Assembly Mennonite Church
Congregational Meeting 1/19/25, 7pm (Hybrid Format: In Person & Zoom)
Minutes by Scott Coulter (on Zoom)

Opening
Glenn Gilbert (Facilitator) opened with prayer.
Glenn introduced three agenda items:

1. Participants Mutual Aid Funds Policy Revisions (second reading)
    a. Formerly Members Needs Fund
2. Spending Plan 2025 (second reading)
3. Student Aid Advisory Group - Seeking Congregational Input

1. Participants Mutual Aid Fund: (Approved Policy Here)

(a) To clarify: funds are available to all AMC participants, not only covenanted members (this is not a policy change).
(b) Key policy change: funds are available not just for external financial crises, but also for participants to participate in life of Assembly (retreats, etc.) (This is a change in written policy, but is consistent with recent practice).
(c) Glenn directed people to the handout. Reminder: we discussed this at the Dec 2025 Congregational meeting. Glenn invited questions & comments. We will be testing for consensus on this tonight.
    (i) Comment/Clarification from Dancy Hirschler (Treasurer): Participants Mutual Aid is not a *fund*, but is a line item in the general fund budget. Money not spent in one year does not roll over to the next year. The Finance Committee & congregation will decide in the Spending Plan how much money to budget for Participants Mutual Aid each year.
(d) Test for consensus:
    (i) Covenanted members present in person at the meetinghouse participated in test for consensus, using five-finger method. (https://assemblymennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Decision-making-at-AMC-2020.pdf)
    (ii) Approved by consensus with all 4s and 5s.

2. Spending Plan 2025 (General Fund Budget): (Approved Spending Plan Here)

(a) Larry Gautsche (Finance Chair) followed up on things mentioned at the last meeting:
    (i) "Property Taxes": We aren't paying property taxes, we're paying stormwater fees on some of our properties. Has to do with amount of paved surface, comes tacked on to the property tax bill. $275 every year. We will continue to pay this.
    (ii) Addition to the Budget: under Mission Beyond Assembly a1k: Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery. Request for $1750. The ART

ministry team hopes the Reparations Committee will provide additional monies in order to make a $2500 dues payment.

(iii) Total budget amount: $565,081

(iv) Pledges support a budget of: $586,000 - slightly more than total budget amount

(v) Larry invited questions on any line item in the budget.

1) Question: Public School Grants. Why is the actual 2024 amount a couple thousand more than in the spending plan?
2) Answer: Dancy (Treasurer) - Public School Grant is 10% of what we pay Bethany Christian Schools every year. There was money that had not been disbursed in the past years, which is to be set aside so it can still be disbursed. To make the accounting accurate, we put a transfer from the General Fund to the Public School Fund as a 2024 expense in the General Fund.

(vi) Glenn (Facilitator): commented: We are blessed to be in a position where we don't have to make cuts. Thanks to the congregation for the generous support that makes this spending plan possible. Thanks to Finance Committee for their work!

(vii) Test for consensus: Approved (all 4s and 5s).

3. Student Aid Advisory Group

(a) Glenn (Facilitator) turned the mic over to Ben Sywulka (convener of the Student Aid Advisory Group) to facilitate this portion of the meeting.

(b) Ben acknowledged those in the Advisory Group who were present: Leon Bauman, Paul Meyer Reimer, Anne Horst Hanby, Cheryl Mast (on Zoom).

<u>TImeline of Student Aid Policy</u>

(c) Leon Bauman shared a timeline of AMC's Student Aid Policy - how we got to where we are now.

- 1995: Assembly is born
- 1986: Assembly adopts first Student Aid Policy
- 1996: Bethany Christian Schools adds Grades 6-8
- 2008: Indiana caps property tax, reducing state revenue for public schools.
- 2008-2010: AMC responds with donation and training for Goshen Middle School and adopts a triennial goal to support public education.
- 2011: Bethany adds grades 4-5. Indiana institutes limited Choice Scholarships.
- 2016: AMC revises Student Financial Aid Plan to include reduction from 10% to 8% of base tuition, and addition of public school fund

(d) Notes:

- Bethany Christian Schools became independent from Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference in the late 1990s. The school is still associated

with Mennonite Education Agency / Mennonite Schools Council (https://www.mennoniteeducation.org/schools/mennonite-schools-council.
- In early 2008, Assembly donated some money to the Goshen Community Schools board as a recognition that the property tax caps were "saving homeowners money" but costing schools.
- Choice Scholarships or Voucher System started in 2011, and has grown to be almost universal. (Currently eligibility for choice scholarships is 400% of the poverty level).
- We have not found a copy of the original policy from 1986.

Presentation - Ben Sywulka

(e) We are not doing a first reading of a policy tonight.

(f) Ben showed a slide with AMC's spending on AMBS, BCS, and College scholarships over time. Overall 9-11% of the budget. Bethany Student Aid has never been more than 4% of the congregation's General Fund budget.

(g) Ben presented results from congregational survey (compiled Sept 2024). Summary:
- Reasons why we do student aid: includes values of supporting public education and supporting Mennonite education.
- We are kind of split down the middle in terms of how happy we are as a congregation with the amount of spending on Mennonite education.
- There does not seem to be a large appetite in the congregation to increase the aid we offer either to public education or to students in Mennonite schools.
- A good chunk of those surveyed say they don't like the current funding model we have. About the same number of people as that say keep it in the general fund but cap the total amount. And then respondents are split about 50/50 on the suggestion that student aid scholarships could be funded by designated donations, not from the general fund.
- Important to use terms that clarify what is supporting public schools and what is providing financial aid to Mennonite schools

(h) What other Mennonite congregations are doing in Goshen:
- Some congregations (Faith, 8th Street) do not give student aid to Mennonite Schools. Assembly is the one congregation we're aware of that gives all of the student aid from the General Fund. Some congregations are partners with Bethany that pay 100% of tuition and get a 15% discount.

(i) Why AMC Leadership Group encourages the congregation to support an interim proposal for the student aid policy:
- Following the normal consensus process doesn't work in this case because we have two idea fragments that are pulling us in two different directions: reduce the student aid, or increase the student aid. Both driven by the same logic: a lot has changed since the 2016/2018 policy was agreed upon.

- How the context has changed:
    1) BCS is now a K-12 school. Many in our congregation attend Bethany younger than 6th grade. Some support keeping current student aid, or even expanding student aid to K-12 students.
    2) AMC has had budgeting challenges. This is the only line item that we don't have control over in our budget, because it's based on a percentage of tuition and the number of eligible students that are enrolled. Some support for capping or reducing student aid so we have more control over this line in the budget.
    3) Indiana Education Legislation. Nearly all students in private schools apply for vouchers. More public schools are having to shut down because of students using vouchers.
- Both changing the current Student Aid Policy, and leaving it unchanged, are controversial. The process for changing the policy is controversial. We have been postponing this discussion for years. For some we are going too fast now, for others we are going too slow now.
- LG observes that when we talk about this issue, passionate people in the congregation make assumptions and comments that are hurtful to others in the congregation (people who have spent their career in Mennonite education, people heavily invested in public education).

(j) How do we work towards consensus?

- Problems: we have different information sources, and we have different moral intuitions. Our moral intuitions influence how we perceive information and reasoning offered by others.
- How to create space for our different intuitions to shape each other? A precedent at AMC: during discussion of LGBTQ inclusion, LG assigned participants to groups of 5 that included someone with a strongly held position on each side. People who are moderate/in the middle can help those on each end of the spectrum listen, consider new thoughts/perspectives.
- Our goal for now is to reach consensus around an interim policy, in order to buy time for further conversation. How do we find a policy that we can all live with, even if we don't all love it?

(k) <u>Discussion:</u>

- Q: I don't hear any discussion of college/seminary education support. Is this just about K-12?
    1) Ben: From what we can gather, the controversy is just around K-12 education.
- Q: What is AMC's policy for doing work on updating policies?
    1) Sara Morris (LG Chair): We don't have a policy on policies. In our 2nd hour conversations, we've been talking about how Assembly's values continue to be at work today in how we make decisions. We've been hearing a lot of voices from people that have been

hurt on both ends. We need to buy time both to do work on policy-about-policy, and work on student aid policy itself.
    2) Ben: The context in which agreement was made in 2016 is very different than the context of today. That's informing why some think it's fair to seek an interim proposal while we have a longer conversation.
- Comment: Support for an interim policy. During the LGBTQ welcoming process, many were hurt during the process because the status quo policy was maintained. Open to doing something different this time.
- Q: If you want to keep the status quo, can you give that feedback?
    1) Ben: Yes, put all your "stickers" on the status quo options.
- Q: Are people on different "sides" of this issue all happy with adopting an interim policy?
    1) Ben: An interim policy is our best attempt at addressing this for now.
- Comment: Sara Morris (LG Chair) summarized comments from the 1/17/25 email she sent out to the congregation this week.
- Q: I have no strong opinions on this issue. Should I participate in giving feedback, or would that mess up the process?
    1) Ben: Hopefully explaining the exercise tonight will help answer that question.

- Comment: Your moral intuitions are shaped by what your own kids need. Not just asking: Are we supportive of Mennonite education or public education? But also: Are we supporting parents who can't afford private education, but that's what their kid really needs? To me it seems it's easy to say public education is great if your kids are high ability, and it's harder when your kid has a special reason why they would be better off in a smaller school with a different kind of support.
- Comment/Response: Part of what was just said sounds hurtful to public school teachers who try to support every student, including those who may not be welcome at a private school. I'm concerned about framing this conversation as public school people on one side, private school people on other side. It seems inaccurate to characterize people like me as not familiar with Mennonite education: I am someone deeply familiar with Mennonite education, but deeply concerned about vouchers and their effect on public education. Why aren't we asking bolder questions like Why does Bethany take vouchers? What are other solutions we could be talking about? Vouchers are a non-starter for me, closing off access to opportunity for many kids in our community. I'm happy for an interim solution and for participation in this process tonight, but I regret that our conversation has been framed this way.
- Comment: I affirm both of the last two comments. I support reflection on what a child needs. This needs not to be separated from support for

public education. Some kids need a strong public school, and a private option would not be right or possible for them. Kids can get some significant attention and care in public education. Be careful not to frame private education at a smaller school as more caring/more individualized.

- Comment: In the next year a lot will change at the state level with legislation. There will be significant impact on public schools, and on immigrant children and children with special needs. Maybe we will have to revisit this again in a year because of additional context changes.

- Ben: Personal lived experience will shape a lot of your moral intuitions. LG feels we need an interim policy to buy time for these conversations.

Feedback Mechanism:

Participants were asked to place "stickers" (or poll responses on Zoom) in response to their support for the following options, as part of an interim policy proposal. Respondents can place their stickers on their 1st and 2nd choices in each category, or put both their stickers on the same choice if they feel strongly. The advisory group will take this feedback and construct some interim policy proposals. This is not a vote. The advisory group wants to hear from the congregation.

1. Funding Sources (two "stickers"):
    a. General Fund (Grades 5/6-12)
    b. General Fund (Grades K-12)
    c. Special Fund (Grades 5/6-12)
    d. Special Fund (Grades K-12)
    e. Special Fund (All Mennonite Education)
2. Transition (two "stickers")
    a. Immediate Transition
    b. Graduate Transition (over *n* years, student aid scholarship funding moves from General Fund to Designated Fund)
    c. Gradual Transition (subsidize funding from General Fund for the current year)
3. Funding Amount (two "stickers"):
    a. 8% of Tuition
    b. Fixed Amount (per student / % of budget)
    c. Need-Based (self-reporting financial need)
4. Long-Term Initiatives (for the congregation to pursue during the interim policy period) (three "stickers")
    a. Education Advocacy Committee
    b. Theology of Education Series
    c. Small Group Discussions
    d. Concrete Support for Schools (Public/Mennonite)

Closing - Mary Lehman Yoder led a closing hymn (VT 504)

Meeting ended at 8:35pm