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Interim Report
Presbytery of Lake Huron
May 10, 2022

Introduction

The Lombard Mennonite Peace Center (LMPC) was contacted by the leadership of the Presbytery of Lake Huron (PLH) to engage the Presbytery as it reflects on the recent departure of their Executive Presbyter (EP). LMPC submitted a proposal involving a two-step listening and healing process (see Appendix A). The two-step listening process deep listening session included 1) phone interviews and 2) several small group listening sessions. The restorative conversation will involve a safe place wherein members of the Presbytery will be given an opportunity to speak about how the departure of the recent EP and how that incident has impacted their life and ministry. This report assesses the first of these two steps. The second step will be delayed until the judicatories work assessing the actions of the former EP has come to completion.

Methods

Phone Interviews: LMPC began the listening process in early March by scheduling phone interviews with current and former members who have served on the council of the Presbytery. The names of ten individuals were given to LMPC to contact. Eight of those individuals responded and were interviewed. The first interviews were conducted on March 8, 2022; the final interview was conducted on March 16, 2022. During these initial interviews, it became evident the breadth of the interviews should be expanded to include pastors of congregations from within PLH who had been impacted by the former Executive Director's recent departure to understand more fully how the recent departure of the Executive Director had impacted the Presbytery. Four names of pastors were provided to LMPC; each pastor accepted the invitation and participated in an interview with an LMPC team member. Those

interviews concluded on April 2, 2022. The notes from those interviews were used to design the subsequent small-group structured dialogues (see Appendix B).

Small-Group Structured Dialogue: On April 21, 2022, LMPH set up and facilitated two small-group structured dialogues with pastors from the Presbytery on Zoom. An invitation to the dialogues was sent to leadership throughout the Presbytery. One group met in the morning and the other group met in the afternoon to accommodate varying schedules. Six individuals participated in the morning session; seven individuals participated in the afternoon session. The focus of the small groups was to provide participants with a bit of uninterrupted time to speak about their concerns for PLH moving forward and what needs should be addressed by PLH as they consider replacing the most recent EP.

Each session opened with a short devotional and prayer based on Philippians 2:1-11 and the need to look to the interests of others. The first round consisted of introductions stating name, congregation served, and current and former responsibilities within the Presbytery. Following introductions, the group engaged in a spectrum exercise involving eight separate topics intended to help participants to think more broadly about their experience in PLH (see Appendix C).

Finally, each participant was given opportunity to spend a bit of uninterrupted time to express their own concerns and perspective of what PLH needs to consider as it begins to think about the position and role of the EP in the current setting (see Appendix D).

In conclusion, participants were given an opportunity to offer statements of affirmation and appreciation to other participants in the group. for others in the group.

Themes

In this report, five themes are highlighted which came from the phone interviews and the small group listening sessions conducted by LMPC as outlined above. In outlining these themes, particular attention has been given to the guiding question presented in LMPC's proposal. It reads, *"Why has PLH experienced instability surrounding the EP position in the past?"*

In listening to participants in the phone interviews and small groups, a common interest began to clearly emerge. Numerous participants indicated the need to examine the current hierarchical structure of the Presbytery involving an EP and

consider whether another model of Presbytery leadership may be more relevant. Several people suggested a regional model of leadership, whereby pastors within the Presbytery provide oversight and care for pastors and congregations within their geographical regions. Such a model would allow pastors to experience a stronger network of support on a more regular basis.

The five themes LMPC identified are as follows: 1) the historic transitional pattern concerning the EP, 2) hesitancy to manage conflict directly, 3) lack of communication resulting in an erosion of trust within the Presbytery, 4) lack of connectedness, and 5) a need for a clear identity in creating a vision and mission for the Presbytery moving forward. It should be noted that though these themes are listed separately, many of the points are interrelated and will be developed more fully in the analysis section of the report below.

Comments for each of the themes came from the phone interviews and small-group structured dialogues and are included in the appendix. Names have not been attached to any comments to maintain confidentiality.

Historic Transitional Patterns:
Early on in their engagement with PLH, LMPC staff members were told that PLH had been "0-for-7 in hiring EP's." When asked about the history of the EP position in PLH, many participants agreed with this assessment, noting that most tenures had ended, as one responded put it, "under a dark cloud." Of the seven previous Executives Presbyters, each had ended prematurely, though each for distinct reasons. Inappropriate behavior, "a poor fit," and an unwillingness to fulfil reasonable leadership roles were all given as reasons for early departures.

Conflict:
The pattern for EPs to end their tenures under a shadow with PLH may be related to a concern that some participants had that the council has at times been unwilling to deal conflict directly. When problems arose with EPs in the past and then let go of, the council has been reluctant to deal with the harm that might had been incurred. Instead, they moved directly into hiring a new EP to replace the one who had left. With the most recent departure of the EP, the council has committed itself to taking a closer look at the patterns of the past to avoid similar problems in the future.

Communication:
A concern frequently brought up, especially during the phone interviews, was the lack of communication during the process whereby the most recent EP departed.

Some felt as though the Presbytery had withheld information concerning the EP, while others felt as though there had been a breach in confidentiality leading to a general feeling of mistrust between members of the Presbytery.

Participants pointed out that the miscommunication or lack of communication was exacerbated by the inability to meet in person because of pandemic protocols.

A significant moment during the listening sessions came when one person mentioned the recent efforts of regional pastors to connect with each other on a regular basis had led to increased understanding between those who held significant mistrust with each other earlier. Similar efforts throughout the Presbytery may contribute to healthier relationships and increased understanding and trust between pastors within the Presbytery.

Connections:
Related to the concern for better communication, was the challenge of staying connected as a Presbytery. Both time and space contribute to this challenge

Geographically, the Presbytery is spread out over a large area in eastern Michigan. The Saginaw Bay which juts into the land base increases the distance between those congregations located in the thumb of Michigan and those on the other side of the bay leaving those pastors serving in thumb area feeling isolated from the rest of the Presbytery.

Temporally, the frequency of Presbytery meetings has moved from monthly to quarterly meetings increasing the sense of isolation. Meetings held on Zoom due to the pandemic have contributed to the distance some have felt over the past several years.

Diversity in the social and economic fabric of the various regions may also be a factor in some regions in the Presbytery feeling less connected. For example, the farmers and ship workers in the thumb area are not facing the same concerns as the professionals that may be working at DOW Chemical Company in the Tri-Cities area.

Identity:
A common concern when considering what the future leadership structure of PLH would look like is understanding what defines the Presbytery. Understanding the Presbytery's identity will go a long way in identifying the model or structure that will serve the Presbytery well in the coming years.

Someone mentioned that the Presbytery needs a new world view and ask itself, "Who are we?" and "What will success look like?" Someone else, using the Navy chain of command metaphor, asked, "Is the EP a commander in charge of a ship or an admiral in charge of a fleet?"

The challenge of identity may be related to the geographic diversity of the region. Though the region is held together by the land, it is punctuated by the bay as well as the economic and social diversity.

Observations

PLH is at a point in time where they can explore how the Presbytery will serve the needs of its congregations in the coming years. In doing so, those engaged in that process should take into consideration the five areas that participants in the phone interviews and listening sessions highlighted.

1) What have we learned about our relationship with EPs in the past that we wish to avoid in the future?
2) How have we dealt with our differences in the past and are we willing to address them directly in the future?
3) How can we strengthen our lines of communication in the future in a way that builds trust and transparency within the Presbytery?
4) How can we strengthen our connections taking into consideration the geographical, social, and economic challenges the Presbytery is facing?
5) Who are we and what does success for the Presbytery of Lake Huron look like?

Conclusion

Though five distinct areas have been lifted out from our engagement with PLH, LMPC notes that these five points are interrelated. In defining itself, the Presbytery will need to take into consideration its geographical, social, and economic diversity. Addressing those challenges will help the Presbytery establish more effective means of communication which in turn will allow pastors to experience more connections. As better connections and relationships are established, trust and transparency will follow.

Addendum

At the request of the Presbytery, Devon Miller, a Program Staff from LMPC, travelled to the office of PLH to facilitate a circle process for the current office staff. All staff members participated in the circle process.

The circle process was designed as a safe place where current staff could air their wounds and frustrations over the past year regarding the departure of the most recent EP.

The circle process lasted for two hours. It began with a short devotional from Philippians 4:4-9. Upon agreeing on guidelines, three rounds addressing the trauma, disappointment, and betrayal the staff had experienced over the past year. The circle process was concluded by allowing staff members to express their hopes for the future in the office and appreciation for each other's support during the difficult times they had experienced together.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Proposal for the Presbytery of Lake Huron

In January of 2022, the Presbytery of Lake Huron (PLH) contacted the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center (LMPC) concerning the recent resignation and departure of the EP (EP). A framework to hold the process together is the question, "Why has PLH experienced instability surrounding the EP position in the past?" To explore this question, LMPC is proposing a two-step process: 1) address the angst within the Presbytery regarding their inability to successfully identify and hire a long-term executive; 2) provide a format where staff and clergy of PLH are given an opportunity to share their experience during the most recent EP's resignation and departure.

Step One: Deep Listening

To better understand the instability of the EP position experienced by PLH, LMPC proposes to conduct a deep-listening process with past and present council members. Initially, eight to ten current and former members with various perspectives would be interviewed by phone to gain a broader understanding of the situation.

After the phone interviews, LMPC would facilitate two small-group structured dialogues consisting of up to twelve participants. Each participant in the group would be given uninterrupted time to express their appreciation and concerns for how PLH has handled its relationship with its EP in the past and how it might improve its search for an EP in the future. The structured dialogues would be facilitated on Zoom.

LMPC would document the comments made in the groups, compile the comments, and include them in a short report that would contain LMPC's observations and recommendations in understanding the shortcomings of maintaining stability at the EP position in the past and key factors needed in hiring a successful EP in the future.

Step Two: Restorative Conversation

To bring healing regarding the resignation and departure of the most recent EP, LMPC proposes to facilitate a circle process once the investigation of the departed EP has been settled. The circle process would provide a safe place for participants to

share their experience over the past several months to help create greater understanding and empathy among council members. All members of the stakeholders would be invited to participate in the circle process. A short report of the circle process would be made available by LMPC. It is expected that the circle process would be held in person unless COVID does not permit.

APPENDIX B

Small Group Listening Sessions
Presbytery of Lake Huron
April 21, 2022
9:30 AM – 11:00 AM EDT

- Introduce selves as mediators.
- Review process: Dates – past, current, future,
- Opening devotion: Philippians 2: 1-11; brief reflection and prayer.
- Introductions and commonalities (start at one end and continue in order):
  a. Give name and current leadership roles in the Presbytery.
  a. Name one thing you hold in common with others in the Presbytery; one thing you celebrate about the church; one thing that you see has a major strength of the church (record each on flipchart).
- Spectrum exercises (post list of key areas of congregational life): To get 'warmed up' by doing a series of very quick spectrum exercises.
  - Imagine a continuum running across the room, from 1 to 9 – with 1 being the lowest and 9 being the highest. You will position yourself on the continuum and choose a number – 1 to 9.
  - We record the number; but we do not give it much weight or emphasis; the focus of this exercise is more to get you thinking broadly about the life of the church.
  - For some of the topics, you would respond differently at different times in your years of participation in the church. Thus, you can average your experience, rather than try to distinguish where you would stand at different times in the history of your experience at the church.
  - This is not intended to provide a scientific reading, but merely to prime the pump for our discussion. So, do not worry if you have a hard time determining where to stand; just do your best.

1. **Mission and Purpose of the role of the EP:** If…
   - The current mission and purpose of the church is very clear to you; there is a visible mission statement; there are regular ways of reviewing it; an annual process of setting goals for moving toward fulfilling the mission.
   - programs are evaluated by relating them to the mission; leaders are elected or appointed according to how well they will implement the mission – then you will be at 9.

On the other hand, if…

- you believe that the mission and purpose is not clear.
- You have never seen a mission statement; cannot remember hearing it.
- it has become lost amid the day-to-day demands of church life.
- such that the Presbytery church is adrift, without any clear sense of mission and purpose – you will be at 1.
- **Place yourself somewhere between 1 and 9** (record number) (do same for each spectrum).

2. **Worship, Spirituality, Christian Education in the Presbytery:** If…
   - Worship is a key focus of the Presbytery and if, with a few exceptions, worship is fulfilling and uplifting; there is a vibrancy in worship.
   - The Presbytery is characterized as nurturing one's spiritual growth.
   - that there is strong support for Christian education for all ages – you will be at 9.

On the other hand, if…

- you believe that spiritual worship is not a strong point; there is more of a mindlessness to the way people worship together; it is just a habit; and the Presbytery does little to nurture spiritual growth; there is a real lack of quality Christian education for all ages – you will be at 1.

3. **Caring for Each Other:** If…
   - you believe that individuals in the Presbytery supports each other in every possible way.
   - in times of physical, spiritual, and emotional need; that one often does not need to ask for support.
   - that you personally have experienced this type of support – you will be at 9.

On the other hand, if…

- you believe that compassion is not a characteristic of the Presbytery, that individuals are not supportive of one another in times of need.
- that you personally have experienced times when the people of the Presbytery have not supported you in times of need; that people's needs are forgotten or ignored by church members – you will be at 1.

4. **Caring from Pastors:** If…
   - you believe that the congregation has a history of pastoral care that is exemplary.

- that pastors have always been there when an individual or family had needs, such as an illness, death in the family, or a need for pastoral counseling.
- that pastors have provided just what was needed at the time; or made sure that such care would be provided through others; with appropriate follow up – you will be at 9.

On the other hand, if…

- pastors have often been unavailable during times of need in members' lives.
- or the care needed was not forthcoming; either from pastors or others charged with providing pastoral care.
- if people's pastoral care needs were just "lost in the shuffle" – you will be at 1.

5. **Caring for EP:** If…
   - you believe that the Presbytery has a history of supporting its executives; not only financially, but also caring for the executives and their families in times of personal need.
   - that the Presbytery has always provided clear and reasonable expectations for executives.
   - That performance evaluation procedures are reasonable and guides executives to grow – and
   - that such evaluations consider the responsibility of others share in the success of the Presbytery's ministry (not evaluating EPs in isolation) – you will be at 9.

On the other hand, if…

- you believe that the Presbytery has often failed to provide needed support for its executives and their families, regarding personal needs.
- has placed unreasonable expectations on the executive for the impact of ministry.
- or has not supported the executives' growth in ministry – you will be at 1.

6. **Caring Conflict Transformation:** If…
   - you believe the Presbytery has a history of seeing conflict as an opportunity; leaders welcome open disagreement; all work for win-win agreements; all can be firm on issues, but kind toward people.
   - that many voices are heard representing all the different perspectives; there is open and direct dialogue, with little behind-the-back criticism – you will be at 9.

On the other hand, if…

- conflict is avoided or seen as dangerous; disagreement is frowned upon; only the most vocal are heard; people are attacked for their ideas; with lots of blaming, rather than sharing responsibility.
- there is indirect communication, triangling, and rampant gossiping – you will be at 1.

7. **Communication and Decision-Making:** If…
   - You believe that the Presbytery has excellent lines of communication.
   - clear minutes are kept of meetings; reports are regularly shared with congregations.
   - information regarding important decisions is widely publicized.
   - The process for making decisions is well-known and widely supported; with opportunities for input and questions from members – in a way that is consistent with your denominational polity.
   - Members of the Presbytery are kept informed regarding what is happening – you will be at 9.

On the other hand, if…

- communication lines are blurry; people often do not know who to go to with questions.
- People do not know what is happening; little record-keeping or reporting is done.
- decision-making processes are unclear, and do not properly provide people with opportunities to have input in a way that is consistent with your denominational polity – you will be at 1.

8. **Structures and Leadership:** If…
   - You believe that structures of the Presbytery are clearly defined; the Presbytery has clearly defined roles and expectations for all persons in leadership.
   - There's good supervision and follow-through on assigned tasks.
   - people know who is responsible for various leadership roles and they support those persons.
   - People are allowed to do their jobs; they are not undermined by others, by those formerly in leadership.
   - that leadership qualities are well-matched to the tasks required – you will be at 9.

On the other hand, if…

- structures are not clearly defined – or defined structures are not followed.

- there is significant lack of clarity regarding leadership role expectations, with little support or supervision, and little follow-through.
- if leadership responsibilities are inappropriately infringed upon by others – you will be at 1.

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1. Outline goals for this process:
   - In the telephone interviews and in the questionnaires that you have sent to us, we have begun to **hear your concerns**, as well as your perceptions of the strengths of the church.
   - In this session each of you now has an opportunity to have some **uninterrupted time to express** your thoughts about any of the topics addressed in the spectrum exercises, or anything else you want to say about what is happening in the church. Thus, we want to hear about **your primary concerns** for the congregation, (key issues, main interests, biggest fears, deepest hopes).
   - After all have shared: the interests documented in this session, along with those from the other groups, **will be categorized under workable problem areas;** such interests will be the criteria used to evaluate any potential solutions that emerge later in the process, when you begin to work on problem-solving.

1. Guidelines:
   - Each person will have some uninterrupted time to say whatever they want to say,
   - We would like you to speak from **your own experience** – not what you have heard from others, but your own perspective.
   - This is not a time for debate – we ask others to be good listeners.
   - Speak to the mediator and not to the group.
1. Confidentiality:
   - You are free to share what you yourself said.
   - However, we ask that you not share what you heard others say – let them speak for themselves. Agreed?
1. Debriefing:
   - Give each person some uninterrupted time.
   - Facilitator paraphrases statements in terms of "need" statements.

- Recorder documents interests in terms of “need” statements on flipchart paper, taping each sheet to the wall to keep it visible, as the sheet is filled.

CLOSING

I invite you to offer statements of affirmation or appreciation for specific individuals or to the entire.

APPENDIX C

Spectrum Exercise Compiled Results

1. **Mission and Purpose of Presbytery:**

_____12____ 23_____5_____12_____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

2. **Worship, Spirituality, Christian Education in the Presbytery:**

_____11 ½ _____31_____1_____2 ½ ___11_____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

3. **Caring for Each Other:**

_____1_____1_____1_____1_____11_____1_____1_____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

4. **Caring from EP:**

1__ _1_____1_____3_____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

5. **Caring for EP:**

31____31_____1_____1_____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

6. **Caring Conflict Transformation:**

_2_____1_____35_____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

7. **Communication and Decision-Making:**

_1_____12_____21_____23_____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

8. **Structures and Leadership:**

13_____3_____3_____1_____1_____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Comments: BLACK–9:30 Group
RED–3:00 Group

APPENDIX D
List of Need Statements

New Model:

- A need for someone who is not a professional EP.
- No need for a spiritual direction.
- A need to celebrate the victories.
- A need for a paradigm shift away from the middle age white guy with a tie.
- A need to have a partner who is a support and cheerleader.
- A need to recognize all the roles of the Presbytery are valid but should not be filled by one person but should be a shared role.
- A need to be better organized to serve the geographical challenges of the Presbytery.
- A need someone who is creative, understands processes, and understands congregational care.
- A need to recognize there are many layers to the problem.
- A need to recognize that the Presbytery is an immigrant church (Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists) who do not understand Presbyterian Polity.
- A need for teams working together because an individual cannot be successful alone.
- A need to recognize the EP is a lonely position (who pastors the EP) "This is a lousy place to work!"
- A need to look within to fill the position(s) rather than just sticking someone in the position again which can create a model for our churches and other Presbyteries.
- A need to wrestle with how the Presbytery wants to be a Presbytery moving.
- A need to determine what the Presbytery needs and figure out how to meet those needs.
- A need to get people who care about what happens in the Presbytery who want to make a difference in the Presbytery.
- A need to tap into the gifts that can contribute to the success of the Presbytery.
- A need for a clear mission statement that is driven by the churches that is nurtured by the EP.
- A need to find our niche—each Presbytery does it differently.
- A need for people, policy, protocol, procedures.
- A need to ask, "Is an EP necessary these days?" "Is this an organizational structure that needs to be reconsidered?" "What does an EP do?"
- A need to understand that the influence needs to come from the bottom up.

- A need to recognize the need for an EP that supports the Matt. 25:18.
- A need to ask if we are asking the EP to do too much in a shrinking Presbytery.
- A need to ask if this time is an opportunity.
- A need for an EP who is a pastor to pastors.
- A need for a captain in the boat that guides the boat.
- A need to hope for the best that there will be another shepherd that comes alongside the Presbytery to help it connect in better ways.
- A need to recognize that we need to wrestle with whether we need a new structure.

Past Patterns:

- A need to support new pastors coming in (does not need to come out of the EP's office, could be a welcoming committee).
- A need to recognize the last leader provided support at one time.
- A need to recognize that the relationship was transactional.
- A need to recognize it was very awkward toward the end because there were still needs.
- A need to put the current situation behind us in a cohesive manner in a positive way—it was a learning experience, and we do not want to repeat and do better in the future.
- A need to refine the role of the EP with more clarity of the role and be more accountable to the Presbytery of their role.
- A need to recognize that there has been a lot of turnover in leadership without a lot of direction, guidance from a system or manual.

Conflict:

- A need to recognize that the pandemic has created situations where support was difficult.
- A need to avoid nitpicking.
- A need to recognize that people have been hurt because faulty information has been passed around because of a tendency of our system to create a centralized leadership which houses all the information.
- A need for a code of conduct with a strict adherence to the code.

Communication:

- A need for the EP to provide support for to the churches who are struggling by listening to their concerns and offering constructive suggestions.

- A need to understand that rubberstamping which is not helpful or healthy.
- A need for clearer communication and transparency in how the Presbytery communicates with the churches.
- A need for more education on how the Presbytery functions.
- A need for clear goals and accountability for the EP by the Presbytery.
- A need for clarity of the written policy (handbook).

Connection:

- A need to recognize that if there would have been support from previous Presbyter things could have been different.
- A need to recognize that the Thumb area is dwindling.
- A need to recognize that the former EP had an interest in the churches in the thumb-we were heard, we were seen, we were listened to.
- A need for infrastructure to support a new EP when they enter the Presbytery.
- A need to understand how to connect the churches to each other.
- A need to have a common call that connect us together.

Identity:

- A need to recognize the demographics and the membership has changed since the first EP came.
- A need for a new world view to ask, “Who are we?” and “What does success look like?”
- A need to define how this Presbytery defines itself.
- A need to find our niche—each Presbytery does it differently
- A need to recognize that when we violate who we are there are consequences.
- A need for an EP that can lead a process in discovering what this Presbytery is.
- A need to recognize that the land and the water shape the Presbytery.
- A need for the core of discovery.
- A need to understand what Matthew 25 means today.
- A need to recognize that we can learn from our challenges.
- A need to be intentional in who we are going to be and how we are going to do that.