Delegates discuss family business

Delegates pass recommendations, discuss issues, hear church plant updates and meet new church planting mobilizer

By Connie Faber - September 1, 2022

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Delegates pray prior to the first business session of the 2022 National Convention. Photo: Janae Rempel

The National Convention featured a packed schedule that included several business-related highlights: passing two recommendations, meeting new USMB staff member Brian Harris and two "family discussions."

Most of the business was conducted during two morning sessions that included voting on two recommendations and hearing reports. While the recommendations—affirming the slate of nominees for various boards and approving a new Memorandum of Understanding for the MB Historical Commission—presented Friday passed by a comfortable margin, there was spirited discussion surrounding both. That lively dialogue continued Friday afternoon during two optional discussions hosted by the Board of Faith and Life.

Election confusion

Delegates were presented with a slate of 24 names to fill openings on the USMB Leadership Board, Board of Faith and Life, USMB Youth and MB Historical Commission as well as Multiply, MB Foundation, International Community of Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite World Conference, Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Health Services.

Leadership Board chair Luke Haidle, who moderated the business sessions, introduced the recommendation that delegates cast a unanimous affirmation of the nominees as a group. Delegates agreed

by a vote of 103 to 8 to do so. That vote was taken via the Whova event app that all delegates were asked to download to expedite the voting process. Several delegates submitted their vote using a paper ballot.

USMB Leadership Board chair Luke Haidle prepares to commission and pray for new board members. Photo: Janae Rempel

Immediately following the vote, Haidle intended to commission new and continuing board members, but that was interrupted when it was noted that delegates had not actually affirmed the nominees. Delegates had approved the recommendation that "the election and/or affirmation of the presented nominations be voted on as one group," but a second vote was needed to complete the election/affirmation process. Once that vote was taken, the commissioning and prayer resumed.

Book prompts addition to MOU

Haidle then quickly moved on to the second recommendation from the USMB Leadership Board: the affirmation of the revised Historical Commission Memo of Understanding. Haidle said the updated MOU

includes a new sentence affirming that the Commission's printed material "must be consistent with the U.S. Conference Confession of Faith."

When Haidle instructed delegates to vote, David Faber, Ebenfeld MB Church, Hillsboro, Kan., asked for discussion. Faber's question and subsequent discussion focused on how the Commission would be expected to handle historical writing that did not support the Confession of Faith. Haidle and Don Morris, USMB national director, said that the new sentence did not apply to historical documents but material that is "newly generated."

Luke Haidle, pastor of Living Hope Church in Henderson, Nebraska, and chair of the Leadership Board, moderates the Friday morning business session. Photo: Janae Rempel

Vince Balakian, Reedley (Calif.) MB Church, asked what precipitated the recommended addition to the MOU. Morris and Haidle described the decision by the Canadian Conference of MB Churches (CCMBC) and the U.S. Conference of MB Churches (USMB) executive boards to ask the Historical Commission to re-edit *On Holy Ground*, a book of personal stories by 15 women in church leadership that was released this summer by the HC. The book was re-published without three of pages of one chapter because the author's understanding of same-sex

marriage is contrary to the Confession of Faith and "not appropriate for the book," Morris said.

"It was not our intention to silence women," Morris said. "Content that goes against our Confession of Faith does not need to be in a book with our stamp on it. We have worked with the Historical Commission and the Historical Commission knows why we are adding the verbiage to the MOU."

Haidle and Morris said the decision to reprint the book caused controversy. "Three pages we hoped would discreetly go away has come to the forefront," Haidle said, adding the events made national news in Canada.

Additional discussion followed. One delegate wanted to reconsider his vote, and parliamentarian Dennis Fast, Reedley, Calif., said the ballots already cast via the Whova app could be cleared.

Another delegate wondered what would happen if the vote failed. Fast replied that the chair would be open to another motion that omitted the new sentence or was changed in some other way.

The vote passed, 92 in favor and seven opposed.

Don Morris, right, introduces Brian Harris, left, as the USMB church planting mobilizer, a new staff p
Rempel

Church planting push

Given that evangelism was the theme, it was natural that church planting was highlighted during the convention.

"Church planting is a big deal," USMB's Morris said. "We haven't been doing all that well for the last few years. But now we're getting ready for a big push."

Part of that impetus is the addition of a new USMB staff member. Friday evening, Morris introduced Brian Harris, lead pastor of Pine Acres Church, Weatherford, Okla., as the USMB church planting mobilizer who will work with the Church Planting Council.

Harris shared his dream of establishing 20 networks of USMB churches across the U.S. in which four or five churches gather and pray together about planting churches.

When the Friday evening program ran long, individual church plant updates were moved to Saturday morning.

A prayer time for church planters, including one in Wichita, Kansas, that will be planted by Ridgepoint Church, followed the church plant updates given Saturday morning. The Wichita church plant was represented by Andy and Carmen Owen, center. Photo: Janae Rempel

Christian Kohs, church planter for Redemption Church in Owatome, Minnesota, was not able to be present Saturday morning so he provided a video report filmed in the hotel parking lot. He told of acquiring a new church building and plans for a grand opening Sept. 11, which is also the congregation's fourth birthday. In the first two weeks at their new location, they've had 48 visitors.

Phil Wiebe, Stansbury Park, Utah, church planter, told how Lakeview Church planted a second campus in Grantsville during the height of COVID-19. In more than one instance, Wiebe said they went ahead with something that seemed ill-fated.

"If it looks impossible, we should probably do it," Wiebe said.

Andy Owen, pastor of equipping and multiplication at Ridgepoint Church, Wichita, Kansas, is thankful for "miracle upon miracle" that has prepared the congregation of 1,000 for planting a new church in south Wichita. A church-plant couple has been identified, a vacant church building was made available, and a small group began meeting in mid-July.

Delegates were invited to gather around those church planters present for a time of prayer.

Bruce Enns, the new Multiply general director, was among those who briefly spoke about the Mennonite Brethren or inter-Mennonite ministry they serve. Photo: Janae Rempel

Ed Boschman, USMB representative to the International Community of Mennonite Brethren; Kyle Goings, USMB Youth chair, Tim Sullivan, chair of the national Board of Faith and Life; and Jon Wiebe, MB Foundation president and CEO, gave short verbal reports during the business sessions. Delegates also heard a brief financial report and recognized Rick Eshbaugh for his service as the Central District Conference minister.

Throughout the convention, delegates heard briefly from Fresno Pacific University president Andre Stephens, Tabor College president David Janzen, Multiply general director Bruce Enns, Ken Esau representing the Canadian Conferenece of MB Churches and Mennonite Central Committee Central States executive director Michelle Armster.

Tackling tough issues

In his Board of Faith and Life report, chair Sullivan invited delegates to attend two one-hour "family discussions" Friday afternoon during free time. The schedule identified the second hour as a discussion about

the denominational reversion clause, and Sullivan described the first hour as related to the BFL written report.

Delegates were invited to attend two hour-long "family discussion" Friday afternoon during free time. Photo: Janae Rempel

Given the vague description of the first discussion, it was a surprise to some of the 75 to 100 people present that the agenda was an update on the status of restoring former Pacific District Conference minister Gary Wall. Sullivan led the meeting and was joined via Zoom by PDC Board of Faith and Life chair Dina Gonzales-Piña.

Sullivan as well as Gonzales-Piña, Pat Coyle, previous PDC chair; Dennis Fast, current PDC chair; and Jordan Ringhofer, PDC minister, answered questions. Questions and discussion focused on understanding the events surrounding Wall's departure and concerns for Wall's family and his current ministry at a Presbyterian church in Los Vegas directing men's ministries and serving as mission strategist.

Wall was charged in April 2019 with a single charge of engaging and agreeing to engage in prostitution after a police operation at a Fresno, Calif., massage parlor in January 2019. Based on a plea agreement reached in Aug. 2019, Wall was able to withdraw his plea of no contest in August 2020, and the case was dismissed given that Wall had met certain conditions.

In May 2019, Wall resigned as the PDC minister, effective Dec. 31, 2019, to serve with the International Community of Mennonite Brethren as the U.S. national director. He resigned from the ICOMB position in November 2019.

Wall has maintained his innocence throughout.

Sullivan explained that the PDC formed a five-member restoration team in June 2021, to work with Wall. When the team of Fast, Gonzales-Piña, Coyle, Valerie Rempel and Jana Hildebrandt decided to employ Telios Law Firm, a firm that assists nonprofit and religious groups, to investigate the events of Jan.23, 2019, Wall "chose to no longer cooperate with the team." At that point, Sullivan said, the Telios Law Firm continued its investigation.

The Restoration Team received Telios' report and gave their recommendation to the U.S. BFL just prior to USMB Gathering 2022. Details of the report were not shared. Both the U.S. BFL and the PDC BFL have not yet met to discuss the recommendations and will need time to process the recommendation, according to Sullivan.

Sullivan distributed a written statement from the Restoration Team that included the following recommendation: "The Restoration Team regrets that they were unable to finish their work with Gary. Based on the findings of the Telios Law Firm, the Restoration Team is unanimously recommending that PDC/USMB leadership revoke Gary Wall's Mennonite Brethren ordination and credentialing and update his ministry status to state that he is not suited to serve in a district, national or international role in the Mennonite Brethren denomination

unless and until he chooses to re-engage in a satisfactory reconciliation process with denominational leadership." "This took a toll on the Restoration Team," Sullivan said. "Pray for Gary, his family, his church and all victims in this situation."

Church property questions

Forty-five to 50 people attended the second discussion, led by USMB national director Morris, focused on what is known as the reversion clause. U.S. Conference bylaws state "should a member church withdraw or be dissolved, its capital assets shall become the property of the district conference of which the church is a member" (USMB bylaws, Article IV, Section 1.D). Article IV, Section 2.B also states that documents governing district conference "shall be consistent with those of the U.S. Conference" and in the case of a conflict between governing documents, those of the U.S. Conference take precedence.

Don Morris leads a discussion about the USMB "reversion" clause.
Photo: Janae Rempel

Morris reviewed times when the reversion clause has been enforced and reported U.S. Conference attorney Lyndon Vix's rational for the

bylaw and assessment that reversion clauses typically hold up in court.

“What do we think of this?” Morris asked. “Our bylaws don’t allow for exemptions, but we’ve made exemptions.”

Several individuals from Central District churches noted that the CDC has written into real estate agreements statements regarding payback of loans and grants and have not enforced the reversion clause.

In the past, the Pacific District Conference has enforced the reversion clause and is currently in conversation with several congregations regarding leaving the denomination. PDC leaders asked for clarity on how USMB intends to proceed given the bylaw.

The question of how much grace can be extended was raised by several attendees. “Does it have to be all or nothing?” asked one person.

While some attendees were disappointed that no solution was identified, those involved seemed to appreciate the opportunity to discuss the issue.