



Sacred Listening

Tending Transformation through sharing stories of God's faithful presence in our congregations.

Thank you for sharing your time and gifts with Central District Conference as we engage in this *Sacred Listening* process. We are confident that you will be blessed by the stories that emerge during your congregational visits. And we are confident that the stories shared will strengthen our faith in God as well as our relationships with one another across the conference.

Background: As the CDC board and staff reflected on our changing conference, we wondered how we might better understand and serve our congregations. Some of us had heard about “appreciative inquiry” as a way of gathering information that might help us prepare for the future. We learned that Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary had recently sent two staff persons for training in appreciative inquiry, Jewel Gingerich Longenecker and David Cramer. Jewel and David shared their expertise with the board and we entered into a collaborative agreement with AMBS to implement our *Sacred Listening* process. The process was also shared with the CDC Leadership Council who offered their suggestions and support. Our goal is to visit all 48 congregations of CDC during 2022. During the first half of 2023 the stories we gathered will be reviewed, seeking common themes as well as unique stories. We trust these stories will provide a clearer picture of who we are, what gifts our congregations offer to our communities, and how we might best resource and support one another into the future.

Roles: Ideally, there will be three persons visiting each congregation. These roles will be more fully defined later but, briefly, they include:

- Facilitator - asking questions and lightly guiding the sharing and conversation that results
- Notetaker - carefully capturing the conversation so that stories and themes can be shared with leadership and throughout the conference
- Sacred Listener - listening prayerfully throughout the conversation, summing up what emerged most saliently with the gathering, and closing in prayer

Reimbursement: Travel and meal expenses while visiting congregations can be reimbursed by submitting a reimbursement form to Emma at the CDC office. We encourage car pooling, lodging with hosts, and modest meals. It is often less expensive to rent a vehicle than reimbursing mileage for one's own vehicle.

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in this exciting opportunity.

CDC Staff and Board of Directors

Current CDC Context: “The roots of our own Central District Conference lie in the formation of the General Conference in 1860. The Central District Conference was organized in 1957 with the merger of the Central Conference Mennonite Church (organized in 1908) and the Middle District Conference (organized in 1888). These conferences carried on the Anabaptist tradition of congregational autonomy while enabling congregations to come together for fellowship and mutual encouragement and to organize for work which congregations could do best in cooperation with each other.” (From *Central District Conference Polity: History and Current Understanding*, 1998) The “CDC At-A-Glance” document captures some of the basic information about our current conference of 46 congregations spread across 11 states.

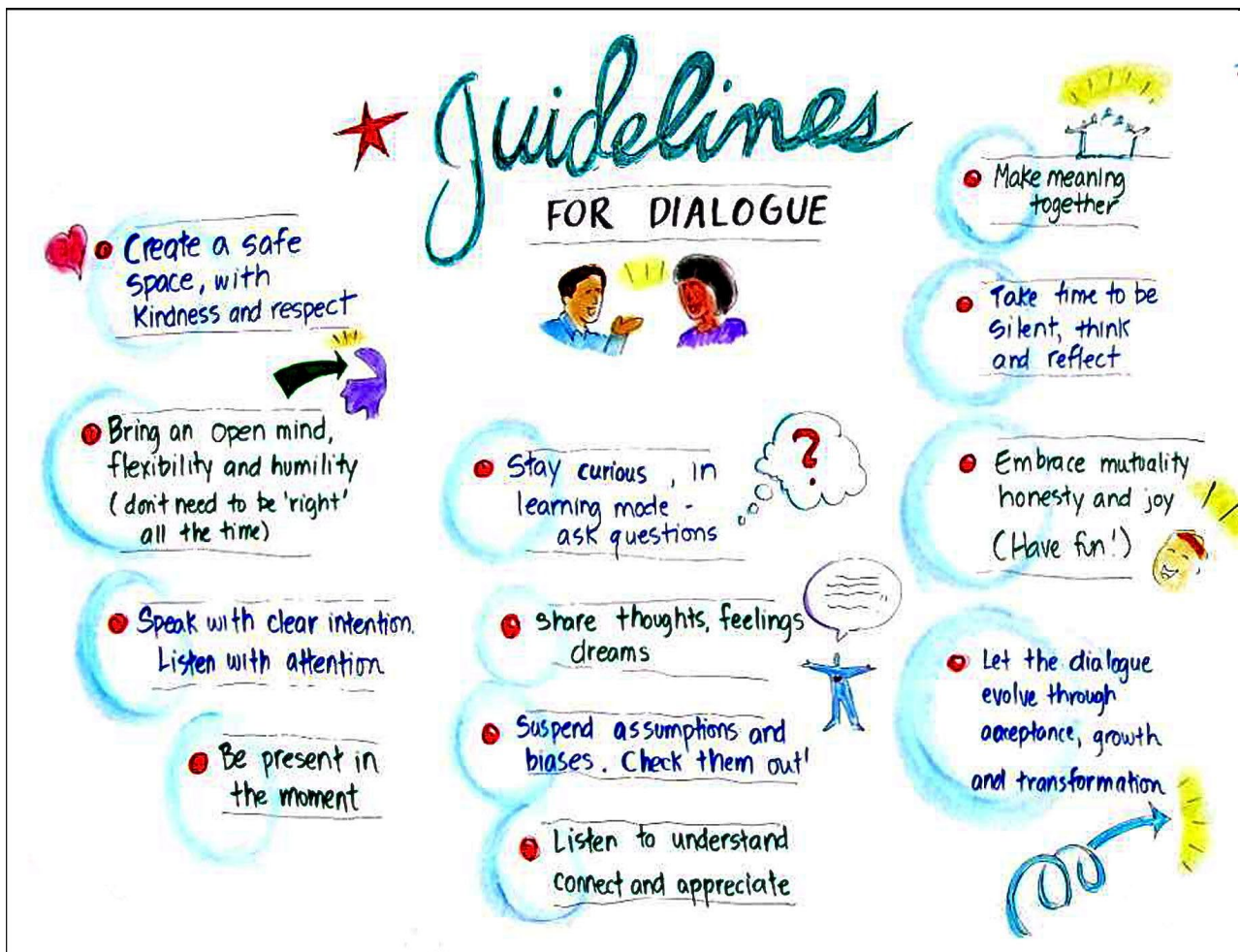
Just as congregations and families change over time, so do conferences. Congregations join and congregations leave. New congregations emerge and small congregations dissolve. In the spring of 2021, our board of directors reflected on some of the recent changes in the conference. The following were identified.

- We have welcomed nine new congregations into CDC over the past five years.
- A number of potential emerging communities of faith have expressed interest in CDC, and we are exploring how best to nurture them.
- Our congregations have increasingly affirmed the full participation of LGBTQ persons in membership, marriage, and ministry, while as a conference we continue to recognize and appreciate the diversity of theological understandings among our congregations. Our congregational polity allows for diversity.
- We have all learned new ways to relate across distance during the pandemic, and we all continue to discern what to carry forward into whatever our “new normal” will be.

CDC Theme- *Tending Transformation*: Every two years the CDC leadership identifies a theme to guide us. Our 2021-2023 theme was chosen as we recognized the many ways our denomination, conference, churches and communities are undergoing transformation. We recognized that change happens and it can also be “tended.” One way we “tend” is by paying “attention.” The words “tending” and “attention” are from the same root word *tendere* which means “to stretch, to expect, to wait for.” If we are a people who are Tending Transformation, we are expectant people, watching attentively as we expect to be stretched. *Sacred Listening* is one way we pay attention to the movement of God’s Spirit among us.

Role of the Facilitator- Appreciative Inquiry is about storytelling. The role of the facilitator is to provide a spirit and environment that invites storytelling.

1. Below is a sample welcome and introduction to the process. Facilitators are encouraged to be familiar with this and make it their own.
2. We are asking congregations to commit at least 1 ½ hours to this listening process. Check with the church contact person when you arrive to clarify how much time is available. Ask about microphones. It is important all can hear.
3. The way the questions are framed invite stories. It is important that the same questions are asked of each congregation so that we can look for common themes. Repeat the questions as needed.
4. Silence is OK. Allow some time for reflection and be non-anxious with silence.
5. Ask people to state their name at the beginning of their story or response.
6. Stories typically stimulate more stories. Allow adequate time for the stories to be told. However, also be conscious of the time. If the energy is strong and stories keep coming, it may be ok to extend the time by 10 minutes or so. If it is clear the energy is gone and people are checking their watches/ phones, it's probably time to wrap it up.
7. It is ok to ask follow-up questions after a story is told in order to gain clarity or make sure you understand something correctly. But don't try to summarize the story or try to make it fit into a particular "theme." Let the story stand on its own.



<https://www.transformativeconversations.com/conversation-intensive>

8. While most of the questions will likely reflect positive experiences, there may be some stories that also reflect pain, loss, grief, etc. It is important to honor these stories as well and allow the space needed for these stories.

Role of the Note Taker- The overall goal of the notetaker is to capture the essence of the stories and responses given by the participants in a written format.

1. Congregations will be invited to record the *Sacred Listening* conversations if they would like. Feel free to ask if you can get a copy of the recording.
2. With the congregation's permission, you may also record the conversations with your computer or other device.
3. Take good notes throughout the conversations.
4. It's OK to ask for someone to clarify something or repeat something if you are unclear about what is being said.
5. You are not being asked to record the stories or responses "verbatim" but to capture the main ideas and interesting points in a summary format.
6. The final summary document should include:
 - A. Congregation Name
 - B. Names and roles of the two or three CDC representatives leading the process
 - C. Date and Time of the conversation and how long it lasted
 - D. Number of persons present
 - E. Anything else that is important about the setting. (e.g. Snowstorm limited participation.)
7. Please send your final summary in an editable (not PDF) digital document to Emma Hartman at office@mcusacdc.org preferably within a week of the visit.

Role of the Sacred Listener- This title is taken from the realm of group spiritual direction where one person is asked to hold the conversation in prayer and listen carefully for the spirit of the conversation. You are encouraged not to speak at all until the very end of the session. You may take your own notes throughout but you are not the "note taker." Your notes aren't capturing the stories so much as the spirit and tone of the conversations as a whole. You might ask yourself the following questions as you listen to these conversations.

1. What is the spirit of the conversations? Joyful? Forced? Generative? Slow? Etc.
2. When did energy increase and when did it decrease?
3. When were folks most engaged? When did their attention wander?
4. Are you hearing particular themes being repeated?
5. Was there any pain, brokenness, or loss being expressed?
6. Does it seem as if something new is being shared that is especially important?

At the end of the session, you will be asked to offer some of your observations to the whole group and to close the session in prayer. Be sure to include thankfulness to God for God's presence and the giftedness of the congregation.

Sample Welcome and Introduction

On behalf of the Central District conference, thank you for taking this time to share stories of how you perceive God moving among your congregation. (Introduce yourselves and the roles you have; facilitator, recorder, sacred listener.) Central District Conference is 46 congregations spread across eleven states. We are one of 16 conferences that make up Mennonite Church USA. Just as each individual is uniquely created in the image of God, so each congregation is uniquely gifted for worship and ministry in a particular location. Thanks be to God for (Name of Church).

The CDC leadership has recognized that our conference is different than it was just six years ago and continues to change. Nine congregations have joined CDC in the last six years. Several emerging communities of faith are exploring affiliation with CDC. Our welcome of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ continues to be discerned. We have experienced a pandemic. Our nation continues to wrestle with issues of justice, privilege, culture, power, environment, race, and more. We are curious about how our congregations are tending to the ongoing transformation that God calls us to.

*We have six questions that we are asking every congregation. We hope to have time for each question, but we will see. What is important is that we hear and understand your stories. We will be taking notes and compiling these stories. When you share your story, please use a microphone (if applicable) so we can all hear. Please state your name as well. Next year, after we've visited every congregation, we will review the stories, looking for common themes and identifying what is unique. We will share our notes with you. **With permission, we will also share stories with one another across the conference. Please let us know if any of the stories you share today should not be shared with others.** We believe this process will help us better know ourselves and what God is calling us to.*

We want this to be a safe place for sharing your stories. We want to hear from a number of people. Please know that your story will be honored.

Do you have any questions?

The Questions: [After several drafts of questions that were reviewed by the CDC Board, Leadership Council, and our AMBS resource persons Jewel Gingerich Longenecker and David Cramer, the following questions emerged. These same questions will be asked in the same order during all of the congregational visits. These questions will be shared with the congregation prior to the visit.]

1. Tell a story about a time when you were especially excited or grateful to be a part of your church.
2. The mission of Central District Conference is summarized as “Knowing Christ’s love...Answering God’s call.” Share a story or two that you feel demonstrates God’s love within your congregation.
3. We “support missional partnerships that make God’s reign visible.” How are you living out your congregation's vision in the community around you? Can you share a story that demonstrates this?
4. We want to “call and nurture wise, dynamic and compassionate Anabaptist leadership.” How does your congregation nurture your gifts and the gifts of others?
5. We want to be communities in which “grace-filled relationships flourish.” Can you share an experience when your congregation was blessed by its relationships with other CDC churches, or other communities such as camps or colleges?
6. Our Mennonite Church USA vision calls us to be communities of God’s “healing and hope.” As you envision your future as such a Spirit-led community, what would that look like in your context?