PDC holds convention

Delegates process nominations, pass budget

By Janae Rempel - January 7, 2022

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Convention attendees share with each other during a time of confession and prayer Saturday. Photo: Janae Rempel

More than 100 people, including 77 delegates representing 25 churches and 25 guests, gathered at Axiom Church in Peoria, Arizona, for the Pacific District Conference convention Nov. 5-6, 2021.

Presiding over his first convention, district minister Jordan Ringhofer introduced the convention theme, "Relevant, Revitalized, Reproducing."

"Healthy churches and disciples will be reproducing churches and disciples," Ringhofer said Friday at the start of the convention and established from the start that this would be a space free of political discourse.

Invitations followed throughout the convention for both celebration and confession. By opening the convention with a discussion about atonement theory, Ringhofer both acknowledged the diversity of the body and issued a call for unity.

"We are interdependent churches," Ringhofer said. "We depend on one another."

Diversity was evident as delegates navigated sometimes difficult and tension-filled topics during the two-day convention, which included board reports, sessions, singing led by Axiom's worship team, elections and a Board of Home Missions dinner.

Nomination process leads to lengthy discussion

One of the more lengthy talking points on both days of the convention centered on ballot nominations.

Jordan Ringhofer invites the PDC executive board to the stage during Friday's conversation about nominations. A prayer time followed. Photo: Janae Rempel

With two open executive officer positions on the ballot, some questioned why names that had been brought forward prior to the convention were left off the ballot. Ringhofer said when the nominating committee could not reach consensus, that name was left off, or, in other cases, people said no to putting their name forward. So, to fill the open positions, the nominating committee for executive officers—in other words, the board chairs—decided to ask for nominations from the floor prior to the vote.

A lengthy discussion continued prior to Saturday's vote, with delegates voicing concerns over a lack of biographical information about the nominees. Ringhofer responded that the process was insufficient and asked delegates to trust the board chairs.

Moderator Pat Coyle and Ringhofer entertained questions about delaying the vote. Upon recognizing that without an election, the senior-most remaining member of the PDC executive board—which would have been Josh Wilson, chair of the Fresno Pacific University board of trustees—would become the active chair, delegates appeared to recognize the importance of moving forward with the vote, despite continued voiced confusion surrounding the nature of the tension.

Ringhofer asked delegates to respect the discernment of the body that has been charged with the decision, requesting patience and promising a different process in two years. Then Coyle agreed to allow the nominees present to introduce themselves and for representatives to speak on behalf of those not in attendance.

After an hour of discussion, nominations for the open executive officer positions of vice moderator and secretary were received from the floor, then delegates moved forward with a vote, electing Dennis Fast, care pastor at Hope Kingsburg (California), as moderator; Nathan Ensz, lead pastor of Kingwood Bible Church in Salem, Oregon, as vice moderator and Chris Wall, church treasurer and former moderator at Madera (California) Avenue Bible Church, as secretary; among other elections.

"That's the first time that I have been a part of a PDC convention where we haven't just done a unanimous ballot," Ringhofer said in a post-convention interview. "I'm never upset when people say no to somebody being on something. I think that's good. We need to be in spaces where we can say no, but then when the answer is yes because the collective has said this is what we have decided we will do, then we move forward in unity. Unity does not mean unanimous. It just means that when we leave, we're agreeing to support one another and submit to one another."

Delegates pass budget

Delegates approved a proposed amendment to a resolution passed at the November 2019 convention to fund hiring a new director of church

planting and leadership development.

The idea was first introduced by former district minister Gary Wall in 2017. After Wall's departure, the search for this new staff member was delayed, allowing Ringhofer, hired as new district minister Sept. 1, 2020, to speak into the hiring process.

PDC district minister Jordan Ringhofer speaks Friday. "We are interdependent churches," Ringhofer said. "We depend on one another." Photo: Janae Rempel

In 2019, delegates had voted to increase the maximum corpus distribution to 7 percent (from 5 percent) for fiscal years ending in 2021 and 2022, to fund the hire of the new staff member.

Joe Ringhofer, PDC accountant, explained the cap on corpus distribution. In need of additional funds as church giving decreased, in 2009 delegates passed a resolution to allow the movement of money from other funds into the general fund to cover expenses, capping it at 5 percent so as not to deplete the funds.

The postponement of the new hire and pandemic-related reductions in board activities and travel, significantly reduced corpus distribution,

with the conference using a corpus distribution of 1.04 percent in the fiscal year ending Sept. 30, 2020, and expected to use a corpus distribution of 3.58 percent in fiscal year ending Sept. 30, 2021.

So, the current proposed amendment provided for an increase in maximum corpus distribution from 5 percent to 7 percent for two calendar years once the new director of church planting and leadership development is hired. After two years, that person would be responsible for covering their own wages by encouraging church giving.

The amendment passed.

Delegates also passed the proposed 2022 budget of $636,027.

In their written report, Ron Brown, treasurer, and Joe Ringhofer said expenses are at pre-pandemic levels.

Encountering “deep waters”

In his executive board report, moderator Pat Coyle touched on two situations he described as “deep waters,” including a situation involving former district minister Gary Wall and discussion surrounding affirmation of LGBTQ+ individuals at Willow Avenue Mennonite Church in Clovis, Calif.

Coyle said two and a half years ago, the executive board was put in a position for which it wasn’t well-prepared. In January 2019, Wall was detained in a Fresno Police Department sting operation and charged with solicitation for prostitution. The executive board sought legal counsel that made it clear the executive board should not discuss the situation publicly, even when some thought they should. Wall has maintained his innocence throughout, Coyle said. Eventually a plea agreement was reached, and the charges were dropped.

Coyle said the executive board recognizes the concern and confusion this has brought the district as the executive board balanced

confidentiality, care for Wall and his family and communication.

Coyle said the executive board has taken two actions based on what it has learned.

First, in consultation with USMB leadership, the board has formed a team to work toward reconciliation with Wall. In addition to Coyle, the team is comprised of Valerie Rempel, director of accreditation for The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada and former vice president and dean of Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary; Dina Gonzales-Piña, West Coast MCC executive director from Iglesia La Gran Comisión in Hanford, California; Jana Hildebrandt, U.S. BFL member and missions, assimilation and prayer director at Ridgepoint Church in Wichita, Kansas; and Dennis Fast, care pastor at Hope Kingsburg (California) and newly-elected PDC moderator.

Convention attendees talk together and visit vendor booths in the Axiom courtyard during a Friday break. Photo: Janae Rempel

Secondly, the board is working to establish better policies and procedures and has adopted a new employee handbook, so resources

are prepared and readily available for future situations as they arise.

Coyle then invited Ringhofer to summarize the situation surrounding the Willow Avenue congregation's discussion about being an LGBTQ+ affirming community. While the congregation had not yet reached a decision at the time of convention, the nature of the church's discussion is outside of the Confession of Faith, Ringhofer said, so the executive board voted to suspend the conference membership of Willow Avenue.

In a post-convention interview, Ringhofer said that the executive board sent a letter to Willow Avenue on Oct. 14 to inform them of the Oct. 11 vote to suspend membership.

The congregation will work with the executive board, USMB Leadership Board and U.S. Board of Faith and Life on next steps. Ringhofer did not entertain questions at the convention, saying it would be unfair to speak about the congregation since it wasn't represented at the convention.

Other business

In other business, delegates heard reports from the following boards: Board of Faith and Life, represented by chair Harold Ens, who said the BFL continues to work with churches for confessional integrity, especially pertaining to Articles 5, 10 and 11; Board of Next Gen Leadership, represented by chair Tim Thiessen; and Board of Home Missions, represented by chair Brian Wiebe. District accountant Joe Ringhofer gave a budget presentation, and Hispanic Council Chair Xavier Piña also gave a report, noting the next Hispanic convention is May 21, 2022, and asking for prayer for Hispanic pastors in formational training through FPU's Center for Community Transformation.

Delegates also convened as owners of Fresno Pacific University.

Fresno Pacific University Board of Trustees chair Joshua Wilson (left), Pat Coyle (hidden) and Jordan Ringhofer (right) pray over FPU president Joseph Jones and First Lady Yvette Jones after Wilson announced Jones' intention to retire. Photo: Janae Rempel

Josh Wilson, FPU board of trustees chair, called to order the FPU corporation and announced FPU President Joseph Jones' intention to retire in summer 2022 after nearly five years of service. Wilson asked for prayer as the board begins a presidential search process.

Wilson briefly referenced the board's recommendation to Jones that a student request to form an LGBTQ+ Pride Club on campus be denied, saying the USMB Confession of Faith (COF) guided the board's response to the student group.

"We as a board are stewards of our Christian identity and Anabaptist identity," Wilson said, adding the board is subordinate to the COF. He invited people to invest in the university.

Jones reported that FPU's financial state has increased over the past four years.

Delegates also heard from agency representatives, including USMB representative to ICOMB Ed Boschman; ICOMB U.S. advocate and member of the Multiply Global Lead Team Bob Davis; and MB Foundation president and CEO Jon Wiebe.

Ringhofer called churches to rethink what it means to be faithful stewards of God's resources. The church should offer hope and engage the whole community, Ringhofer said, asking, do people see the church doing so much good that they can't help but want to be part of it?

Board of home missions hosts dinner

During the Board of Home Missions dinner Friday evening, chair Brian Wiebe introduced various church planters and missionaries.

Board of Home Missions chair Brian Wiebe introduces church planter Moni Worku, who has started a multi-ethnic local and global church community using technology. Photo: Janae Rempel

Moni Worku is planting KCulture Church, a multi-ethnic and multicultural local and global church, using social media and technology.

Fred Leonard, lead pastor at Mountain View Church in Fresno, California, introduced two pastors, including Scott Gossenberger, who initially launched a campus of MVC but whose church, Rock Harbor in Clovis, California, is now an MVC daughter church, and Tony Petersen,

pastor of MVC East Campus in Clovis.

Phil Wiebe, lead pastor of Lakeview Church in Utah, and Jeff Hubrich, campus pastor of the Lakeview Grantsville, Utah, Campus, which launched on Easter 2021, shared church history and said Lakeview has baptized 35 individuals.

Pablo and Maricela Chavez, pastoral couple at Iglesia El Buen Pastor in Orange Cove, California, shared their call to long-term missions with Multiply in Peru.

Brian Wiebe concluded by encouraging attendees to be like Barnabas by funding the mission, finding the leaders and facing the task.

The evening concluded with prayer over the Board of Home Mission.

Speaker addresses atonement, convention theme

Joshua Butler, co-lead pastor of Redemption Tempe, gave two messages as guest speaker, including a discussion about the atonement and revitalization. Photo: Janae Rempel

Joshua Butler, co-lead pastor of Redemption Tempe, gave two

messages as guest speaker. During the first session Friday, Butler discussed what he described as the tragic irony of the divisive nature of the cross. The atonement is like a multifaceted diamond, Butler said, but he focused discussion on penal substitution, which he said is at the heart of the controversy.

Butler's goal, he said, was not to solve atonement theory, but rather an attempt to start a conversation and provide a way for people with different understandings of the cross to stay at the table together.

Butler listed concerns on each side, including those who would say that traditional understandings of the cross can sound like divine child abuse, and those who are concerned that by rejecting certain themes, we are rejecting something very central to faith.

Butler provided three points to continue the conversation.

First, Butler said, Jesus is an active agent, not a hapless victim, who goes to the cross out of love to become the new head of humanity by living Israel's story—and in turn Adam's and ours—and succeeding where Israel failed.

Second, the penalty for sin is exile and death, as evidenced by Adam and Eve being driven out of the garden and Israel's rebellion leading to captivity and national death. Jesus bore our exile and death at the cross, Butler said.

Third, the church has historically understood the fairness of penal substitution in terms of corporate identity, Butler said. Adam is the originator of the human race, and at the cross, God installed Jesus as the new head of humanity. Using an analogy, Butler said that just as a new CEO would be held responsible for corporate debt incurred by a past CEO, so Jesus, even though personally innocent, bore the penalty for his people. Ultimately, the cross is evidence of God's love, Butler said.

During his second message, Butler on Saturday focused on the revitalized portion of the convention theme. He shared his personal story about how the more he did for God, the more distant God seemed as he went through the motions before he finally decided to quit striving and rest in God's love.

Expressing a desire for attendees to be revitalized by the Gospel, Butler shared three images of God pursuing people, including in the garden of Eden, at Mount Sinai and the incarnation. He also referenced the story of the lost sheep.

"We talk about searching for God," Butler said. "What if we have it backwards and God's actually the one coming after you and me?"

Following the message, Ringhofer invited attendees to find someone they didn't know and spend time in confession and prayer.

The convention concluded with Ringhofer thanking Coyle for six years of service, followed by a closing prayer and doxology.