

# Conference Minister's Corner

## Unapologetically cultivating hope: Delegates affirm new growth in our conference

By Rev. Amy S. Zimbelman

If you haven't heard the story yet (via [Ryan's report](#) or [at assembly](#)) of the bold initiatives our conference is taking and their inception, it goes something like this:

It was the fall of 2021. I'd been in my role as Conference Minister for a year, had spent time establishing relationships and listening to where folks are at, and felt like it was time to dream. I felt it, and Moderator Ryan Koch felt it too.

So we met at a coffee shop.

I brought a page or two of ideas for the future of our conference (Ryan thinks it was more like three or four pages, but who's to say?). We discussed them, threw some of them out entirely. And we honed in on a couple of them.

We left hopeful, but with no means of funding these initiatives. Good ideas, but will they ever come to fruition?

Did I mention that it was the first time we'd had a conversation like this?

Then, the *very next day*, I get a call from Ryan. "Amy, you are not going to believe this." I could tell that, whatever he was going to say, *he* barely believed it. A woman at First Mennonite Church had passed away and left a sizable endowment for both the church and for the conference. A windfall of funding. With no requirements as to how it is spent.

I never had the privilege of knowing the woman who gave this extravagant gift, but bless her for her generosity.

One of the best living theologians/Bible scholars that I know of, Renita Weems, says that a miracle is receiving something you need just when you need it. That's what this was. We not only needed money, we needed assurance that it's okay to dream, to unapologetically cultivate sheer hope for the future of this conference we love so much.

So we took that as a sign. Not that our ideas are fully-formed or iron-clad, but that we should definitely move forward with them, sharing them first with the rest of the Leadership Board to see what they think. And then, after brainstorming some more and honing them, bringing them to the delegates at assembly, which we did on July 30th in an hour entitled *Hope for New Growth*.



Pictured: (left) Our conference's new postcards, available to share among our churches and our communities, (right) Hope for New Growth session at Assembly—video available [here](#).

So what are the ideas? And how were they received by delegates?

First of all, I'll say that these ideas are growing out of the good soil in our conference—our communities that get together to worship God and laugh, learn, pray, sing, grieve, march, eat, and grow together. Our many thriving churches and passion ministries are looking outward to work for peace and justice in this broken and beautiful world. Our conference is worth sustaining and growing.

With that as a foundation, the first idea is to prioritize **church planting (a.k.a. cultivating new communities)** as a conference. Our Anabaptist way of life and faith is worth sharing, so we'd like to empower new faith communities sprouting up, whether they call themselves a fellowship or a community or a church. It's vitally important that the model of these new communities is intentionally Anabaptist and intentionally anti-colonialist (which encompasses being anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, etc.), and not re-inscribing oppressive power dynamics.

The second major idea would help provide funding for the first and for our conference operations as a whole: a **social enterprise** that generates a revenue stream in an ethical manner while having a social impact. This would look like what other conferences have to help fund their work: Pacific Southwest Conference's thrift store, the international guest house in DC, Atlantic Coast Conference's bike shop, etc.

Helping to enable these initiatives is the Future Anabaptist Leaders program, which empowers young people to explore ministry in our conference, as well as moving my Conference Minister position from 3/4 time to full-time for two years starting next summer 2023. Funding was set aside for both of those.

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**\*\*IMPORTANT NOTE\*\*** Does this funding mean that churches no longer need to financially support our conference? No. In fact, these new initiatives are dependent on churches continuing to financially contribute to the conference at similar levels. If church funding were to decrease, these new initiatives may not be possible. We very much **NEED** and **APPRECIATE** your congregation's continued giving to make our day-to-day operations and our new initiatives possible. Thank you!

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We intentionally presented these ideas very much in the ideas stage, so that after approval, task forces could be assembled to flesh out what the social enterprise might actually *be*, what/where/how many church plants we'd help support, etc. We didn't want fully-formed ideas rubber stamped by delegates—we actually want to discern together whether this is the best way forward or not.

During the meeting and before voting during the debate session, we allotted plenty of time to field questions and concerns. One concern was: is it possible to adjust the \$125,000 for church planting and \$125,000 for a social enterprise as we go, or are they set in stone? We clarified that the ideas themselves are a package deal and should be voted on for affirmation or rejection as a unit, but the funding is subject to change, and that any major changes in distribution of funds would be brought to delegates for approval. Transparency and trust are important to us.

After more discussion which can be listened to [here](#), the delegates voted. The initiatives passed!

From here, Ryan and I and the leadership board will be working on assembling task forces, with an eye towards ramping up in the summer of 2023 when I go full-time.

Let the miracle of new growth begin!