

Stratford/Wilmot Regional Meeting – Feb. 28/17

- Jim Brown opened the meeting in prayer
*Congregations represented: Tavistock MC, Wellesley, Avon, East Zorra, Steinmann, Erie View UMC, Shantz, Nith Valley, Mannheim, Hillcrest,
- David Martin opened the discussion by gauging what folks knew about Future Directions
- David provided a brief history of the process: What should the church be doing right now? In conversation with Willard Metzger (Exec. Director MC Canada) What is the purpose behind what God is calling us to be? Future Directions Task Force put together reports studying what is happening in the Canadian church. The Final Report (FDTF) outlined “directions” not a “blue print” of what is happening. More detail has been put together in this future directions conversation – the proposal which is now available on line. The proposal will be discussed at each Area Church (Regional Conference) gathering and feedback from these gatherings will help to refine the proposal (adding more detail to the conceptual drawing).
- David continued to articulate that the Future Directions proposal indicates that support local congregations in their missional calling in their neighborhoods. The Regional Church supports congregations in this mission
- Proposal document seems to be proposing more structure than helping congregations engage their local mission, suggested by Steve Drudge. Might be better to re-name document “Re-structure MC Canada” than “Re-vitalize ...” David responded that the proposal does provide clarity on governance, painting some pictures, but not specific details. New patterns and new structures to create a framework for what we are envisioning.
- The National Church and the Area Churches will work better together in this new system because the National Church’s focus and purpose will emerge only from what Regions are indicating. Regions will ask their congregations what they need. Regions will ask each other, “What are you doing in Alberta that could be helpful for us here in Eastern Canada?” If all 5 Area Churches say together that (eg. International mission) is a national

priority then that will be done together. National priorities are owned by the collective of all 5 regions and not seen as simply one region's priority. Let the National Church resource the Regions and the Regions resource the local congregations

- What does a vital congregation look like? Asked Gord Alton. We must imagine together what this looks like. We haven't wrestled this sufficiently at the local level before it is suggested at the national level. David responded that this is an enormous culture shift that must happen. Some form of a structure is necessary to support this conversation. "This is what we are hearing from our congregations" – what are other regions learning about this conversation about a vital congregation?
- Our delegate sessions do not typically reflect our diversity that we believe in – more like an "old boys club." National gatherings are being imagined as times of worship
- Willard quoted John Longhurst as indicating: no one knows this vision or where the church is going? Congregational life used to be reflected in our structures, but not anymore. We were clear on what a congregation is. But that is no longer the case. We don't know what congregational life will look like in the future, so we don't want to cement ourselves in a structure that won't be flexible to that change.
- Kevin Peters Unrau said, we used to talk of a "Mennonite culture" but we cannot do that anymore. We cannot make generalizations about our church culture that what works here will work in Toronto, etc. When you don't have uniformity holding you together what will it be? Documents like this proposal are held tightly and also loosely and we must name what holds us together – "our baptism" suggests Kevin. Also made reference to BFC issue that for some people trumps baptism. How do we disagree on these issues and still remain together as a church? David responded that we are so diverse – language wise (for example) and agreed, yes, baptism holds us together and our call to live out the gospel. These are the pieces that need to hold us together – study conferences and congregation of ministerial leadership gatherings will be where we have discussions about what holds

us together. Our school leaders are very enthusiastic about the envisioned national collaboration. “It would be very exciting to see a Grebel recruiter outside of Ontario” said Kevin. This document will not be the answer to bring us together but collaboration between each one of us (people in the pews) are engaged in living out their faith and sharing that with others

- More responsibility to the congregation, more dollars will stay ‘at home’ to accomplish what is envisioned in the proposal, said Jim Brown. Perhaps better to start with the congregation, “is there vision for a national body across Canada?” Willard responded that the beginning conversation was that we need to imagine ourselves as “congregational units.” We have heard that there is strong affirmation for a ‘national family’ – less clarity on what that will look like. Future National conferences seem to Jim that they will continue to reflect what they are now – white, male, etc. David referenced the “Dusting off the Bible” conference in which folks were quite pleased to just meet together and study the Bible. So, that seems to indicate that if we as regions can find out what congregations are looking for. Willard responded, the actual delegates will be fewer in number yes, but the sense of a ‘national family’ will be developed through the other gatherings – congregation of ministerial leadership
- Concern for the local congregation, said Tanya Dyck Steinmann, the congregation will continue to struggle, what will that mean in the meantime? David responded that the church finds itself in a time of significant change – in the past, social reasons to be in church were valid, but today people don’t feel the compulsion to attend church. Church leaders are challenged nowadays to inspire young adults to why faith is important – this will take time. Restructuring the church will be like renovating a home – we will need to learn to live ‘with the mess.’ But it is also quite exciting to do this together
- Cyril asked the question: Why do I go to church? What’s our purpose? Who changed my life and convicted me to serve in the church? It is Christ. David responded that our cultural context has changed – secular, non-Christian. Are people connecting with the Spirit? Simon Sinek – “start with why” –

why do we exist as a national church/regional church/local church? We must ask ourselves these questions. There will be no engagement in this process if the folks in the pew aren't engaged in their neighborhoods.

- Maurice Martin suggested that in hearing the last 20 minutes of discussion, it would do well to have more confessional and vision statements in the proposal document. David responded that the challenge is that. Willard responded that the Vision: Healing and Hope statement that is there is a beautiful thing – we just need to animate it better.
- Jim Brown suggested, we need more clarity on our theological convictions, more Bible conversations. David responded that we need to refocus our theological convictions, but being careful that we do this creatively so as not to 'draw lines in the sand.' We need 'theological leadership', said Jim, in terms of giving leadership, but being so broad theologically like in the past, issues got pushed down as 'non-essentials.' Kevin Peters Unrau added, we are 'building fences' in our leadership of working on difficult issues. David also added quoting apostle Paul – baptism in Christ – core that held conflicting churches together.
- Restructuring indicates dramatic staff reductions – means less dollars at the national level; therefore more dollars at the local level.
- Don Penner, suggested, it would be nice to hear from others who haven't spoken yet, to experience more diversity in the room.
- Gord Alton said, might be better to say that instead of "call" language which only pastors understand. Call is understood as a response to God. How could this be re-worded for all people to better understand? David responded that we need a structure flexible enough that invites people into a new experience of God. Gord added, we might have to hold the Bible lightly – especially for the next generation. It is a challenge to bring new freshness to Bible exposition, David said.
- Don Penner shared about a past relationship gone bad, confessing that he had lived in a way that wasn't true to himself in order to receive love, and so in a similar way the church needs to ask itself what is its purpose in 'being'?

- If there is no national body where is the accountability? Good document from a structural point of view, when and who decides on new naming? This individual preferred less 'corporate' language (naming) and more to who we are now – "Alternative 1." The term "Area Church" is not helpful to this person, but "Regional Church" is less confusing. Do we need a fresh name for Mennonite Church Canada? David suggested.
- Matthew Isert Bender suggested the language of "de-construction" doesn't call people into anything; it seems it is not working to not craft a vision. I don't think there will be crafting a vision without division. How do we do this across the country? Ongoing cutting of staff/structure is painful – "pruning" hurts because it is living people – but pruning is needed for future growth. At Nith Valley, are we seeing new growth from what has been cut? David responded saying some of those staff will be moved from the national level to the regional level in order to support local congregations.
- Troy Watson said, "I want to bless you and thank you. I sense the Holy Spirit in this room and in this process. I want to commit to praying for this process – for boldness for you to be the leaders you need to be."
- Gord Alton closed in prayer