

Ohio Episcopal Area Task Team Listening Sessions Report

By Rev. Linda Middelberg & Rev. Ed Peterson*

Including the Task Team itself, we interviewed 254 people in 17 different sessions. In those sessions, we had a wide diversity of people, including laity and clergy of rural, urban, and suburban churches of various sizes across multiple geographic areas. In each session, we asked participants 3 questions:

1. What excites you and makes you hopeful as you think about living into a new Annual Conference?
2. What are your concerns or what gives you pause?
3. When you think about a new conference what words or phrases would you use to describe your vision of what we could be?

For the question of what excites you and makes you hopeful, we got answers that mainly fall into four categories.

1. After the past years of feeling separated through COVID and disaffiliation, it is hopeful and exciting to be talking about something that will connect us and bring people together. People were hopeful that as we move together, we will become more than the sum of our individual parts. There was a yearning for the creation of a new vision that would reintroduce The UMC and its mission to the entire State of Ohio.
2. Most people believed that coming together would provide everyone with a larger pool of assets and resources – more ideas, more creativity, more financial and human resources, more possibilities.
3. There was a belief that the church could have more influence on what is happening in our State if we spoke with one voice.
4. We could also hear the longing for less bureaucracy and lower administrative costs so more money could be invested in local congregations.

One person said that creating the “Ohio Land” of the bishop’s vision will be a bit like the TV show “Survivor.” It will be challenging but worth the effort.

While many concerns were expressed in the discussion of the second question, here are the main categories.

1. Do we really have the capacity to do this while still concentrating on the mission and ministry of the Church? There was a fair amount of concern that the process of creating a new unified conference would take our attention off the work that God has already given us to do.
2. “Change fatigue” was a consistent thought expressed. Our staff, our clergy, and our congregations have gone through so much change over the last several years, including the increased use of technology, the effects of disaffiliation on individual congregations and communities, redistricting, and a new bishop. How will we excite people about one more change?
3. There was concern about how we would honor and support the various cultural and geographical differences that exist regionally. Travel time becomes a problem, and many areas of the State do not have reliable internet access. There was a general concern that rural areas would feel even more isolated from the conference than they do now.
4. People encouraged leaders to be transparent in the process and to communicate more frequently about what is happening.

5. Finally, there was a real fear that even if we were able to create something new, it would not take long for the desire to “go back to Egypt” to be so strong that we would fall back into old habits.

Even amid these very real concerns, there was a call for the conference to be patient with the process. One group ended with the sentiment, “Whatever we decide, we will be fine!”

We heard so many amazing words and phrases when we asked people to describe their vision for what is possible. Two of the most profound phrases were “authentic resurrection” and “spiritual explosion!” Other words and phrases include “invitational”, “unity”, “stronger together”, “big dreams”, “adventure”, “mosaic”, “tapestry”, “grace”, “energy”, “strategic”, and “forward-looking”.

Two people reminded us that when you take the first letter from West Ohio and East Ohio you have WE. Several people mentioned how much they appreciate the images that the bishop’s term “Ohio Land” invoked.

Perhaps the best prayer was, “this process will create messy/holy chaos. Please, God, bless this mess!”

As we ended the conversation, people were asked to name something that they would take away from the meeting. The responses were mostly positive. In sessions that included both conferences, people were excited to meet their counterparts. We felt that people were walking away feeling more positive about the process and understanding that we were just at the beginning of what would need to be done.

Many people indicated that the process was more layered and complex than they previously understood. The team could not have said it better than one person who declared that to create the vision to which we are being called by the Holy Spirit, it will take all of us!

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