

ANE Way Forward Team Recommendations to the ANE District Board

Executive Summary

- 1) Adopt the Proposed Way Forward Commitment**
Make and invite a commitment to live together with respect despite differences, and to deal with differences in a forthright manner.

- 2) Build a Culture of Honor, Respect, and Humility**
Set a new standard for attitudes and discourse, as Christians known by their love.

- 3) Lift Up Brethren Beliefs and Practices throughout the District**
Cultivate our shared Brethren identity, as that identity is the basis that binds us together as a district and denomination.

- 4) Facilitate Events that Encourage Understanding of Differences**
Directly address our theological differences, striving for greater understanding of the various points of view and emphases of our shared faith in Jesus Christ.

- 5) Embrace a District Process for Responding to Disagreement**
Provide leadership in dealing with disagreements within the District by embracing the 2004 AC statement, "Congregation Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions."

- 6) Renew a District Emphasis on Spiritual Renewal**
Commit additional resources toward intentionally tending to our spiritual health and vitality throughout the District.

- 7) Develop Strategies for shared Mission-Driven Activities that Help Build Unity**
Recognize that unity springs from shared purpose and action, and so strive to intentionally create opportunities for working together across congregational lines.

- 8) Release District Time, Talent, and Treasure for All of the Above**
Choose to make significant investments to help us create the future we seek.

Full List of Recommendations

1) Adopt the Proposed Way Forward Commitment

Make and invite a commitment to live together with respect despite differences, and to deal with differences in a forthright manner.

- a) Choose to adopt the Way Forward Commitment as a District Board.
- b) Invite individuals and congregations in the District to adopt the commitment.
 - i) Strategize how to share the Commitment with congregations.
 - (1) The District Board could say, “This is our work, this is how we are moving forward... we’ve committed, please join us”... and/or
 - (2) Vote on it at District Conference (likely not preferred)... and/or
 - (3) A “District Renewal” closing service at District Conference—perhaps with anointing for those who wish for it—reflecting a desire for healing and wholeness according to God’s will (*see more under #2b*).
 - ii) Consider how delegates to District Conference might take the Commitment back to local congregations.
 - (1) Perhaps an option for congregations and pastors sign on?
- c) Explore how to encourage churches and pastors to *continue* to live into the Commitment.
 - i) If not owned by individuals and congregations, it wouldn’t go anywhere. Therefore, possible suggestions for consideration include:
 - (1) Include as part of new staff member/spiritual renewal team’s work;
 - (2) Board members given set of congregations to walk with (*alá* deacons).

2) Build a Culture of Honor, Respect, and Humility

Set a new standard for attitudes and discourse, as Christians known by their love.

- a) Model honor, respect and humility at District Conference by having a prayer of blessing and release for congregations who have decided to leave the COB.
 - (1) Representatives of these churches would be invited, but this action would not depend on their presence.
 - (2) If possible, a representative of those churches might also pray a blessing over the District and churches remaining.
 - (a) This would be a visible way to extend respect to each other and to refrain from disparaging each other; doing so honors our shared Church of the Brethren history, acknowledges that all who confess Christ continue to be connected to the larger Body of Christ, and promotes an attitude of continuing to be *for* one another rather than *against* one another.
 - (b) This action comes in a spirit opposite that of pride, judgment, anger and the burning of relational bridges. *“But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, ‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’” -James 4:6*
 - (i) *Note: Shenandoah District may have already held a service similar to what is suggested here, so that could be a resource.*
- b) Plan a service at District Conference that sets a new tone for our life together.
 - i) First, lead the District in acknowledging our current broken situation.
 - (1) Include time to *Lament* our loss of fellowship with churches and individuals, and *Repent* of any attitudes of contempt for those with whom we disagree or words and actions which have not reflected the love, humility, and grace of Jesus.
 - ii) Then, look forward to our future as a district.
 - (1) Leverage the Commitment as a way forward to help us *Reinvent* how we walk and work together in the unity of Christ.
 - iii) The service might include anointing for both healing of hurts, as well as for strength to move forward together in newness of life.
- c) Since respect is fostered out of relationship, contribute to this new culture with strategies that build relationship.
 - i) One idea is to find new opportunities and new ways (videos?) to share testimonies from various congregations, in order to reinforce the awareness that we are on the same journey together.
- d) As we seek to build this new culture in relation to theological differences, we need also to call each other to greater awareness of how we might inadvertently participate in discrimination arising from *other* differences, e.g., race, culture, socio-economic class, etc.

3) Lift Up Brethren Beliefs and Practices throughout the District

Cultivate our shared Brethren identity, as that identity is the basis that binds us together as a district and denomination.

- a) Recognize the importance of what it means to be Brethren--our distinctiveness of belief and practice in shared ministry is what holds us together.
- b) Develop short lists of highly recommended resources on Brethren beliefs and practices, and share them with congregations.
- c) Provide some of the best resources to congregations across the District.
 - i) Develop, procure and disseminate collections of selected resources on Brethren beliefs and practices. (Initial suggestions include such resources as the video, "By Water and the Word," the books "To Follow in Jesus' Steps," the "Heart, Soul, and Mind" series, "Dunker Guide to Brethren Beliefs," etc.).
 - ii) Support a project to help create an updated video series about our beliefs and practices (like ANE successfully did in the past), and make it available to each congregation as well.
 - (1) These efforts could be underwritten via donors, or by funds remaining from withdrawing churches.
- d) Offer "Lunch and Learn" opportunities at District Conference, in sectional gatherings, or even online, where Brethren beliefs, history and practices are presented in easily portable mini-courses that equip leaders, and provide information that they can take to their congregations. (Offer CEUs?)
- e) Discern strategies for helping ministers uphold Brethren teachings, whether through mentors, area meetings, learning events, etc.
 - i) Give particular attention to supporting ministers not acquainted with the Church of the Brethren in their path of learning at the *start* of the credentialing process.
- f) Strategize ways to provide support to congregations and pastors at an earlier stage in the process when there is evidence that ministers are leading a congregation away from Brethren beliefs and practices, or a congregation itself is beginning to be out of harmony with the Brethren.

4) Facilitate Events that Encourage Understanding of Differences

Directly address our theological differences, striving for greater understanding of the various points of view and emphases of our shared faith in Jesus Christ.

- a) Sponsor and support events, district-wide and more locally, that present a variety of viewpoints on controversial issues in faithful manners. Examples include:
 - i) Lancaster COB's Wednesday Night Live series on "Hot Button Topics which Engage and Enrage Christians," which hosted committed Christian speakers representing contrasting viewpoints on the same subject on different nights.
 - ii) Indian Creek COB plans for hosting young adult focused "Faith and Justice Forum" events, designed to "build bridges of understanding and respect across differing perspectives on complex faith and social issues of our day."
- b) Provide open opportunities for congregations and their members to enter into safe and structured dialogue with each other around issues of which we may not all be of one mind.
 - i) Such events would take careful planning, and require meeting facilitators, in order to assist members of the District in honestly and openly sharing differing points of view, with the goal of enhancing the understanding of, and appreciation for, the convictions of others--not the goal of changing someone's mind.
- c) Encourage our congregations and their members to embrace the differences that give richness and power to our life together in Christ.
 - i) By recognizing our different ethnicities, races, and genders, and by celebrating the varied gifts given by God that we bring to share with each other, we affirm that "there are many gifts, but the same Spirit" that work together to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.
 - ii) Strategies to help us embrace our differences might include:
 - (1) Creating intentional, ongoing, faith in action sessions that highlight how our differences contribute to the effectiveness of our ministries;
 - (2) Sharing Brethren beliefs, practices, and history that also recognize the contributions of our female and our non-Germanic forebears;
 - (3) Lifting up the value in our differences, naming how our differences help us strengthen each other's work through bring varied perspectives and varied gifts to bear on shared actions in a complementary manner; and
 - (4) Intentionally valuing each person for the various gifts that they bring to our shared vision of proclaiming the Gospel.

5) Embrace a District Process for Responding to Disagreement

Provide leadership in dealing with disagreements within the District by embracing the 2004 AC statement, "Congregation Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions."

- a) Commit to implementing the guidance of the 2004 Annual Conference Statement, "Congregation Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions" as district policy.
 - i) This requires the District Board to study the paper itself, and then to develop a process that identifies who in the district structure is responsible for particular parts of what a district is called to do.
- b) Strategize how to acquaint congregations with the 2004 Annual Conference Statement, as well as with the district process for implementation.
 - i) This knowledge will be for a congregation's own benefit, as well as for all congregations and members to understand the process that the District is committed to follow for any congregation that finds itself in disagreement with any Annual Conference decision.
 - ii) Making the process for congregational disagreement clear will reduce anxiety about how future instances of disagreement will be handled.
- c) Consider how this process might be easily extended to other disagreements we might face, even if not strictly a disagreement with Annual Conference.

6) Renew a District Emphasis on Spiritual Renewal

Commit additional resources toward intentionally tending to our spiritual health and vitality throughout the District.

- a) Re-create the District Spiritual Renewal Team, and empower them for their work.
- b) Include emphases for congregations, leaders and pastors that contribute to spiritual renewal, relationship building, and fostering respect.
- c) Connect pastors in meaningful and substantive ways that invite their input during pastoral gatherings and trainings.
- d) Encourage small pastoral peer gathering or partnerships that provide support and encouragement.
- e) The new staff person could possibly be given responsibilities to assist in this area.
- f) Bring people who have a heart for support and encouragement into walking alongside congregations and pastors.
 - i) This could be a benefit to any of our congregations and pastors.
 - ii) Those particularly benefiting from this support might include pastors or congregations in transition, those having difficulty in some way, or those not as familiar with our Brethren identity.

7) Develop Strategies for shared Mission-Driven Activities that help Build Unity

Recognize that unity springs from shared purpose and action, and so strive to intentionally create opportunities for working together across congregational lines.

- a) Provide opportunities for us to like each other, despite the obstacles of distance and difference.
 - i) We recognize that district-wide events are often difficult due to travel and location, but let that not stop us from doing what we can.
 - ii) If an event can only reach a few congregations, that is still better than none (*although do not use this as an excuse to not reach widely or exclude others*).
 - iii) Prioritize opportunities for congregations to gather... and encourage them to help in the planning. (It takes more time and effort, but if the time/talent/resources are there, it becomes exciting and beneficial to those involved, generating connectedness.)
- b) Create opportunities for churches to partner together on specific tasks to achieve a specific goal.
 - i) One example might be hosting an outreach event. Funding would be provided only if multiple churches partnered together on the project. Another example might be two or more churches working together on a celebration event for all those who have been newly baptized in our district. The possibilities are great.
 - ii) Reporting back, in ways that are then shared with the wider district, would be an essential component of this effort. Such allows others to see our unity in action, helps build a culture of unity, and serves to encourage others to dream up and implement actions/events/partnerships of their own.
 - iii) Allocate resources (staff time, etc.) to help facilitate these activities. Take the lead in suggesting possibilities to various congregations and helping coordinate these efforts.
- c) Encourage churches to use the facilities of *other* churches for events. This allows congregations to support and encourage other congregations in their ministry.
 - i) Some of these events could even be structured in a reciprocal way; for instance, if Church A held a retreat at Church B's building with Church B supplying a meal; after a time, Church B could come to Church A's building, and enjoy a meal provided by Church A.
 - ii) Never underestimate the power of one church having the opportunity to serve another. (Nothing garners support and unity more than asking another to help.)

(Recommendation #7 continues on the next page....)

- d) Have one-on-one partner churches for prayer and support, encouraging them to meet together in prayer (either staff or board/leadership teams).
 - i) Buddy congregations could change each year.
 - ii) Select churches that are closer to each other, so that they grow in deeper fondness with one another.
- e) Hold pastoral gatherings that truly have meaning – spiritually, educationally, mentally, and physically.
 - i) Hold a training on things that pastors truly need training on (ask them what they would like to see).
 - ii) Bring in phenomenal speakers for an evening that will fill their souls with joy and encouragement.
 - iii) Encourage pastoral partnerships that can reach out to one another for support and encouragement with a buddy peer or small groups.
- f) Involve people in district leadership from as many different congregations as possible. The more we involve individuals from a congregation, the more they share a district identity back to that congregation.
- g) Consider reworking our vision/mission/purpose from the perspective of active participation from congregations. Align it with our denominational vision, so that there is a cohesive direction we feel called to as a district.
 - i) Hold mini-gatherings to see how congregations feel about this common vision together, both to share the vision, as well as to sharpen it.
 - ii) Teach, equip, challenge congregations to use this vision in their local context, encouraging them to discern how they fit into this greater vision.

8) Release District Time, Talent, and Treasure for All of the Above

Choose to make significant investments to help us create the future we seek.

- a) Allocate staff and board time for helping coordinate and move us forward.
 - i) Communication is incredibly important: strategize how to share what we are doing together, celebrating what we have accomplished, telling stories of ‘testimonies’ in person and online, etc.
 - ii) Create even more opportunities for personal visits from staff and board.
 - iii) Release financial resources, whether from donors or withdrawing congregations, to provide funding support to those who want to work together to bring a greater impact in their community.
 - (1) Adopt an attitude of “If this will bring about a greater sense of unity between congregations within our district, then this is likely worth our investment.”
- b) Develop helpful and supportive ways to track the progress of those things we state that we wish to accomplish, including providing sufficient oversight, so that we actually accomplish what we intend.

Appendix A: Helpful Observations for Additional Consideration

1. Reflections on Unity

- a. Unity is not another event to have, but arises from a common purpose or vision or mission that a group of people wish to attain together. You know you are unified when all aspects of an organization are focused in the same direction.
 - i. Corollary: unity is not a helpful goal in and of itself... unity does not serve well as a vision, a mission, or a purpose, as it has no future, no content. Rather, unity is the by-product of shared goals.
 - 1. If our goal is simply for us to like each other more, to connect more... then yes, we can develop events and ideas around that and that will help somewhat. However, just developing events will not bring long lasting unity to any part of our structure.
 - ii. Therefore, creating strategies for unity is helpful but cannot be our mission/vision. We will be served well by being clear about our mission/vision, which allows that vision to foster unity.
 - 1. This isn't to say that it is unhelpful to implement strategies to contribute towards our unity, such as building relationships... it just means that we need to keep the larger goal of our shared vision in mind.
 - iii. Unity happens when congregations desire to be a part of the greater body, to be identified with the church down the street. Ultimately, the District can do little to make people feel unified. However, the District can give space for churches to partner with one another in a common vision/mission, which will create a sense of moving together, fostering unity.

2. Reflections on How Connections Happen

- a. District Connections
 - i. District connections typically happen through large group engagement – e.g., District Conference
 - ii. It would be helpful to strategize how to create other district connections in more regional ways.
 - iii. Unless it is something that a person loves, most times, experience has shown that people will not come to a district event, just because it is a district event. The age of “structure allegiance” is over, and has been for a time now.
- b. Congregational Connections
 - i. Congregational connections typically happen through purposeful/thematic opportunities – hymn sings, shared work projects, co-sponsoring events, shared worship services, etc.

c. Pastoral Connections

- i. Pastoral connections typically happen through small groups, thematic opportunities, or working on a task together – trainings, small groups/ministerial area gatherings, shared projects.

3. Reflections on the Implementation of Great Ideas

- a. Often the church can produce great statements to guide our faith and life, and recommendations are often very powerful... but if these things are not implemented, nothing much changes.
 - i. Therefore, our follow-through is essential. It is very important to create helpful and supportive ways to check on and evaluate the progress of those things we state that we wish to accomplish.

*Respectfully submitted,
The Way Forward Team*

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Action of the ANE District Board on June 16, 2020: The ANE Board affirmed the report of the ANE Way Forward Team as presented and the ANE Board adopted the Way Forward Covenant—Re-ordered—June 2020.