

Open Table Mennonite Fellowship

December 7, 2015

Lois Kaufmann, Conference Minister
Central District Conference

Dear Lois and the CDC Board of Directors,

I am writing on behalf of Open Table Mennonite Fellowship to request membership in Central District Conference, following up on informal conversations with Lois Kaufmann.

Open Table began in 2012 as the godchild of two CDC dual-conference congregations, Assembly Mennonite and Faith Mennonite. We are a house church-style fellowship, with an informal, contemplative, interactive approach to worship, and meet for worship and a fellowship meal each Sunday at Faith House, the big old house near downtown Goshen where Faith Mennonite has its offices and emergency housing. Demographically we span the decades from infant to 80-year olds, with about half the group currently Goshen College students. Our intention is to grow organically, budding a network of worship circles rather than building, and this fall we have a small “test bud” meeting earlier on Sundays for breakfast and worship, trying this out. On November 22, we held our first annual membership signing, with 31 people choosing to sign.

Attached you will find a brief history and the Who We Are statement from our website (opentablemennonite.org). This fall we reviewed the CDC membership expectations as outlined in the CDC Constitution and Policies and Procedures and in our October 11, 2015 discernment meeting, we agreed that we would like to request membership in Central District. We had discussed conference membership at a number of earlier points, but with many of us coming from dual-conference congregations, the hold-up has been the denominational requirement of choosing one, along with the sense that we are not in a traditional mold and may not fit CDC expectations in the same way other congregations do. We look forward to exploring this further with Lois and the rest of you.

Sally Weaver Glick
Congregational doula/pastor,
Open Table Mennonite Fellowship

Who We Are

Open Table Mennonite Fellowship welcomes every individual as a unique and beloved child of God, the Source of life and love. With the Holy Spirit as our guide, we attempt to follow the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. Rooted in the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition, yet open to insights from other faith traditions, we seek to join God's plan for healing the earth and bringing peace and justice to its people.

Leadership and Discernment

Our congregational life values everyone's voice, and our diversity of voices. We have a part-time pastor/doula, whose voice is still just one among ours. Leadership is shared, and all significant decisions are made by consensus in monthly discernment meetings.

Worship

Our worship also values participation by many. Each service is hosted by a different worship leader, and we create our sermon together through interacting with scripture, inward reflection, and sharing. Each service concludes with Jesus' invitation to the bread and cup and the sharing of a simple fellowship meal together.

Growth

The face-to-face nature of our worship circle allows all to be known by name. We want to create a safe place for questions and honest mutual engagement, where we can discern together what the good news of Jesus means in our context. We also want to welcome newcomers. We are exploring ways of budding new worship circles to welcome growth while also maintaining a small intergenerational worship experience.

Ministry

We support individuals' calls and involvement in a variety of settings, both at Open Table and in the broader community. We want to help each other find a life-giving balance as we carry out our calls and our responsibilities.

Nurture

We strive to be an open and welcoming community where God's love transcends all barriers that oppress and exclude people. Mid-week small groups are one way we encourage, support, and hold each other accountable to live out our faith throughout the week. Children are a valuable part of our community and we are committed to working with families to tailor the ways we involve children in worship and help with their Christian formation.

Affiliations

OTMF values the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the life of the church and is a member of Supportive Communities Network, a network of Mennonite and Brethren congregations.

OTMF is requesting membership in Central District Conference of MC USA.

Approved July 12, 2015

Open Table Mennonite Fellowship

Brief History

Open Table Mennonite Fellowship began in 2012, the godchild of two Central District/Indiana-Michigan dual-conference congregations, Assembly Mennonite and Faith Mennonite.

At the time, Assembly was experiencing significant growth and was looking at a building expansion. Some in the congregation also wanted to consider two services and in early 2012, co-pastor Karl Shelly hosted several meetings exploring different options for this. A group coalesced of about twenty who were interested in a smaller, alternative-style worship service. Rather than trying to get all the details figured out ahead of time, Karl encouraged the group to begin meeting, quoting a line from the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado: “The way is made by walking.”

Several of this group were also involved in Faith House Fellowship, a small, contemplative worship group that began in 2005 as a sprout from Faith Mennonite. FHF followed Faith’s pattern of meeting on Sunday evenings for worship and a fellowship meal, gathering at the big old house near downtown Goshen which Faith uses for office space, meetings, and emergency housing. In 2012, the fellowship had dropped to seven regulars, and was ready for something new.

So in the summer of 2012, these two groups came together, bringing DNA from both Assembly and Faith. Meeting every other Sunday, we explored Biblical passages that picked up on the theme of walking, being led, and being “on the way.” We got acquainted and began to get a feel for what this new group might become. There was some settling out, as several people realized they preferred to stay with the larger Assembly group and a few new faces arrived.

In the fall, we began meeting at Faith House every Sunday at 11:00 for worship, followed by a simple fellowship meal. Demographically, we had a few representatives in nearly every decade from grade-school children through 80-year olds. We took a temporary name of Assembly North, and continued to explore “Who are we together?” and “What might God be inviting us to?” We shared our faith journeys and our sense of individual call, and in Advent we started a year-long journey through the book of Luke.

As we moved into 2013, we affirmed Sally Weaver Glick in a leadership role as Assembly North chairperson. In addition to administrative tasks, she led us in a series of “Listening Sessions” looking at vision and identity. By June we had agreed on an initial “Who We Are” statement that described our house church-style worship service and our intention to develop an organic growth model, multiplying worshiping groups as a way of incorporating new people while maintaining the strengths of a small, intergenerational service. Growing out of our work with Luke and our practice of a weekly fellowship meal, we had significant conversations about our celebration of communion. Our numbers grew from 15-20 on a Sunday morning to 25-30, as a sizable number of Goshen College students began attending regularly.

As 2014 began, Faith was supporting us by providing our meeting space; Assembly had been providing some worship resources and pastoral care. We wanted to begin paying Sally for a .125 FTE position as our pastor/congregational doula and asked the Assembly Leadership Group about including a line item for us in the annual budget. They were willing to assist with a portion, but also named their sense that we were moving towards becoming a separate congregational entity, rather than a second Assembly worship service or a Faith-related sprout. As we considered this, we found that we agreed.

We chose our name – Open Table Mennonite Fellowship -- and initiated some conversation with our area conferences, but the complication of needing to choose one when most of us had come from dual-conference congregations meant that we set this decision aside for a time. Instead, we moved ahead with incorporating, opening a bank account and drafting a budget, and began work on congregational policies.

This continued into 2015, as we pulled together worship guidelines and a leadership group structure, agreed on guidelines for discernment and decision-making, determined our membership policy, updated our Who We Are statement and agreed that we wanted to join the Supportive Communities Network of Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Interests.

In the spring of 2015, our average attendance was 25-30, with a peak of 43 on one memorable Sunday, filling the space available at Faith House. Earlier we had explored some options for a larger space, but nothing had developed as a good long-term choice. Over the summer, an Amoeba/Rhizome planning group met to push out our vision for organic growth, and this past fall, a small “test bud” of five people began meeting at 9:00 Sunday morning at Faith House, trying out this approach for growing into a new worship group that would be part of a network with the 11:00 group. At our December discernment meeting we will be reviewing their experience and deciding how we move ahead.

In October 2015, we agreed to request membership with Central District Conference of Mennonite Church USA. And in November, we celebrated our first membership signing, with 31 choosing to sign as members in what we anticipate as an annual event.