

1 ALLEGHENY MENNONITE CONFERENCE – Polity and Purpose (Pending delegate approval)  
2 | “(Adapted from Central District Mennonite Conference Statement of 1999  
3 by David Mishler, Conference Minister, in consultation with Leadership Council July 2018)

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5 I. WHY WE NEED TO BE AND WANT TO BE A CONFERENCE

6 Conference for the congregations in Allegheny is something like a family of siblings. We love  
7 each other and are concerned about each other. We want to help each other, but we do not  
8 feel a need to control each other. We share a common faith heritage and commitment, as well  
9 as a desire for common mission. Being together helps us strengthen those commitments,  
10 continue discovering God in significant ways, and define what it means for our walk as Jesus’  
11 disciples and Anabaptist Mennonites today.

12 For us conference is a place for fellowship, for discussion, and for mutual counseling as we seek  
13 to hear what the Spirit is saying to us about what it means to follow Christ. It is a place where  
14 relationships are vital. Conference is also a means for organizing so that we can work together  
15 in mission and church planting, for providing ministries and supportive affiliations with such  
16 organizations as International Guest House (IGH), church plants, 3rd Way Collective, Laurelville  
17 Mennonite Church Center, World’s Attic, Service Adventure, among others. Conference is a  
18 resource for help in choosing and supporting pastoral leadership and for keeping us responsive  
19 to the needs in the world around us.

20 Although our conference is part of what church is and does, it is not analogous to or a  
21 substitute for our congregations. It is in our congregations that we commit ourselves to  
22 participation as members of the body of Christ, a commitment that encompasses our total lives.  
23 The congregations’ commitment to conference is different and more specific, defined by what  
24 we have come to understand the purpose of conference to be.

25 We confess we have often failed at being our best as conference. We talk of being family but  
26 have sometimes failed in incorporating new members as full participants in the family. We talk  
27 of mutual accountability but have often failed to responsibly give and receive counsel,  
28 hindering the work of God’s Spirit among us. We talk of unity, but disunity has sometimes  
29 disrupted our conference efforts in witness, mission, and service. At times, we have been left  
30 with a sense of being scattered and of being weakened in our ability as a group to proclaim  
31 important understandings of faith and in our witness to Christ in the broader public arena. Yet  
32 conference continues to be very important, enhancing and facilitating God’s work among us so  
33 that God’s healing and hope will flow through us to the world.

34 II. THE FORMAL CONGREGATION-CONFERENCE RELATIONSHIP

35 Allegheny Mennonite Conference by-laws describe us as “an association of congregations”  
36 (Article 1) and use words like “encourage and assist,” “forum for consultation and sharing,”  
37 “provide perspective and counsel for congregational life,” “facilitate and promote common  
38 objectives” (Article III). Congregations “aspire to live in voluntary commitment to Jesus Christ  
39 from an Anabaptist perspective, using the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* as a  
40 guiding document” (Article VI.)

41 These points summarize our purpose:

- 42 1. To promote Jesus as the center of our faith, community as the center of our life, and  
43 reconciliation as the center of our work.
- 44 2. To serve as a resource for, and to offer guidance to, pastors and congregations in matters of  
45 faith and life.
- 46 3. To facilitate the reign of God by providing channels through efforts in mission, evangelism,  
47 church planting, Christian formation, nurture, and peacemaking.
- 48 4. To be supportive and respectful of the discernment processes used by Conference and  
49 individual congregations in decision making and to understand our diversity as a way of  
50 sharpening one another (Proverbs 27:17) in extending the reign of God in our communities.

51 Our conference, then, is intended to be a resource: to promote, serve, offer, facilitate, and be  
52 supportive. Conference is congregations working together: it is not a separate body over  
53 congregations. Conference is formed by congregations coming together voluntarily for specific  
54 purposes. The constitution (Article VI) describes the steps that a congregation takes to join the  
55 conference and also states that congregations may choose to withdraw from the conference.

56 III. OUR HISTORY AS A CONFERENCE

57 According to Harold S. Bender, writing in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, congregational  
58 autonomy was the form of church government for virtually all groups in the Anabaptist-  
59 Mennonite tradition until the 19th century, when some conferences in North America began to  
60 develop “into authoritative ecclesiastical bodies with power over the local congregation and  
61 ministers” (Vol. I, p. 669).

62 The roots of our own Allegheny Mennonite Conference date to 1876; it was “known first as the  
63 ‘Mennonite Church Conference of the Southwestern Pennsylvania District’” (Sanford Shetler,  
64 *Two Centuries of Struggle and Growth*, p. 337) and was “grant(ed) permission to organize”  
65 subject to Lancaster Conference. So in the time of authoritative ferment and the tendency of  
66 (Old) Mennonite Church toward hierarchical lines of authority, Allegheny Mennonite  
67 Conference has always lived in the tension between congregational autonomy and conference  
68 authority as desired forms of organizational power. Those diverse perspectives clearly rose in

69 the tensions that have led numerous congregations to withdraw around differences related to  
70 human sexuality and biblical interpretation.

71 A major objective of Allegheny Mennonite Conference continues to be the inclusion of all who  
72 share the same purpose and want to walk together following Christ. A view to work at faith  
73 formation and mission may still be the way to overcome differences around authority. It is  
74 probably fair to say, however, that many of our attitudes toward church discipline, particularly  
75 “harsh discipline,” were influenced significantly by an (Old) Mennonite view toward discipline.  
76 In that sense, the attitudes toward discipline in many of our congregations today, whether  
77 leaning toward autonomy or hierarchical authority, may be a reaction to practices found in  
78 other Mennonite bodies.

#### 79 IV. THE AUTHORITY OF CONFERENCE

80 The authority of Allegheny Mennonite Conference lies in our coming together to seek God’s will  
81 and embrace God’s ultimate authority in our lives. That kind of authority is not coercive and  
82 does not threaten. We make decisions intending to affirm congregational discernment in our  
83 various places of ministry, yet not imposing one congregation’s decision on other congregations  
84 who see things differently. We thus encourage congregational autonomy yet with expectation  
85 of prayerful counsel with one another.

86 Conference statements reflecting the majority position on issues are to be taken seriously and  
87 studied carefully and prayerfully. At the same time, we also humbly recognize that a majority  
88 can be mistaken and a minority may be nearer the mind of God. We also understand that this  
89 kind of authority means that everyone within the conference has the responsibility to both give  
90 and receive counsel honestly and clearly. Unless we are engaged in this way, our conference  
91 will not discover authority as a reflection of God’s ultimate authority, and we will find ourselves  
92 going in many different individualistic directions.

#### 93 V. DISCIPLINE AND DISCIPLING IN ALLEGHENY

94 We believe that discipline of individuals, usually understood as “sanctions,” belongs in the  
95 congregation and is not a function of conference. Discipline is, after all, part of the discipling  
96 and care that the church, the family of God, gives to each Christian. As such it needs to be done  
97 in the setting where the person has made a membership commitment, the individual is best  
98 known, and the situation is understood. That is the local congregation.

99 The relationship between conference and congregation is not the same as the relationship  
100 between the congregation and its individual members. When Paul speaks of the body of Christ,  
101 it is a body of which individuals (1 Corinthians 12:27) are members, not a conference of which  
102 congregations are members.

103 Along with the congregations, the conference participates in the universal Christian mission of  
104 forming disciples (Matthew 28:18–20). The conference does discipling by providing  
105 opportunities for people to come together and seek the meaning of discipleship in our time and  
106 by providing resources for helping us to actually walk as disciples.

#### 107 VI. THE CONFERENCE ROLE IN PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

108 We consider the role of conference in the selection and credentialing of pastoral leadership to  
109 be very important. Our conference ministers and Credentialing Committee play a vital role in  
110 the call, credentialing, and ongoing accountability (and discipline, when necessary) of pastoral  
111 leadership. We recognize the heavy responsibility this places upon the Credentialing Committee  
112 and conference ministers. We also see pastoral mentoring and pastor-peer groups as essential  
113 ways of giving and receiving counsel, of strengthening our conference as a family, and of  
114 discipling all of us.

#### 115 VII. IN CONCLUSION

116 The relationship of conference to congregations in resourcing and mutual discernment is very  
117 important in Allegheny Mennonite Conference. It also calls us to engage each other responsibly.  
118 Every person in our conference is called upon to actively seek God’s will, to listen to the Holy  
119 Spirit, and to share what we have heard with our brothers and sisters in our congregations and  
120 in the wider conference. In Allegheny Mennonite Conference, we are not passive followers. We  
121 are all called and invited to take responsibility, together with our sisters and brothers, to seek  
122 God’s will on what it means concretely for us to be disciples of Jesus today.

123 We understand this individual responsibility, this call to mutual accountability—difficult as it  
124 may be—to be at the heart of Anabaptism. This is what baptism on confession of faith means.  
125 The Anabaptists rejected the idea of church as a traditional community that relied on tradition  
126 and the authority of traditional leaders. The church is a voluntary community that each person  
127 enters on the basis of one’s own individual decision and confession of faith—an individual,  
128 responsible, adult decision, which calls us into mutual relationship with each other. The  
129 Anabaptists believed that this is what the New Testament clearly teaches.

130 As humans, created in the image of God, we cannot see the future, but we are confident that as  
131 we continue walking together in faith as responsible disciples of Jesus, the Holy Spirit will  
132 continue to transform us in ways wonderful and new.