



Exploring Faith and Values as part of Organizational Identity

Mennonite Health Services Alliance convened a forum on April 29 to review outcomes of a Values Integration Project. The assembly of nearly 50 CEOs, senior staff and participating communities' Board members, representing MHS Alliance, Friends Services for the Aging and Church of the Brethren Fellowship of Brethren Homes, were welcomed by Joe Swartz, President and CEO of host community, Tel Hai.

Warren Witte, Executive Director of the Friends Foundation for the Aging, added his greeting and shared that this project represented the first grant awarded to a Mennonite organization by his Quaker foundation. This initiative addressed the challenge shared by Peace Church organizations of keeping “the link to faith alive” through the pairing of education, credentials, experience AND the desired “values skill set.” Rick Stiffney’s doctoral research served as a foundational element in the project.

As facilitator for the forum, Rick noted the diversity of religious traditions in the room. His dissertation work sought answers to the questions: “What does affiliation mean? How does that affiliation affect governance and leadership?” Stiffney went on to ask “How does or should organizational identity and affiliation impact HOW we work?” His answer included the need for a clear articulation of core values and convictions which create our organizational identity to a market place and a work force marked by incredible diversity.

MHS Alliance Consulting Associate, Tim Stair outlined the identity and values research that was undertaken. Resource materials created as a result of their efforts include a highly readable history entitled *A Quick Guide to Anabaptist Values* by Emerson L. Leshner and John D. Roth. Structured after the familiar David Letterman “Top Ten” list format, the book offers an easy-to-understand reference for those not familiar with the Anabaptist tradition. This gave rise to the development of a short fast-paced DVD and creation of online resources (including study guides available at www.mhsonline.org all focused upon the integration of values in the workplace.

Using clay as a metaphor for the ongoing life-shaping process, Stiffney suggested that as “works in progress” the clay is now ours to shape. To keep pace with the rhythm of life we are to keep moving, changing, and growing in order to stay fresh, relevant and responsive. But in such an environment what do we hold on to? How do we find a balance between traditional values and the dynamics of change?

A graphic depiction of this dynamic tension was offered by a series of interconnected boxes to demonstrate the link between the community of faith, mission and values. A second sketch showed the “boxes” of the faith community, mission and values no longer interconnected. Instead, the community of faith has become an artifact in the corporate museum and the values are no longer informed by faith. The challenge posed by Stiffney is to bring the core beliefs and convictions into

the daily life of our organizations; to live the mission reaching beyond “espoused values” or rhetoric and the “artifacts” of our symbolic message.

The executive’s role in this quest is critically important. Stiffney cited the need for a sense of vocation with a CEO’s vision of self as the “embodiment” of the organization’s mission and values; a commitment to effectiveness and faithfulness; an ability to stay faithful to the unique core values of the organization’s faith community while serving “pluralistic markets” with a diverse workforce.

Participants sharing from personal experience included John Hendrickson, CEO of Frederick Mennonite Retirement Community; Chris Book, Executive Director of Paxton Ministries; and Ron Sawatsky, CEO of Rockhill Mennonite Community whose remarks were delivered by Monique Acosta of MHS Alliance. Joe Swartz, CEO of Tel Hai also shared a brief history of their “Engaging the Faith Community” initiative.

Table groups were asked to work from the frame of reference of a CEO or Board member and identify resources that would prove helpful in the development of faith integration in organizational identity and also to propose collaborative ways in which to further this work.



Of the eight working groups, only one elected to work from the CEO’s perspective and pointed out the dynamic tension often a part of Board/CEO relationships when identifying “traditional values” versus the customer’s values. The sharing of more stories to develop and enhance the common core was offered as an important tool in bridging the distance between these roles.

The other groups tackled the enhancement of the Trustee’s engagement in core identity. Their discussion echoed many of the study’s elements: shared materials and stories, more opportunities like this forum to meet and work together, mixing Board and staff with more frequency, reviewing core values on a set schedule to keep them front of mind, calling upon MHS Alliance and others for consultation and assistance, developing a “values-based” orientation program, being intentional in Board member selection, creating tools for the assessment of leadership and staff, connecting values to strategic planning as well as the admonition to “keep talking to each other.” Jane Mack, Executive Director of Friends Services for the Aging urged more strategic planning and opportunities for working together because the Peace Church groups “have so much in common.”

In closing, Warren Witte declared “how rich this mix of organizations is!” He thanked Rick and MHS Alliance for this valuable work. “It is the springboard for great discussions to come.”

Stiffney concluded the session as he’d begun with heartfelt thanks to the funders of this work: Friends Foundation for the Aging, Greencroft Communities, Rockhill Mennonite Community and the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community. He acknowledged the valuable role filled by the ten participating CEOs in the study, his supportive Board of Directors and the MHS Alliance staff. Rick suggested we have a lot to learn from other religious traditions and could benefit from keeping our boundaries “permeable.” “Let us be clear about our center (core identity and values), but be able to engage others in conversation.”