



Lombard Mennonite Peace Center 101 West 22nd Street, Suite 206, Lombard, IL 60148

PHONE: 630-627-0507

FAX: 630-627-0519

E-MAIL: Admin@LMPeaceCenter.org

WEBSITE: www.LMPeaceCenter.org

Healthy Reconciliation in the Synod of the Covenant

On behalf of an Administrative Commission appointed by the PC(USA) 223rd General Assembly, Elder Patrice Hatley, co-moderator, contacted the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center (LMPC) on January 14, 2020, regarding the Synod of the Covenant and allegations of disorder. Elder Hatley reported that the Administrative Commission had completed its administrative review and was exploring possible options for “actions that may result in restoration of community among member constituents.”

On February 20, 2020, a week after the Administrative Commission (AC) assumed original jurisdiction of the Synod, LMPC again spoke with Elder Hatley by phone to better understand the disharmony in the Synod and consider how the LMPC large-group intervention process could be implemented in the Synod. Rev. Hatley reported that the AC was seeking to appoint an interim Synod executive, which would have implications on the process. In March, because of the Covid-19 virus, it became apparent that any on-site intervention in the Synod needed to be postponed or cancelled due to safety concerns and restrictions on public gatherings.

On June 12, 2020, Rev. Dr. Charles Hardwick, the newly appointed interim executive, contacted LMPC to continue the conversation regarding the mediation process in the Synod and to consider how to proceed further, given the current public health restrictions. Together, we recognized that, while doing a full-scale mediation process would be ideal for healing and growth, it would be impossible to implement in the current context. In addition, since the new Synod assembly and committees would be largely comprised of new participants who did not have a shared history with each other or with the out-going executive, who had been the focus of much of the intensity surrounding the Synod’s disorder, we decided that a transformative mediation model would not really fit a newly comprised Synod leadership. Furthermore, most individuals that held leadership positions in the former Synod would no longer be in working relationships with one another, the primary context where transformative mediation is most appropriate.

We decided, then, to propose a two-step process to the Administrative Commission. The first phase would address the needs of the past through a listening process that would inform the Administrative Commission on its healing reconciliation process. The second phase would focus on the future with an educational workshop to help the new Synod leadership understand emotional processes and function in healthy manner.

A proposal was designed and submitted to the Administrative Commission for approval in July with the expectation that a formal report and presentation would be made to the Synod of the Covenant on August 28, 2020, after the completion of the listening phase.

The Listening Process:

Understanding that the Administrative Commission regards “original jurisdiction as a temporary measure and desires that through healthy reconciliation, and operational stability, the Synod of the Covenant may become what God desires it to be,” the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center conducted a listening process to gather information regarding the impact of the disorder on individuals and assess the level of intensity and anxiety in the Synod. This process focused on the “healthy reconciliation” aspect of the Administrative Commission’s mandate and not “operational stability.”

LMPC requested a list of names from the Synod. In consultation with Rev. Hardwick, we decided that it would be best if the interim executive first contacted the individuals, giving a brief introduction of himself and requesting their participation in the interviews. 25 names were compiled that represent a diverse group of individuals with diverse experiences and diverse perspectives. In the end, 11 individuals were interviewed. While this number is slightly lower than we would have desired, we do feel we have enough information for this report and its recommendations.

In our interviews, we did inform interviewees that we would keep their information and comments confidential and not attribute any direct statements to them. All interviews were conducted by phone, lasting 60 minutes on average, without any major incidents to report. Everything was civil and polite. Many expressed deep appreciation for having the opportunity to be heard and to share in the process.

In the interviews, we were listening for indications of anger, polarization, reactivity, defensiveness, disempowerment, powerlessness, frustrations, negativity, severed relationships, abuses, painful memories, and hurts. We were particularly attentive to “us-them” language, which would indicate a higher level of tension in the Synod. We shaped the interviews around seven questions.

1. What are the strengths of the Synod? What do you celebrate?

The Synod of the Covenant is known for its diversity. Many reported that this was a highlight. “Some presbyteries are a majority white, so coming together as a synod provides the opportunity to get more diversity.” The diversity in the Synod of the Covenant allowed people to get insight into many ethnic and racial groups. The Synod is seen as a place where diverse ethnic and racial groups can flourish.

Many celebrated the focus on mission in the Synod, the ability to have shared ministries that the presbyteries couldn’t do alone, or didn’t have the capacity for, such as the mobile health fair, which provides health care to those in need throughout multiple presbyteries. There is partnership with the General Assembly’s focus on mission work. The Synod supports the presbyteries in their mission and the presbyteries support of the work of other presbyteries through the Synod. The Synod gives the ability to help support areas and missions/projects that were bigger than a presbytery could do on its own. We also heard reports of grants being given to presbytery-level ministries and even congregations. Mobile health clinics and interchanges with people from other countries were two of the biggest highlights.

- 2. On a 10-point scale, with 1 being harmonious/calm and 10 being chaotic/crisis, based on your own experience, how would you describe the current stress and intensity in the Synod presently? What was it before?**

We specifically asked about the tension people felt in the Synod. Most reported that three or four years ago people were able to converse and dialogue together and things were harmonious, “people talked to each other and not about each other, ideas and thoughts were shared openly, at least initially it seemed people were able to talk through things in a polite way.” Things then suddenly changed about two years ago and eventually got to a 9/10 – very chaotic. “People took their interpersonal issues and made them become broadcast as a synod issue, when they could have been worked out before taking it to that level.”

People reported that things were down to a 3 or so, currently. There has been grief, but there is also healing that has occurred. There is certainly uncertainty about the new executive and new direction, but people have been hopeful. It seems that the initial steps that the interim has taken have been well received.

One individual stated, “Folks are looking towards the future but are not sure what it is going to look like, so perhaps for me a 7/10 because of the uncertainty.”

Another shared that, “Now with Chip it feels like a time of Sabbath for everyone. This is a good time for slowing down. There is a need to move slowly into the next phase of the Synod.”

- 3. Are there any historical factors, secrets, repeating patterns that might shed light on recent tensions? Were there previous times in the past when the Synod experienced intense conflict? If so, indicate the issues, approximate dates, and how well each situation was resolved.**

We asked this question to see if there is a repeated pattern of behavior. Most individuals did not really have a sense of history prior to the tenure of the past executive. Most reported changes that occurred during his tenure.

Some talked about a change in attitude in the Synod. Previously it seemed that individuals had been more committed to the Synod in a general sense, but there was now a “spirit of competition” between different caucuses, mission projects, and presbyteries, where individuals were seeking out their own special interests and not the interests of the whole. Historically, individuals were more willing to give and take, knowing that “what goes around comes around.”

Many talked about tensions between the ethnic caucuses and the Synod. CECA received many comments here, both positive and negative. Many talked about changes to the organizational structure, such as the timing of meetings and how decision-making became unequal.

- 4. Are there any persons in the Synod with whom you think you may have a "broken relationship?" If "yes," would you like to have the opportunity to be reconciled with that person?**

Most people did not report that that they had a broken relationship with anyone in particular. A few individuals did mention they had strained relationships with the previous Synod executive, but they would not seek to restore the relationship through mediation. Others mentioned strained relationships with those who “spear-headed the removal of the executive.”

5. What are some of the current challenges of the Synod?

“The need for clarity on true representation in both voice and vote from all of the caucuses, as well as making sure selected representatives for caucuses are selected not out of tokenism or to fill a particular “ethnic role”, but who are part of ongoing conversations and show commitment to the issues at hand.”

“Lack of forward movement over the last 5 months – nothing has been able to be accomplished at the Synod level and we haven’t had open communication about plans or what is coming next.”

“To move forward in a healthy way from a history of systemic issues.”

“Increase in true diversity; currently it feels like ‘diversity’ is synonymous with the African-American. We need to expand this to include all groups.”

Many raised questions regarding the Synod itself. “There are questions around how the Synod will be supported by the General Assembly after this process.” “If we’re going to have an institution as a middle-governing body, it can’t just be a volunteer position, there needs to be an obligation to support the Synod, even amidst urgency at a congregational level – the community needs to be given authority at Synod level to make real changes – increase buy-in and people’s commitment.”

“The Synod needs to know their presbyteries better. To have jurisdiction over these bodies, you need to know your presbyteries and people. There should be more commitment from presbytery moderators to the synod.”

“There is a policy gap between the way policies are written and the way they are practiced. It is difficult to tell if policies are good or bad if they are not actually implemented and practiced. Do we change the people or change the policy?”

“Policies are getting in the way of a movement to have intimate, personal, and spiritual experiences at churches. There is an institutional hierarchy.”

6. What are your primary interests or concerns for the Synod?

“All groups should have the opportunity to be represented with both voice and vote. Leadership needs to be diverse. For example, the moderators committee is made of moderators of each individual committee of the Synod; if we don’t have diversity in our moderators, then we don’t have diversity in the moderators committee.”

“In general, working towards increased diversity within the Synod, volunteers, staff, etc. and that the diversity of the whole Synod be represented in its leadership.”

“There is a hope to increase the relationship between the presbyteries with the Synod moving forward, setting mission, vision and prioritizing relationships and then setting structures accordingly.”

Many individuals expressed that they were proponents of the synod structure when the synod is allowed to function well – it has so much potential. There is hope that the Synod can continue to work well as a mid-governing body.

Some expressed concern that Rev. Hardwick is only an interim and a desire to know what the future process will be for a finding a long-term executive.

“I hope this brings better communication between presbyteries and the Synod.”

There is a disconnect between the work of the Synod and the local congregation. Many Pastors do not regularly report on what is happening within the Synod to their local congregations.

7. On a personal level, how well are you doing in the current situation? Physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, etc.? Has this situation taken a toll on your personal life.

Several reported that it has been a difficult process, but that as of now, they are hopefully optimistic. For example, no one reported that they were still having sleepless nights or significant anxiety.

One individual said: “It has been rough. As a person on the committee that hired the past executive, I felt a sense of responsibility, or weight when things began to change. The situation has made me stronger.”

Another: “It profoundly affected me and I had to re-examine the body of Christ, especially as the denomination of PCUSA. People want to hang on to modernity through institutional denominations, but these have become very toxic; I have even considered leaving the denomination – yet I have decided to stay because I feel I can be a bridge and help people see that a more post-modern, relational view of church is possible, and could be something different and special.”

Many commented that the PCUSA system has a methodology to manage such issues and has done so in an orderly fashion, perhaps a little more slowly than desired.

Some commented that it would have been better to work with staff to improve their performance instead of getting rid of staff.

8. Other Comments:

Several made statements about their concern for the treatment of former staff, that they be treated fairly. “I don’t like the way the process is going, because for the previous Synod administrative assistant; I hated for her to get caught up in this, she only did what she was told to do.”

One asked what the former executive had actually done, “Was there a formal charge?”

Several commented on how the former executive seemed to change at some point and they were not sure why. Some felt he was excellent in mission, but this administrative role was not a good fit.

Some expressed a need to have an increase in clarity/communication from the Administrative Commission to build trust with the broader network of presbyteries – “perhaps this is covered in this

consultation and the report we're putting together;" there is a lack of clarity around what the future plans look like for the Synod. This is a main concern.

People are unclear what the next steps will be. People are concerned about the role of the interim and then the long-term plan for the Synod.

In general, there is a need for better structures for communication between presbyteries and the Synod. A plan needs to be created and implemented for regular reporting, to find the best way to disseminate information to keep people engaged in the Synod's work, rather than 'siloed' in specific presbyteries or ministries.

There needs to be some coaching or diversity/equity training with presbytery moderators and Synod staff, including critical engagement with CECA.

There needs to be critical engagement with the existing policies and procedures, offering the potential for changes to be made in a collaborative manner, to update to newer policies that address the concerns of presbyteries moving forward.

People have offered genuine appreciation of having the opportunity to be part of the interview process and for LMPC stepping in as part of the process.

People have stated that the beginning processes of the new interim has been helpful, often citing a worship Sunday sermon and liturgy.

Several raised the issue of the Ohio/Michigan divide and commented on the location of the new Synod office.

Several mentioned that individual presbyteries have their own issues.

There is a concern about territorialism.

People offered sincere appreciation for the former executive and his deep passion for mission.

Recommendations:

- A. The Lombard Mennonite Peace Center believes that the challenges facing the Synod of the Covenant moving forward are challenges typical of a denomination and that the unresolved hurts from the past will not greatly impact the decision-making and strategic planning of the future. LMPC does not believe that there is a level of reactivity in the Synod that would “sabotage” future efforts. LMPC does not believe the Synod needs to “neutralize history” before moving forward. (By typical challenges, we mean issues of diversity, budgets, communication across denominational structures, personnel issues, representation, mission priorities, change, etc.)
- B. LMPC does not believe that individual members that have served in the Synod are continuing to struggle with the events in the Synod in their own personal lives, and while there have been some significant challenges for some, most individuals express a genuinely positive attitude to continue to be active in the church’s mission and service.
- C. LMPC has heard many very positive comments about the entrance of the new interim and the intentionality to connect broadly with individuals and groups, to be present, to be receptive, responsive and open, to make himself available.
- D. LMPC does not believe that a full-scale mediation process would be appropriate for the former Synod assembly members. Such a process only works when there is a strong commitment and motivation on the personal level to participate.
- E. LMPC heard concerns about different groups, like caucuses, and how these fit into the Synod assembly structure, however, LMPC did not hear language of polarization.
- F. LMPC did hear some blaming and reactivity toward individuals and decisions made by them, but the intensity of the reactivity was not high.
- G. One strong indication of anxiety in a system is a call for a *quick-fix* to gain clarity and certainty. This can push leaders to hurry up and make decisions in an effort to calm a call the anxiety. A number of individuals expressed comments that LMPC understands as “quick-fix solutions,” particularly related to the interim executive position.
- H. LMPC is concerned that whenever a conflict is overly focused on one individual, like a pastor or Synod executive, that the true roots of the conflict are not being addressed. We would ask, “Is this a case of scapegoating?” While there is certainly a cross-cultural component to this situation that defines the role of leadership, LMPC would encourage the Synod to continue to think deeply about the nature of the disharmony in the Synod.
- I. LMPC firmly believes that a *Healthy Congregations* workshop, designed for the second phase of the process, would be of great value for incoming assembly members.

Jay Wittmeyer and Sarah Howell
Lombard Mennonite Peace Center

Addendum: Congregational Stability and Change

The leadership of congregations is diffuse. Leadership is spread out among various people (clergy and lay) and groups (the board, committees, program staff, office staff, choir directors, Sunday school staff, etc.). Leadership includes both those in formal leadership roles (Pastor, elected lay leaders, staff) and those who are informal but nevertheless “weighty” leaders – those whose opinions and feelings matter to the group. The functioning of all of these leaders contributes to the way the whole system gets along.

In the application of systems theory, the term “mature” is used to describe leaders who have three characteristics. They are able to:

- a. **Define self:** Mature leaders know what they believe and where they are headed. When needed, they can articulate a vision. Their actions are based on their beliefs and their vision, and are not merely reactions to what others have to say. They speak and act without attacking others or seeking to compel their agreement.
- b. **Stay in emotional contact:** This is not the same as getting stuck to or merging with others. It means being able to be present and in contact with important others, even when they disagree. Mature leaders do not withdraw from important others when anxiety increases.
- c. **Maintain own boundaries:** Mature leaders can “define self,” yet they are also “self-contained.” They know where one-self ends and another begins. They respect others’ right to have their own thoughts and make their own decisions. They are not invasive of administrative or personal boundaries.

The optimum for a congregation would be to have the functioning of all key leaders demonstrate all three of these characteristics, both in their relationships to one another and in their relationships with the members of the congregation. Were this the case, the course of congregational life would be quite stable over time and highly resilient through changing circumstances.

Most congregations’ leadership is composed of people who do well at some of these characteristics, and not as well at others. However, many such congregations nevertheless maintain significant stability over time because the overall mix of leaders seems to contain within it enough of all three characteristics.

While any one leader is of modest maturity, the leaders together function to “**complement**” and “**limit**” one another. “**Complementing**” has to do primarily with *the way the overall leadership group relates to the congregation*, and has to do with the balancing of leadership’s capacity to define self and stay in emotional contact (#1 and #2 above). “**Limiting**” has to do primarily with *the way those within the leadership group impact one another*, and has to do with maintaining boundaries (# 3 above).