

# **Western District Conference Listening Process Summary Report - June 2025**

**Western District Conference (WDC) mission statement:** Western District Conference empowers Anabaptist/Mennonite congregations to:

- Witness and invite others to faith in Jesus Christ
- Dwell in just and loving relationships
- Connect to God's mission in the world

## **Listening Process Background**

In 2022, the WDC Executive Board approved a conference-wide listening process. A listening process planning team was formed to develop and refine the process. Planning team members were Heidi Regier Kreider, Doug Penner and Wendy Funk Schrag. In February and March 2023 the listening process planning team conducted visits at Buhler Mennonite Church and Grace Hill Mennonite Church. Additional refinements were made after these pilot visits before launching the program conference-wide. Over 20 individuals were identified and received training to serve as facilitators and recorders on a 3-member team for each congregational visit. Team members for each visit were selected based on geographical proximity and availability.

In April 2023, a letter was sent to each WDC congregation inviting them to be a part of a conference-wide listening experience with the purpose of empowering the vitality of WDC congregations by hearing their stories, offering ongoing relationship, and supporting their witness and mission. The goal of the listening process was to discover common themes among conference congregations and to animate hope, joy and shared vision in the months and years ahead.

Why now? Our proposal to undertake a listening conversation within churches came in recognition of transitions experienced across the conference in recent years, as well as transitions expected in the future. The WDC leadership recognized that our conference is different than it was just a few years ago and continues to change. We have experienced a pandemic. Our nation continues to wrestle with issues of justice, privilege, culture, power, environment, race, and more. A number of congregations have experienced pastoral transitions. Some congregations have left the conference while others joined as members of WDC. Congregations have discerned issues of welcome and witness, with all the passion and conviction those issues stimulate in our pews and in our hearts.

WDC wanted to hear how congregations are tending to these ongoing transitions and transformations as we listen to God's call for our conference, how WDC can provide resources, and connect congregations around common themes and initiatives.

## **Listening Process Format**

Congregations were asked to identify possible dates when a listening team of three people representing WDC could join their congregation in person for listening sessions of approximately 2 hours. Most congregations chose a Sunday morning or afternoon that best suited their schedule.

Listening sessions opened with reflections on theme verses from 1 Thessalonians 1:1b-3: *“Grace to you and peace. We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers constantly, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

The sessions featured small group conversations, using Appreciative Inquiry questions designed to highlight and build on the hopeful and life-giving experiences of each congregation:

1. Tell about a time when you’ve felt most alive and vibrant as a congregation, or as a participant of the congregation.
2. What is foundational and reassuring about this congregation that has helped in difficult times?
3. What activities or ministries are most important for your congregation now in fully carrying out God’s work?
4. What do you hope for the future for your church and what resources from WDC would be helpful for that?

Small groups recorded responses to each question, and then shared comments with the whole group. A report of the responses was sent back to each congregation following their listening session.

At some visits, not all of the questions were used if the congregation had recently held similar conversations as part of their church life. All adults and high school youth were encouraged to participate. Some congregations also found creative ways to include younger children through children’s features during worship or other avenues.

At the conclusion of each listening session the listening teams shared information with the congregation about WDC resources, and attending and experiencing worship were an important part of the visits by listening teams.

Administrative support for the Listening Process was provided by WDC Administrative Assistant Michelle Hiebert and WDC Ministry Assistant Violeta Ajquejay-Suastegui.

Listening team facilitators and recorders included:

- Listening Process Planning Team members -
  - Doug Penner - Bethel College Mennonite Church, North Newton, KS
  - Wendy Funk Schrag - First Mennonite Church, Newton, KS
  - Mike Peters - Rainbow Mennonite Church, Kansas City, KS
- WDC Staff members -
  - Heidi Regier Kreider, Conference Minister
  - Sandra Montes-Martinez, Associate Conference Minister (TX)
  - Kathy Neufeld Dunn, Associate Conference Minister (KS)
- Wayne Albrecht - Peace Mennonite Church, Dallas, TX
- Suhelen Cazares - Iglesia Menonita Aposento Alto, Wichita, KS
- Ron Flaming - Shalom Mennonite Church, Newton, KS
- Dawn Yoder Harms - Bethel College Mennonite Church, North Newton, KS
- Steve Hochstetler - Austin (TX) Mennonite Church

- Berni Kaufman - Eden Mennonite Church, Moundridge, KS
- Lee Lever - Austin (TX) Mennonite Church
- Delon Martens - First Mennonite Church, Hutchinson, KS
- Marlene McKitrick - San Antonio (TX) Mennonite Church
- Elizabeth Melendez - Houston (TX) Mennonite Church
- Nita Nikkel - Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, Goessel, KS
- Vicki Penner - Southern Hills Mennonite Church, Topeka, KS
- Kathy Goering Reid - Peace Mennonite Church, Dallas, TX
- Rachel Voth Schrag - Peace Mennonite Church, Dallas, TX
- Cynthia Neufeld Smith - Southern Hills Mennonite Church, Topeka, KS
- Roger Neufeld Smith - Southern Hills Mennonite Church, Topeka, KS
- Megan Turley - Houston (TX) Mennonite Church
- Dave Wiebe - First Mennonite Church, Newton, KS
- Ben Woodward-Breckbill - Shalom Mennonite Church, Newton, KS

## **Visits Conducted**

Western District Conference has 55 congregations and church plants in the following locations:

- Nebraska: 2
- Kansas: 34
- Oklahoma: 3
- Texas: 14
- Guatemala: 2

We are thankful for the number of congregations that were able to participate. 33 Listening Process visits were scheduled from February 2023 to July 2025:

- Nebraska: 2
- Kansas: 21
- Oklahoma: 1
- Texas: 8 (included a listening session with youth and children's ministry leaders in Texas)
- Guatemala: 1

## **Responses Shared in the Listening Process:**

Participants shared a wide range of stories and reflections in response to Questions #1 and #2. These reflections highlighted how WDC congregations provide a vital spiritual home centered around Jesus and grounded in scripture, where participants experience friendship, belonging, acceptance, love, spiritual companionship, and support; hospitality and fellowship; intergenerational worship that inspires and connects people; witness for peace and work for justice; capable and caring pastors; financial generosity; and a theological foundation and historical heritage connected to Mennonite Church USA and Western District Conference.

With the goal of resourcing and connecting congregations, this summary focuses on common themes and highlights from the comments shared in response to Questions #3 and #4:

## **What activities or ministries are most important for your congregation now in fully carrying out God's work?**

WDC congregations are engaged in a wide range of ministries:

- Congregation based – Sunday school, children's and youth ministries, Bible studies, discipleship training and catechism, topical study groups, caring ministries and support groups, life-giving worship, social events and shared meals to build relationships
- Community – Activities around ministering to specific needs (homeless shelters, food banks, volunteer work at nursing homes, participating in community justice/advocacy efforts, peace groups and organizations, foster care, etc.)
- Mennonite organizations – Ministries with Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Central Committee kits, relief sales, and meat canning, Mennonite Mission Network, Camp Mennoscah and Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp, colleges (Bethel and Hesston), etc.

## **What do you hope for the future for your church?**

WDC congregations highlighted these hopes:

- To grow in numbers, especially young adults who will stay and become the next future generations
- To appreciate our history but be relevant for today
- To grow in diversity
- To have stronger children's and youth ministries
- To focus on strengthening relationships rather than the things we disagree on
- To maintain Anabaptist values – to evolve without compromising who we are
- To be known in our community, both to serve the community and invite community members to our church
- To support our pastors so they stay long-term
- To establish the next generation of church leaders
- To still be here 50 years from now or perhaps merge with another local congregation

## **What resources from WDC would be helpful for that?**

The following were the most-mentioned ideas from the listening visits:

### New resources:

- Help us learn strategies for growth, outreach, viability and revitalization, and how to communicate Anabaptist/Mennonite faith to new people
- Help with social media, technology and training on how we can be more visible in our community
- Host regional youth gatherings
- Help congregations connect with college students, young adults or other WDC members who move into their community
- Help us connect with young adults and families with young children

- Connect WDC congregations with each other for collaboration, learning, ministry and mission projects, peace witness, sharing expertise
- Provide resources to train teachers of children and youth to shape Anabaptist faith identity
- Help us learn how to manage congregational finances
- Communicate more effectively about the resources WDC offers, e.g. Provide a poster for each congregation showing all the WDC resources available

Continue or expand current resources:

- Continue the WDC Resource Library – it is appreciated.
- Provide Anabaptist faith formation resources, supplies and materials
- Provide grants for specific projects
- Provide safe church training and resources
- Provide resources, seminars or referrals to resources on specific topics: e.g. Anabaptist/Mennonite history, justice/peacemaking, dismantling racism, immigration, how to listen during polarizing times, personnel management, church structure, connecting with young adults, caring for older adults, support for families, domestic violence, mental health, LGBTQ inclusion, land acknowledgment and indigenous justice, faith and politics
- Connect congregations with Mennonite service and mission opportunities
- Provide expertise in mediation and conflict transformation
- Provide resources for pastoral calling/training, transitions, salary guidelines, and pastor reviews
- Create a supply list of people in WDC available to help with worship (music, preaching, etc.)
- Provide accompaniment, encouragement and partnership

**Other Observations and Congregational Strengths**

All of the listening teams reported experiencing warm hospitality when they visited congregations. Congregations have developed welcoming spaces including parking, signage, greeters and coffee. Worship services included intergenerational involvement, a wide variety of music, a joyous spirit, and meaningful preaching, along with faith formation for all ages.

Listening teams often mentioned that the congregations appreciate their history but strive to be relevant and up to date by incorporating live-stream or other technology and a social media presence.

Congregations have specific areas of expertise and experience, and could be a resource for other congregations.

Although attendance has declined in many congregations, especially since Covid-19, congregations are focusing on self-reflection, experimentation, deepening relationships within the congregation, and exploring ways to grow. Some are grieving the loss of people who have left their congregation, and some are celebrating growing numbers of new participants. Listening team reports emphasized how much congregations care for one other and their communities.

## Next Steps

The WDC staff and Executive Board will continue to consider the suggestions for ways WDC can help congregations as well as implement specific actions. Some activities have already been launched, including the following:

- A team of several WDC staff persons and a congregational youth ministry leader attended a training at the Kansas Leadership Center to explore the challenge of supporting congregational youth ministry more equitably across the conference, in ways that are culturally and contextually relevant. Also, a special listening session was held with children and youth ministry leaders in WDC congregations in Texas, to learn more about their context, hopes and needs. The Resource Commission is appointing a new Youth Ministry Committee with the task of planning regional youth gatherings in the south and the north. The Kids Meet Christ program funded by a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc will support congregations in WDC to reimagine worship to better engage children (0-12 years).
- WDC has offered resources for congregations across WDC to provide support and advocacy for immigrants; and we are connecting WDC congregations in central Kansas with DART (Direct Action and Research Training) as a way to engage in local and regional justice initiatives in collaboration with other faith communities.
- Workshops on specific topics at WDC Annual Assembly are planned based on needs identified from the listening visits.
- WDC staff and Commissions are using the listening team reports to incorporate this information into their support for congregations, including planning for forums to connect congregational leaders around various topics and ministries.
- We are considering ways to more effectively inform congregations about the resources that WDC offers, and we invite all members to support their congregations and the conference through financial gifts and ministry involvement.

**Thank you** to all who served as listening team facilitators and recorders, and for congregations' hospitality in hosting WDC listening teams and participating in the Listening Process. Hopefully this process has helped congregations be more aware of WDC resources, and will invite continued dialogue as we support, evolve and grow together. For more information about the Listening Process or this report, contact the WDC office at 316-283-6300 or [wdc@mennowdc.org](mailto:wdc@mennowdc.org)

Report submitted by the current Listening Process Planning Team

- Heidi Regier Kreider, Conference Minister
- Wendy Funk Schrag, First Mennonite Church-Newton, KS
- Mike Peters, Rainbow Mennonite Church, Kansas City, KS