

Dear Members of the Executive Board of MC USA:

Over the past 9 months, MEA has hosted a roundtable discussion involving 8-10 educators and church leaders to discern some of the key challenges and opportunities of leadership development in a post-pandemic world. Our conversation began out of a series of questions from Conference Minister David Mishler: Where are future Mennonite pastors going to come from? How and where are they going to be educated? And, if they received training, will they be trained to do the things most needed?

This raised a number of important questions about how the church is being (re)formed by the pandemic in a national context that sociologists are describing somewhere between post-Christendom and surging white Christian nationalism.

This evolving future has profound implications for how we understand the nature of the church and the nature of leadership and ministry. Our shared understanding about these matters determines what educational programs are needed to form effective leaders for the church.

We note that in Glen Guyton's recent book, *Reawakened*, we have an executive director bringing a renewed and needed focus on leadership. Out of financial scarcity or prophetic imagination, fewer churches are locating the leadership function of the congregations in full-time professional leaders. Leadership development programs need to adapt to meet the learning goals of professional, lay, and co-vocational church leaders. In some places they face a church struggling to understand its reason for being in the world at this time, and in other places absolutely overwhelming community demands and congregational needs.

We identify urgent questions of ecclesiology and the calling and educating of leaders that are critical for the future vitality of our congregations. Such questions include:

- Do congregations own the calling of church leaders as an urgent and essential ministry?
- Where do dynamic visions exist for a church as more than an in-person, once weekly gathering, where the church is seen as a *community of ministry* that forms disciples who make disciples?
- What creative credentialing pathways are possible for church leaders?
- How can we describe the essence of the church of Jesus Christ (ecclesiology) in a way that fosters *diverse and faithful* expressions of the church?
- How do we prepare *all* members of the church to be ministers?
- Where are leaders engaging *systems of oppression* so that all hear the gospel as *good news*? How do leaders learn this?
- Are the existing six competencies for ministerial leaders adequate across diverse congregations? Which competencies need the most attention today, what competencies may be missing, and *what pedagogical approaches* develop those competencies most effectively for diverse contexts?
- What are the ways that our theological, historical and traditions of practice can be integrated meaningfully into leadership training that fully engages the churches' vocation for this time?
- How do we create coordination mechanisms that support the grassroots programs which are already today breaking down silos in the academy and toward competency-based programs that are *spiritually holistic and formational*? Who wields the power to determine these competencies?
- How are leadership skills best embodied from an Anabaptist perspective for *administrative leadership and contextual engagement*?

We believe that technical strategies will not meet the leadership challenges we are facing. What is needed are adaptive approaches that engage every part of our denomination to empower local expressions of the church. The task of engaging these questions can be overwhelming because these questions belong to all of us - not only to the Executive Board, Mennonite theological schools, or designated church leaders. Our institutions are not able to discern or address all that is needed on their own. As we approach the

beginning of a new biennium for Mennonite Church USA, we believe that the executive board is in a unique position to coordinate and convene the parts of the whole to discover and address the diverse leadership needs of the church for such a time as this. So we ask the executive board to make the calling and educating of leaders a key priority of the church in the coming biennium by engaging the parts of the church to:

1. learn the essential roles that leaders play in the life and mission of local congregations and describe the kind of empowerment and authority needed to lead congregations in missional vitality;
2. cultivate visions that empower all to be ministers in the church and world, and equip congregational leaders with practical tools to live into them
3. identify the key pathways and best pedagogical practices for leadership education that are most responsive to the many circumstances where the call to church leadership emerges;
4. listen for the emergence of a shared vision for our ecclesiology - the identity of Mennonite congregations in the world and the role of leadership within them

We believe the discovery of and addressing these key areas can set us all on a course to meet the leadership needs of the church in the most responsive, relevant and impactful ways. The educational and church leaders in the recent MEA-sponsored conversations are energized by these challenges and opportunities and want to do whatever we can to equip the church with leaders for a hope-filled future. We want to partner with you in imagining how our members can be fully alive as a church that makes “God’s wisdom known in all its rich diversity until it reaches the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” (Eph. 3:10). We look forward to your response.

With deep gratitude for your service to the church,

Sarah Ann Bixler
David Boshart
Michael Danner
Marco Guete
Nancy Heisey
Michelle Hershberger
David Mishler
Sarah Nahar
John Powell
Tom Stuckey
Jolene VanGunten