

Compelling Vision Process 2019 District Conference Report

In Proverbs 29:18 we are reminded that “Where there is no vision, the people perish, but they that keepeth the law, happy are they” (KJV). In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way: “If people can’t see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; but when they attend to what he reveals, they are most blessed.”

It is unsettling to provide leadership for *and* to engage in a process when there is no preconceived outcome. It requires faith. Brothers and sisters, this has been a journey of faith as we have sought to open ourselves to God’s call and vision. The Compelling Vision Process was not intended or designed to “test”, directly or indirectly, the desire of the body to maintain, change, or establish any particular official position/statement of the Annual Conference. Rather, the intent was to change the focus and tone of our internal discourse as we turned our attention toward God’s Spirit moving among us, seeking to identify that which unites us and discern that which God is calling us to be and do as the body of Christ in these times. Throughout, our work has been shaped by the guiding statement drafted by the Compelling Vision Working Group and affirmed by the Compelling Vision Process Team at the beginning of the process:

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!

Despite faithful engagement in the process by people across the denomination, we know there remain barriers and obstacles to full and widespread embrace and embodiment of the vision yet to be articulated. In an effort to gain a better understanding of these concerns, we asked a question at Annual Conference which allowed each participant to give voice to that which they perceived as barriers or obstacles to their embrace and embodiment of the final vision. The responses gleaned from that question will be shared with the Leadership Team, which will decide how best to respond to these concerns.

That said, we understand firsthand the underlying tension that results from different perspectives. As a team, we are a diverse body, bringing differing cultural, geographic, theological and experiential perspectives to our work together. Just as some discovered around their tables at district conversations and/or Annual Conference, we have had to work hard at building and maintaining relationships and learning to communicate with one another in our discernment about how best to guide this process and theme your responses at each stage of the process.

Some have asked if we will be taking the questions we asked at Annual Conference to other constituency groups to broaden the input. The process was launched with conversations at the 2018 Annual Conference. We then took the conversations into the districts to widen the reach through a

series of 73 conversation events across the country (a report on these conversations can be found on the Compelling Vision webpage at www.brethren.org/compellingvision). The conversation then returned to Annual Conference in 2019 to deepen the conversation around some of what we heard in the district conversations. In addition to inviting the delegates to engage in these conversations, non-delegates were given an opportunity to register in advance to sit around tables and engage in the conversation as well. Trusting that the body gathered at Annual Conference was representative of the wider body, we are not planning to take the questions posed at Annual Conference to other constituencies. That said, we did take four of the questions asked at Annual Conference to the youth gathered there because we knew they had different scheduled activities and would not be participating in the conversations taking place during the business sessions. We appreciated their enthusiastic engagement around the questions and their insightful wisdom.

While we know that the experience varied from table to table and those at some tables did not have a positive experience, we have also heard numerous anecdotal accounts of the ways in which relationships were transformed, trust was built, unity was discovered in the midst of diversity, and hope was renewed. These stories affirmed the conversational nature of the process and the use of the iPad technology provided by CoVision, which allowed for everyone's voice to be heard—not just the voices of a few standing in line at microphones—and gave us the opportunity to share an immediate snapshot of the themes emerging in the conversations.

As the process unfolded at Annual Conference, some expressed curiosity about or skepticism of the questions we chose to ask. So, we offer this small window into our thought process in choosing these questions.

- Thursday morning we asked questions that helped us begin to dream about the future, to affirm where God is already at work among us, and to help us think about our identity through the lens of our practices and passions.
- Friday morning we moved into questions designed to help us think more deeply about what it means to be Christ's community and how we can find ways to live well with each other.
- Friday afternoon we invited participants to take a closer look at some of our historical core convictions which had been affirmed in the District conversations—like discipleship formation, peace, and service. The intent was to help us better understand these convictions and how we are called to put them into practice in these times.
- On Saturday morning we moved to questions designed to inspire big dreams about the future of our calling and work together as God's people, as well as to help us start to envision what those big ideas could look like in practical and specific terms.

For those who are interested, a full list of the questions asked at Annual Conference can be found on the Compelling Vision webpage (www.brethren.org/compellingvision).

Many participants were inspired by the conversation around two particular questions:

- Describe a Christ-centered ministry you have observed in another Church of the Brethren congregation or in the wider body in the last year that made you more hopeful about our future.
- What is the next big idea to address one or more of these needs?

Recognizing that creativity breeds creativity and energy feeds energy, the complete list of responses to each of those questions has been posted on our webpage.

So, where do we go from here? In the coming weeks, we will be analyzing the data more comprehensively. Not only will the Compelling Vision Process Team and Compelling Vision Working Group be working together to do an internal analysis of the data, but we have contracted with Auxano Consulting to do an external and objective analysis of the data. Once the analysis has been completed, we will write and disseminate a report on the conversations that took place here at Annual Conference. In addition, Auxano will continue to consult with us as we take the gleanings from that analysis and begin to articulate the vision, which will be brought back to Annual Conference next summer for affirmation by the body. The combined Compelling Vision Working Group and Process Team is scheduled to meet September 23-26 to finalize a report on the Annual Conference Data and begin to articulate the vision emerging from the conversations.

During the last fifteen months, we have felt the prayerful support and encouragement of so many undergirding our work. We hope you will continue to hold the team and the unfolding process in your prayers.

At the outset we stated that it was our fervent prayer that as a result of this journey:

- relationships with one another would be deepened, transcending points of disagreement and more fully reflecting Christ's body;
- we would be able to celebrate the ongoing activity of God's Spirit at work among us;
- we would be open to what God is calling us to do *together* as Christ's disciples;
- the vision ultimately articulated would be compelling—not as an external obligation, but because it lays claim to our hearts, our imaginations, and our spirits, shaping our identity and inspiring our ministry at all levels of the church;
- and we would wholeheartedly embrace a way forward, centered in Jesus, affirming contextual creativity as we boldly seek to embody that vision, for the Glory of God and our neighbors' good.

This continues to be our prayer. We hope those who have participated in the process have already experienced a taste of this and that all will join us in this prayer as the process continues to unfold.