

Mission Summit Conversation Evaluation, July 2015

On the weekend of June 26-28, 2015, a series of Mission Summit Conversations (MSC) were offered to attendees at the American Baptist Mission Summit/Biennial. The Mission Summit Conversations were held as an experiment for the first time in 2013 and were brought back for 2015 as a result of the initial experiment receiving high marks.

Selection of Topics

The topics were chosen on the basis of a national survey that was distributed during the fall of 2014. Survey topic choices were drawn from previous Mission Summit topics, suggestions from the 2013 MSC evaluation, the Mission Summit/Biennial planning team, the Transformed by the Spirit Journey Team, the National Leadership Council and from other gatherings of ABC constituents. The survey was distributed via regional and national organizations. 143 persons responded to the Survey. Additionally, in an effort to include topics of interest to youth, a separate survey targeting 16-23 years olds was distributed with 29 young people responding to this survey. Items with the highest ratings from the two surveys became part of the 2015 MSC topics. About one-half (11) of the topics for 2015 were repeated from 2013 and 10 of the topics were new for 2015. See the Appendix for a list of the 21 topics selected for the 2015 MSC.

Primarily due to space limitations, the topics were divided among three large rooms. Three common threads were chosen for the set of topics and the topics were then subdivided into the three broad categories of "Our Leaders," "Our Witness," and "Our Future." These three topics served to orient the persons to the process and served as another handle or sense-making device for the MSC.

The morning session was 90 minutes long and included a report out of the tables in each room. The afternoon conversations were 60 minutes in length and did not include a report out.

Selection and Training of Small Group Facilitators

Approximately 85 facilitators were recruited and trained to guide the MSC. 70 of these facilitators were pre-assigned to topics and 15 of the facilitators were willing to serve wherever needed. Tables were set in rounds and supplies were distributed to the rooms in preparation for the participants.

The three room hosts, Steve Bils, Nikita McCalister, and Marie Onwubuariri played key roles in the MSC as they were in charge of the three rooms of "Our Leaders," "Our Witness," and "Our Future." Several conference calls were held with this group to prepare for the MSC. Greeters were also provided for each room by the local arrangements committee.

In the 2013 MSC, facilitators were randomly assigned to topics rather than being assigned to topics of their choosing to avoid a facilitator being overly interested in a topic and dominating the conversation. In 2015, facilitators were invited to self-select a topic of interest to them, in an effort to generate interest in topics before and after the MSC event. This switch seemed to work well with the interest benefit offsetting the potential for facilitator domination. The importance of not dominating conversations as a facilitator was also emphasized in the facilitator orientation session.

Even though the majority of facilitators were pre-assigned to a topic, they were told that they might need to switch to another topic according to the interests of the participants. Conversation participants were not asked to sign up for conversations in advance, but rather were allowed to self-select into topics on the day of the event. Several facilitators in each room switched to a new topic as interest for particular topics grew. The “flipping of tables” from one topic to another occurred nearly seamlessly as room hosts made suggestions and facilitators happily jumped in to facilitate a different topic as needed.

In terms of facilitator recruitment, invitations to serve as an MSC facilitator were extended to the entire NLC, to the caucus presidents, as well as to all Transformed by the Spirit journey team members. Seven (7) BGM members and 8 NLC members (7 of whom are members of the REMC) ended up serving as facilitators. Two of the three room hosts were also NLC members and the other room host is a member of the TbyS Journey Team. The remainder of the facilitators included regional staff members, pastors, and local church leaders. Mission Table representatives were not selected in time to be invited to serve as MSC facilitators. The majority of facilitators were recruited by scouring the Mission Summit/Biennial registration list for names of persons with facilitation skills.

A 90 minute training and orientation event was held for the MSC facilitators on the Friday afternoon of the MSC event. Nearly all of the facilitators attended and those who did not attend arranged to review the materials ahead of time. A facilitator training document that included principles undergirding the MSC, a list of topics and facilitators, a Q & A document, instructions for forming groups, and a one page script for each round of MSC was distributed in advance. All but two of the facilitators received high marks from the online evaluation.

Communication and Technology

The most common request from the 2013 MSC was to find a way to launch the conversations ahead of time and to continue them after the event. To accomplish this goal, David Cushman, director of the ABC Computer Center, designed a publicly interactive online Message Board that included all 21 topics. Bridget Holmstrom transferred summaries and activity reports from the 32 topics of 2013 to the Message Board as well. Topics that were continuing from 2013, highlights of previous work and new topics for 2015 were included.

Message Board Link: www.MissionSummitConversations.com

Online moderators were recruited for each of the 21 topics. The job description for the online moderators included:

- Familiarize oneself with the database platform.
- Check for new postings related to your assigned topic on a monthly basis.
- Enhance the conversation by adding new comments and questions.
- Alert the Transformed by the Spirit Database Monitor or Jeff Woods of any inappropriate material that has been added to the site.
- Encourage a spirit of respect when posting and responding to comments.

In the month following the MSC event, summaries and highlights of all 21 MSC were posted. One hundred forty-six (146) messages were posted within the month following the MSC event.

The results of an online evaluative survey revealed that:

19% of the respondents read and contributed to the online conversations prior to the event
13% of the respondents read but did not contribute to the online conversations prior to the event
44% of the respondents were aware of but did not read the online conversations prior to the event
23% of the respondents were not aware of the online conversations prior to the event

A list of topics and locations, along with a Q & A document were included in the program guide. Personal emails also alerted people to the upcoming process.

The “report out” session of previous MSC work from 2013 to present took place in the form of talk show interviews hosted by Susan Gillies and Harry Riggs. Participants in the talk show included:

1. Katie Jo Suddaby
2. Nikita McCalister
3. Alan Selig
4. Chakravarthy Zadda
5. Deborah Jackson
6. Carl Ratliff

Greg Mamula captured brief 1-2 minute video segments of the morning conversations and edited and showed them in the afternoon report out session as well.

Encouraging Participation at the MSC

Decisions regarding the MSC continue to be made on the basis of emphasizing flexibility for the MSC participants. Mission Summit participants were not asked to sign up for a particular conversation in advance, but rather were told that they could choose to join any MSC on the morning of the event. To allow for this, MSC facilitators were pre-assigned to topics, but were told that their topic could change on the day of the event to be flexible to the interests of the attendees. It was emphasized that the facilitation was about encouraging the flow of the conversation rather than adding content to the discussion. If asked, facilitators also told participants that they were welcome to change topics for the second round of conversation.

Even though Mission Summit participants were not asked to sign up for a MSC in advance, every person who registered for the Mission Summit received a personal email from the MSC coordinator, explaining the Mission Summit Conversation process and distributing a Q & A document and list of MSC topics.

The MSC Event

The schedule for the MSC and related events is shown below:

Friday:

3:00 – 4:30 pm - Orientation for the group leaders

Saturday:

9:40 – 11:10 am – MSCs in 3 rooms – round one

2:15 - 3:15 pm – MSCs in 3 rooms – round two

3:30 – 4:20 pm – Talk show with Susan Gillies and Harry Riggs

Sunday:

2:15 to 3:15 & 3:30 to 4:30 - Next Steps in Mission Summit Conversations

Each round of MSC had a specific goal as listed below:

Round One – Model healthy communication on the challenging issues facing American Baptists.

Round Two –Explore how God is at work in this topic.

Online Evaluation

An online evaluation link was distributed to the MSC participants via their registration packets. Fifty-four (54) persons responded to the evaluation. Results of this online evaluation are detailed below.

Summative Results

Evaluation respondents were asked to respond to a question asking for their overall impression of the MSC, basically asking, “Was it worth your time to attend?” The responses are shown below.

32% of the respondents indicated that the summit exceeded their expectations.

59% of the respondents indicated that the summit met their expectations.

9% of the respondents indicated that the summit was not helpful to them personally.

In terms of attendance:

55% of the respondents stayed in the same conversation for both rounds

16% of the respondents attended two different conversations

22% of the respondents attended only the morning conversation

8% of the respondents attended only the afternoon conversation

Benefit of the Conversations

Additionally, respondents were asked to rate three aspects of the MSC on a 1-10 scale with 1 being low and 10 being high. The results of this question are shown below.

Mission Summit Component	Mean	SD
Content discussed	7.96	1.67
Quality of Discussion	7.94	1.73
Importance to your ministry	8.22	1.79

Verbal comments from the 2013 MSC surfaced five main areas of benefit that can arise from the conversations. These potential benefits were included in the 2015 evaluation asking persons to respond on a 1-5 Likert scale. Four of the five potential benefits received an average score above 4.0. The ratings of the specific benefits are shown below.

Specific Benefit	Mean	SD
Gave an opportunity to connect with new people	4.32	0.75
Helped me realize that I am not alone on this issue	4.23	0.79
Provided helpful insights	4.06	1.00
Helped me understand other perspectives on this issue	4.04	0.83
Brought the parking lot conversations into the main hall	3.86	0.91

Number and Type of Conversations

Respondents were asked to indicate how many conversations they would like to have in the future. The results of this question are shown below.

Number of Preferred Future Conversations	Percentage %
More conversation options	6%
About the same # of 21 conversations	79%
Fewer conversation options	15%

Even though only about 15% of the respondents attended two different conversations, about 2/3 of the respondents (65%) indicated that they would like to be able to discuss more than one conversation rather than stay in the same conversation.

Finally, respondents were given three choices in terms of the type of conversations that could be available at the next Mission Summit. The results of this question are shown below.

Preferred Types of Future Conversations	Percentage %
Brand new topic with similar questions	26%
A continuing topic	38%
A topic with a dedicated room with several tables on that topic designed to get at deeper and systematic issues	36%

Formative Results

In order to plan for future MSC events, persons were also asked for ways to improve the Mission Summit Conversations. Several of these suggestions are included in the list of recommendations at the end of this report. The specific list of suggestions is contained in Appendix B.

Several of the participants also suggested topics for future consideration as shown below. The specific list of suggested topics is contained in Appendix C.

Summary

Season two of Mission Summit Conversations was appreciated by the majority of the participants; there were fewer negative comments about logistics. The first attempt at the conversations attracted more people, was brand new to everyone, and brought a stronger sense of excitement and energy. There is something about having more people than expected that creates a buzz in the room. While there was less chaos at this year's event due to having better signage, better advance communication, and an adequate number of facilitators trained and ready to go, one of the room hosts suggested that the lack of disorder also might have decreased the energy from Season One. Repeating venues may also have contributed to the familiarity.

Still, 90% of the respondents said that the conversations met or exceeded their expectations and people reported receiving specific benefits from the conversations, with the # 1 benefit being an opportunity to connect with new people. In an age of "networking" this seems to be a significant outcome.

People like the flexibility of the conversations. They like not having to sign up for them; they like being able to switch if they do not like the group that they are in; and they like having several options for topics. People enjoy and benefit from the conversations, but they want a few more bells and whistles added to them. The evaluation showed a relatively even split among the three options of having brand new conversations, ongoing conversations, and conversations that get at the deeper issues of the topic. If there is a way to offer all three options to the participants, this may give the conversations the enhancement needed.

Recommendations

Offer Three Types of Conversation

After the first two seasons of Mission Summit Conversations, people seemed to have grasped the concept of the conversations. Several persons have commented that these conversations have helped to bring us back to our grassroots DNA as Baptists. I suggest that the conversations be repeated, but offer the participants three different options. One room might be dedicated to brand new topics and be formatted similarly to the Seasons One and Two. Several breakout rooms might be dedicated to several of the ongoing conversations, perhaps with a brief update of what has taken place in that conversation thus far. Thirdly, we might offer one or more large rooms dedicated to a broad topic such as violence or congregational change with specific tables designed to address various nuances of the topic. For instance a room on violence might include tables on domestic violence, racial violence, bullying, congregational conflict, etc. A room on congregational change might include tables on missional church, "Joining God in the Neighborhood (A Transformed by the Spirit resource), congregations without buildings, etc.

Continue the Message Board

The public interactive online forum should also be continued. Having a place to share learnings from the conversations has been requested by many in the past and encourages the ABC to become more of a learning community. The Message Board should also be a great asset for the work of the Mission Table.

Continue with the Sunday Flex Option

Two rounds of Saturday conversation rather than the three rounds offered in Season One seem to be sufficient and allow for different events to take place on Sunday afternoon. Some of the dedicated rooms could continue their conversation on Sunday afternoon if desired.

Appendix A – List of 2015 Topics

Our Leaders – Leatherwood Ballroom at the Sheraton

- 101. Discipleship**
- 102. Living Out Our Cultural Reality**
- 103. Next Generation of Leaders and Congregants**
- 104. Pastoral Attrition**
- 105. Spirituality**
- 106. Volunteerism***
- 107. Women in Ministry**

Our Witness – Convention Center Courtyard 1-3

- 201. Burmese Refugees**
- 202. The Gospel in a Rapidly Changing Society***
- 203. Human Trafficking***
- 204. Immigration***
- 205. People with Disabilities***
- 206. Poverty***
- 207. Violence**

Our Future - Convention Center Courtyard 4-7

- 301. Alternative Models of Pastoral Ministry**
- 302. Community Networking***
- 303. Congregations of the Future***
- 304. Congregations without Buildings***
- 305. Missional Church**
- 306. Revitalizing Aging Congregations***
- 307. Technology**

***Denotes a new conversation for 2015**

Appendix B – Suggestions for Improvement

- Check the times that the conversations are scheduled.
- I found these conversations very unhelpful because I just talked about the same information I already knew and spent too much time listening to older laypeople talk about their stories and experience with the topic (refugees from Burma). The afternoon session was somewhat better because there were people in the group who have been working with refugees for many years who began to speak about their current struggles. I would much prefer to spend this time in a workshop learning from an expert in the topic.
- Have been going well. I think a dedicated room for a specific topic(s) for folks that really want to go deeper would be great. Maybe have a combo of a few brief reports, including learnings, from folks that have been working on this topic for a while now (and perhaps denominational folks who have made this topic a national/regional priority), solicit some specific questions ahead of time perhaps (maybe from past facilitators of this topic) and open conversation.
- It seems we were all answering the same questions regardless of the topic. "Where is God in it" for a Spirituality table seemed redundant and way too much time was spent on it. The questions were pretty softball, only leading to talk about feelings about the topic. I keep hoping the focus will be discussing the things our churches are doing related to the topic. What is working and not working? What would we like to see our church doing? How can we support each other? I'd like to get ideas from others to bring home. People were only allowed to answer questions they were invited to answer by others in the group. The questions changed before everyone answered, so there was not a match between who wanted to answer a question and who really got to. And some got passed by repeatedly. This method of speaker selection won't work well though if we move to discussing what we are doing and want to be doing in our churches. The synergies of the discussion would be stifled. Perhaps start by letting everyone have a turn, end with everyone having a turn, but in the middle, let it be a real conversation.
- I wrote about these extensively in my other survey. I think the conversations should leave room for the Spirit to move and to be more free flowing and organic and not as stiffly structured.
- I feel that they are much needed and just keep doing what you are doing. Great Job!
- My table had 12 participants. It was too many. By the time everyone shared there were no follow-up questions.
- Would have been better if not so many people crowded into given space. Our table had difficulty hearing each other due to surrounding noise tables were probably too close together I realize you need to work with what is available. I think conversations are good overall.
- It would be useful to have smaller rooms with similar topics so the reporting is relevant to all in the room.
- Get Refugees to share their testimony.
- It was hard to hear the people on the other side of the table.
- Spreading us into more locations allowed us to hear one another in the table conversations. In 2013, it was hard to hear because there were more groups per room.
- Liked the current format.
- People are looking for ideas, programs and potential helps that they can take back to their congregations as possible answers or partial solutions to the very real difficulties congregations are facing.

- I would appreciate more of a 'breakout' format to have experts onsite. Maybe this could be done via Skype if the person cannot attend the meeting. As well, a breakout format gives an expert opportunity to promote his/her books and other resources.
- We surfaced a strong focus on Black Lives Matter, Human Equality (including Gay rights), and Racism. These issues will still need attention. Churches and other institutions of society too often lag behind social change instead of leading that change. Let's find and live on the cutting edge to create the Beloved Community.
- Perhaps some reporting over time of the consequences of these conversations. Was it simply a good place to vent and discuss or did they result in some individual and /or corporate/institutional/ congregational mission in and around a given topic. May need some kind of intentional feedback from participants other than this format

Appendix C – Suggested Topics for the Future

- Church unity
- Racial and cultural divide in our churches
- Christian summer camping for children - its value (for the property investment) and effect (do the kids become lasting disciples?). What have regions done, what are regions doing?
- I would have ones on being a healthy, vital congregation; as well as ones about worship, and reaching your community.
- We need to get more young people involved in ministry; therefore I would like to suggest: ministering to the Millennials.
- supporting new church planting
- Domestic violence
- New church starts
- social media (separate from technology) technology in society (not just how it is used in worship) identifying what makes worship authentic - what is important and what is not (praising God vs. wearing jeans)
- More conversation about race relations.
- The U.S. Constitution in relation to the Church: Freedom of Religion and Separation of Church & State. Facilitated by a panel including a Constitutional lawyer, a professor with expertise in this area and a theology professor in this field. The panel could address questions submitted by attendees in advance. End each session by allowing for follow up questions from the floor.
- Our denominations fascination (or what would appear to be their fascination) with one political party. You might want to reword that! :)