

Mennonite Health Services Alliance Values Integration Initiative - Putting Anabaptist Values to Work

For more than 100 years, Anabaptist individuals or church institutions across the United States have started programs in response to needs in their communities. Over time, leadership and workforce in these programs have become more diverse and evidence of Anabaptist identity has decreased.

Today, only 59% of executives of MHS Alliance member organizations belong to Anabaptist congregations. In 2008, an analysis of the mission and values statements of 48 MHS Alliance member organizations showed that only 21% directly identify themselves as Anabaptist or Mennonite. While some of the MHS Alliance core values appear in most member statements, most of these values show up only 45% of the time or less.

Without intervention, organizations may lose their unique expression of identity and values.

As we interact with leaders from other denominational associations, we hear this concern echoed across the country. Where it used to be a given that the executive needed to have the same religious affiliation as the organization, boards today are more interested in professional qualities and technical competence when they select new leadership for increasingly complex organizations. Consequently, the identity, values and history are not necessarily carried by the executive.

For the past ten years, the three Peace Church associations – Friends, Church of the Brethren and Mennonite – have worked together on issues of common concern. Among other things, we have shared resources and promising practices with each other. Several years ago, Friends Services for the Aging shared a video, *Being with Friends*, and a kit they developed to teach employees of FSA members about Quaker history and beliefs. This sparked our interest in developing a Mennonite version of this resource.

The goal of this project is to provide information and practical resources so that whether or not executives and other employees are acquainted with the religious affiliation of the organization, they can understand and carry out its mission and values.

Project Components

Under the direction of MHS Alliance staff member Tim Stair and a task force of member executives, the project encompassed the following components:

Body of Knowledge - A theologian and a writer were engaged to compile a booklet about Anabaptist history, background in health and human services, and core beliefs. The style of the written material is easy for most people to understand and has a touch of humor. The material was tested with potential end users as well as with denominational leaders. A short DVD was created based on the written material. Both of these resources have been well-received.

Fresh Values Statements - A new set of core values for MHS alliance was developed. To accomplish this, we reviewed values statements from member organizations and explored which statements best expressed our beliefs, in the context of health and human services.

Measurable Behaviors – After the new values statements were developed, we engaged a professional research firm to identify and test behavioral markers for each of the values and design an assessment tool for measuring employees’ awareness of the values. When completed, this product will provide a tangible resource for organizations to use in teaching and reinforcing how these values can be experienced and expressed.

Leadership Behaviors – As part of his doctoral studies, MHS Alliance President/CEO Rick Stiffney conducted qualitative research that focused on the question “How do you as CEO understand your role and work as it relates to shaping the faith identity of the organization you serve?” He responded to that question by conducting extensive interviews with the CEOs of 10 MHS Alliance member organizations. Interviewees included both those who are Anabaptist and those who are not.

Stiffney’s research yielded four themes that have an impact on the faith identity of the organizations he studied:

- A personal faith for the CEO provides a shared frame of reference for developing an organization’s faith-based identity, with personal integrity being essential to the CEO’s credibility.
- The convergence of the CEO’s personal sense of call and the mission of the organization is a source of motivation, focus, and power for the CEO’s daily work. CEOs represent and live the organization’s mission.
- Sense-making – CEOs need to offer a frame of reference for the organization’s identity in communication with various constituents. CEOs often experience tension between articulating a commitment to Mennonite/Anabaptist faith and effectively serving pluralistic markets.
- CEOs contribute to a distinctive organizational culture and identity by repeatedly engaging in practices that nurture such an identity. Promising practices include demonstrating a personal faith, emphasizing the elements of organizational identity in orientations for employees, and using rituals thoughtfully to reinforce core values.

From this research, Stiffney and the MHS Alliance CEOs who worked with him developed recommendations that, when implemented, should strengthen the faith-based identity of member organizations. Recommendations include creating resources that would be used in recruiting board members, guiding executive and senior leadership formation, supporting boards in times of executive recruitment, , and orienting new employees.

Consultation – While this study focused on MHS Alliance organizations, we believe that the information gained can apply to organizations from other faith traditions. We are committed to sharing our findings with our Peace Church colleagues and discussing the role of associations in enhancing strong identity and values in ways that lead to high quality of care.

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