District Executives.”

During the first meeting of the Leadership Team following the 2017 Annual Conference we began working on how we would move the “Compelling Vision” process forward, even as we addressed deep unrest within the denomination. We heard from many over this past year who have been disillusioned, frustrated, or hurt by actions of others within the church. Yet their desire is strong for the church to enter a time of healing and renewal through the power of God’s Spirit, and we are encouraged to see that the desire to find a way forward together as Church of the Brethren is also strong.

The center of life in the Church of the Brethren is the congregation. Each congregation creates a community of faith based on foundational beliefs and practices that define its vision and work together in the context of those with whom they minister. These beliefs and practices are formed dynamically throughout the life of the congregation as it strives to understand and live into Christ’s call through its own study of scripture together as well as through sharing in the life of worship, service, and study within the district and the denomination. As individual congregations join the larger body to celebrate and share in a common purpose centered on Christ’s call to discipleship, it is those foundational beliefs that help bind us together.

Unlike some denominations where individual leaders at the denominational level are the highest authority in the life of congregations, the highest authority in the Church of the Brethren is the body of delegates from congregations who gather in Annual Conference. It is at the Annual Conference that each congregation has the opportunity to contribute in determining how we will live out Christ’s call for us together. Our work together is molded and formed by statements we decide together at Annual Conference. While each congregation will have ministry that they are called by God to passionately pursue in their community, when we come together out of our different cultures, theological perspectives, and gifts, we have a Kingdom responsibility to find ministry that we can passionately pursue together. It is our role here at Annual Conference to find the epicenter of our life together. We are not here to tell each congregation how they shall follow Christ’s call, but we are here to bring the passions of congregations together in a place where our collective effort can do even more than congregations can do on their own.

Our compelling vision will be found where our passions for ministry intersect. The compelling vision process is designed to authentically discover what we can together embrace with enthusiasm and passion as we follow Christ accomplishing His work in our world. Then, much like the ripples from a stone in water, or the vibrations from the epicenter of an earthquake, this compelling vision will find its way into the lives of congregations alongside their own unique ministry and vision.

We realize that there is a bit of skepticism around this search for a Compelling Vision. Some may feel that as we move through this process we may discover that the spiritual community existing at our intersection of commonality is very small... that our differences are too great to share in a meaningful vibrant compelling vision. We, however, believe the opposite to be true because we have a firm hope in the work of God’ Spirit among us. We believe that at the

intersection of our commonality is an incredible vibrant community that we have yet to really discover in this generation. We hope that you will be on this journey of discovery with us.

The Council of District Executives (CODE) has joined hands with the Leadership Team to form a Compelling Vision Working Group (CVWG) which is comprised of the General Secretary David Steele, 2018 Annual Conference Moderator Samuel Sarpiya, 2019 Annual Conference Moderator Donita Keister, Annual Conference Director Chris Douglas, and two District Executives chosen by the CODE, Colleen Michael and John Janzi. The 2020 Annual Conference Moderator will join this group following the 2018 Annual Conference. This CVWG has called out 6 individuals who are serving with the 2018 Moderator Samuel Sarpiya, 2019 Moderator Donita Keister, and Annual Conference Director Chris Douglas forming the Compelling Vision Process Team. Those six individuals are Rhonda Pittman Gingrich (chair), Kayla Alphonse, Kevin Daggett, Brian Messler, Alan Stuckey, and Kay Weaver. The 2020 Annual Conference Moderator will be added to this team following 2018 Annual Conference. Both the Working Group and the Process Team will remain constant in their membership until the process reaches its conclusion in the fall of 2019.

As we began our work on the Compelling Vision process, one of the first things the Working Group did last fall was to establish spiritual center point of our work by developing a guiding statement. It was and is the conviction of the Working Group that this process to be unquestionably centered and established on Jesus Christ. This statement of proclamation, intention, and invitation articulates the deep conviction of those leading this process and will guide for us through the final articulation of a vision centered on Jesus Christ.

"Confessing Jesus Christ as Teacher, Redeemer, and Lord, we desire to serve Him by proclaiming, professing, and walking in His way together bringing His peace to our broken world. Join us in reclaiming a new passion for Christ and helping set a course for our future as the Church of the Brethren serving Him in our communities and in the world!"

In Donald Durnbaugh's history of the Church of the Brethren, "Fruit of the Vine," we read about the earliest vision of our forebearers. Durnbaugh cites from the account of origins by Sander Mack that the first eight brethren "felt powerfully drawn to follow again the footsteps of the first Christians." As a result they took the courageous and selfless steps against the culture of their day to follow that vision of authentic Christianity as they studied the New Testament history of the early church and lived to model it faithfully. They "felt powerfully drawn." It sounds like they had a Compelling Vision. May we be as courageous and selfless as we seek and live into God's Compelling Vision for our life together.

Rhonda Pittman Gingrich (Chair, Compelling Vision Process Team)

In Proverbs 29:18a we are reminded that "Where There Is No Vision, the People Perish" (KJV). There seems to be broad agreement that we have lost our way and are a people in need of a

vision. As Brother Samuel has traveled throughout the denomination this year, he has encountered many who feel it is time to change the focus of the conversation, who are passionate about discerning who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do together in these times. This interest in a compelling vision to guide us into the future is accompanied by curiosity and questions about how we might discern such a vision.

While involving some input from across the denomination, historically denominational visioning and goal-setting have been completed primarily at the board level, resulting in varying degrees of wide-spread ownership. The current process is structured very differently to facilitate increased input from across the denomination and hopefully, as a result, a greater sense of ownership.

A childhood chorus points to this difference: “The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people.” Sister Donita noted the importance of our congregations. Without you, without the members of our congregations back home, there would be no church. Therefore, while we, as a Process Team, have been called to define and guide the denomination through a process for discerning a compelling vision, one of our priorities is engaging as many people as possible in the process by offering opportunities for wide-spread individual input and communal discernment.

Conversation, a key building block of relationships, will be at the heart of our journey. The use of tables during Annual Conference business sessions was only instituted in 2012. Prior to that, delegates sat in rows of chairs and delegate input was limited to comments from the microphone. Genuine dialog with brothers and sisters about the issues we were facing was minimal. Comments from the microphones, often taking the form of persuasive speeches, are still part of the equation; however, I think most people who have experienced business both prior to and after the institution of the tables would agree that the conversations delegates share and the relationships built around the tables are invaluable. Genuine conversation isn’t about persuading others to our point of view. It is about sharing our perspective and respectfully listening to the perspective of others. It is about developing empathy for another human being who has had different life experiences. Genuine conversation can help us move beyond conflict, placing it in perspective as we discover shared pain and shared passions, shared hurts and shared hopes. Therefore, throughout the process, both individual input and communal discernment will happen within the context of conversation.

Another difference from previous attempts at visioning and goal-setting will be the central role Annual Conference will play in the process. As you will see when I describe the process in detail, rather than simply affirming a statement developed by a small group, delegates and other conference-goers this year and next year will help shape the conversation, test what is being heard, and identify emerging themes.

With these two key components of the process in mind, let’s turn our attention to an overview of the process we have outlined. In just a few moments we are going to begin the conversation, starting with one question this afternoon and continuing with a series of questions through the

morning business session tomorrow. Conversations will then shift to districts and various constituency groups throughout the fall and winter. We have already had a conversation with the young adults gathered at Young Adult Conference over Memorial Day Weekend. We are working collaboratively with the National Youth Conference staff to engage our youth in the conversation through the small group experience at NYC later this month. We are working with districts to schedule two-hour conversation events in each district. A few of those events will take place at District Conferences, but in most cases we are working with district leadership to schedule multiple events in strategic geographic locations to facilitate the participation of as many people as possible. We also anticipate scheduling conversation events with the boards and staff of the various agencies that serve the church. These conversations will be shaped by what we hear this afternoon and tomorrow morning and like the conversations we have here, will be designed to solicit both individual input and encourage communal discernment. The conversation will then continue at Annual Conference next year as together we begin to test and synthesize all we have heard and identify emerging themes and shared passions for ministry. Then and only then will we will work collaboratively with the Compelling Vision Working Group to articulate a vision to guide us into the future. That vision will be brought back to Annual Conference in 2020 for affirmation by the delegate body. Throughout the process we will attempt to be transparent, sharing updates via Newline and posting information online at: www.brethren.org/compellingvision. We also welcome the opportunity to talk more with any of you who have questions at any time. Feel free to catch us for a face-to-face conversation here at Annual Conference, to call a member of the team, or to email the team at cvpt2018@gmail.com. And above all, we invite you to bathe this process in prayer.

As we embark on this journey together, it is our fervent prayer that: our relationships with one another will be strengthened and deepened, transcending points of disagreement; we will be able to celebrate the ongoing presence and activity of God's Spirit at work among us; we will be open to what God is calling us to do *together* as Christ's disciples; the vision ultimately articulated will lay claim to our hearts and our minds, our imaginations and our spirits, shaping our identity and inspiring our ministry at the congregational level, the district level, and the denominational level; and we will wholeheartedly embrace the challenge set before us by that vision, affirming contextual creativity as we actively and boldly seek to embody that vision. For as Eugene Peterson says in his paraphrase of Proverbs 29:18: "If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what (God) reveals, they are most blessed."

As we prepare to enter into conversation, we offer some guidelines for sacred sharing.

- Transparency – Let's create an environment of transparency in these conversations, striving to be men and women with no secrets so we can help one another grow. Allow others to get to know you as well as God knows you.
- Don't Name Names – We want you to speak from personal experience; however, wherever possible, talk about situations or events in your life without naming names. This allows our experiences to be instructive while avoiding gossip.

- Don't Convince – It is completely ok to share your opinion--a difference in opinion is welcome; unity does not equal uniformity—but please don't try to convince others to your side of thinking.
- Listen – Be sure to listen while others are speaking. Avoid thinking about what you want to say next, really listen. We should each value one another in the discussion, not just what we want to say.
- Pause – After a person shares, leave a pause to allow the entire group to feel the weight of what was shared. No one should feel rushed to “get their thoughts” out during the discussion time.
- Don't Fix – Hear what people are sharing without trying to fix them. If they need your advice, they will ask for it. (It is ok to ask permission to enter in.)
- Don't Rescue – When someone is sharing a deeply personal or painful story, we often want to make them feel better about the situation. Resist the temptation to “rescue” people. This usually stops people from sharing any further and hinders them from going deeper than they might have gone.
- Don't “Cross-Talk” – Be considerate of who is talking. Don't have a side conversation while someone is sharing.
- Use “I” Statements – It's easy to talk about the Church or others around you, but in the interest of building relationships, we want you to put yourself out there. Try to use “I” statements rather than “you”, “they”, “the conservatives”, “the liberals” or “the church.”

These guidelines are summarized on a table tent in the center of each table. In addition, we ask the table facilitator to serve as a time keeper to ensure that no one monopolizes the conversation and everyone has an opportunity to share.

Sing: “Gentle Shepherd, Come and Lead Us”

Prayer: Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us, for we need you to help us find our way. As we enter into these conversations, open our minds and our hearts to one another and to your guidance as we seek to discern who you would have us to be and what you would have us to do as we move into the future. Following your example, may we be gentle with one another, may we share with honesty and integrity, may we listen with compassion, may we seek understanding, and may we grow together as your body. Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us, for we need you to help us find our way. Amen.

Compelling Vision Questions

- We have been called to work together to develop a compelling vision for the Church of the Brethren. At the heart of that vision is a desire to live as Christ's disciples. What compels you to follow Jesus?
- Yesterday, we began our conversation about following Jesus. With that conversation in mind, what are one or two values that you think we who are participating in this process share?

TABLE SHIFT

- You've heard your conversations yesterday and your conversation today. What are the themes you see emerging?
- Why is it important for God's people to have a vision?
- What can make a vision for the Church of the Brethren compelling?

TABLE SHIFT

- What about developing a compelling vision gives you hope?
- What question do you hope someone asks you during the compelling vision process?