

1 **ALLEGHENY MENNONITE CONFERENCE – Polity and Purpose**

2 “(Adapted from Central District Mennonite Conference Statement of 1999 by David  
3 Mishler, Conference Minister, in consultation with Leadership Council)

4 November 3, 2018

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 sometimes we have failed at being our best as conference. We strive to incorporate  
26 new members as full participants in the family. We desire mutual accountability in giving and  
27 receiving counsel, allowing the work of God’s Spirit among us. We strive to enhance our efforts  
28 in witness, mission, and service. We gather and encourage each other to enhance our ability as  
29 a group to proclaim important understandings of faith and our witness to Christ in the broader  
30 public arena. Conference continues to be very important, enhancing and facilitating God’s work  
31 among us so that God’s healing and hope will flow through us to the world.

32 II. THE FORMAL CONGREGATION-CONFERENCE RELATIONSHIP

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

39 These points summarize our purpose:

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

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

54 III. OUR HISTORY AS A CONFERENCE

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

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

66 authority as desired forms of organizational power. Those diverse perspectives clearly rose in  
67 the tensions that have led numerous congregations to withdraw around differences related to  
68 human sexuality and biblical interpretation.

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

#### 77 IV. THE AUTHORITY OF CONFERENCE

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

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

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

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

97 The relationship between conference and congregation is not the same as the relationship  
98 between the congregation and its individual members. When Paul speaks of the body of Christ,

99 it is a body of which individuals (1 Corinthians 12:27) are members, not a conference of which  
100 congregations are members.

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

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

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

#### 113 VII. IN CONCLUSION

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

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

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