

Woolwich Grey/Wellesley West MCEC Regional meeting notes, April 4, 2017

Congregations represented: Floradale MC, Crosshill MC, Wellesley MC, Elmira MC, Zion MF, Community MF, Bethel MC, Listowel MC, Milverton MC, Hawkesville MC, Brussels MF, Steinmann MC, Sterling Ave MC, Riverdale MC, Hanover MC, St. Agatha MC.

Kara Carter (pastor Wellesley MC) opened in prayer.

David welcomed folks and invited those present to identify the congregations they represented. David handed out summaries and 25 page copies of the proposal. David invited folks to go to futuresdirectionsmc.ca "Future Directions: Covenant New." The website provides folks with the latest information, who is involved, documents available.

David opened the discussion asking folks to identify where they are on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of familiarity with the future directions conversation. Given the wide spread of knowledge of this conversation David began by providing some background.

David shared how Willard Metzger contacted him about pulling together MC Canada leaders to discuss the future of the Canadian Mennonite Church in spring of 2011. Began by writing out some of the priorities they thought concerned the national church. Initial conversation centered on "what can we afford?" Moved to asking some different questions: What does God want us doing? What does the church need?

David quoted Simon Sinek re: "Start with Why" (TED talk), also an author, etc. Apple Inc. was successful because they asked the "why" questions rather than the "what" questions. These same principles apply to the church. Leaders began asking: Why a national church? Why a regional/area church? Why a local congregation? Why the Christian faith?

During this time, leaders also began recognizing that a Future Directions Task Force was needed to ask the church some of these questions; write reports based on the significant changes occurring in Canadian society, etc. A final report was written after considerable time of feedback at Area Church AGMs and previous interim reports.

There was some initial confusion and misunderstanding around the report. There was continual input and feedback taken into consideration into developing this document further. This document and Addendum was voted on in Saskatoon at the national Assembly. The delegates voted 94% in favor of the FDTF Final Report & Addendum approving in principle the directions outlined in the document.

Since Assembly a proposal was written based on the report & Addendum which was voted on. Each Area Church (except MCEC) has already discussed this proposal and offered feedback into this discussion. There are Working Groups focused on essentially each of the national priorities

outlined in the proposal; as well as a Listening Group. The proposal that folks have in hand will be refined by the feedback from the Area Church meetings and the feedback from Working Groups.

The future directions conversation necessitated a shorter time frame (“aggressive”) given that national staff and Witness Workers have been working in limbo for the past few years already.

Keith Regehr was hired as the Transition Coordinator to lead this process.

David outlined a few of the factors highlighted in the future directions conversation: What is the purpose of the local congregation? Where is ‘mission’? The surrounding Canadian society is becoming increasingly secular. What does ‘witness’ mean here – in Canada? What does it look like to engage our neighborhoods beyond just ‘service’ type mission? Greater collaboration needs to happen across the country. Typically regional leaders would meet together once a year with only superficial engagement. The new model envisions actually collaborating together and committing to meet together more often perhaps 4 – 6 times a year. The idea also is that the regions will all be working on the same agenda (same priorities) across the country. MCEC is very well resourced perhaps the most well resourced regional church in Canada or beyond. As you travel to western Canada, the regional churches are not as well resourced since they retain fewer finances for themselves and send more to the national church. In the new model however, more funds will be kept at the regional level and less will be sent to the national level. Our ability to ‘thrive’ is partially tied to the resources available to us.

David opened for questions:

- Rick Martin asked what is the ‘feel’ for the level of support you have been hearing so far? David responded by commenting that there has been some misunderstanding around Witness: short term assignments that will be 2-3 weeks. Our international brothers and sisters are part of a more mature church and so their needs will be different than in the past. International Witness is important in this conversation. It has been heard ‘loud and clear.’ Paul Wideman commented that other concerns have also been heard; the proposed funding model is meeting some resistance in other Area Churches however in MCEC a similar model is already being used and therefore will be less of a change. MCBC has been somewhat unique in how congregations relate to it and/or to the national church (congregations have the option of being “Area Church only” affiliated). Some anxiety also around the future board structure – less of a voice for some while others will have increased voice. Some area churches can “dream differently” now in the new model and quite excited about this, as well as affirming the future collaboration envisioned. Trust is so needed in this conversation. We need to trust each other in order to work together well. David commented that MCEC has been

tithing from the Schmidt Fund and made \$100,000 available to hire Keith Regehr – Transition Coordinator. And, MCEC made some funds available to MC Alberta to hire an executive minister and as a result they will begin budgeting for this role. Paul feels his role is to bring a “calming” role in collaborating well with other area churches – MCEC is not here to take over, we want to work together with all of the Area Churches for the benefit of the whole church. MCEC has allowed itself to have a less influential voice from the other Area Churches – by not having as much representation at the board table, western churches will actually have more representation. If the new model is functioning as it should we (Regional Churches) should be seeing themes and trends across the country and essentially there should be fewer surprises. There must be agreement between the regions in shared agenda otherwise it will not be done. The model is built for consensus. An Area Church could potentially facilitate an international witness initiative without the rest of the other Area Churches but that would not be seen as a “national” priority.

- A question was asked: How can we maintain equality? David responded that each Area Church would assess its own needs regionally/locally since more dollars will be kept at ‘home.’ Those dollars could make available resources such as: MCEC is currently printing a book around boundaries written by Carol Penner, but it could also be printed in say Manitoba or elsewhere with their respective Area Church branding.
- Paul commented that the change in finances being kept at the local level and at the regional level is realized by retaining more and sending less to the national church.
- Another question was asked: Is there a plan to disseminate this information more broadly? David responded that the ‘person in the pew’ doesn’t necessarily need to know what is happening, but hopes that the pastor knows and understands. Yes, we have had some really good experiences as a national church all together. David recalled an experience in Winnipeg with CMU students who were asked: Why a national church? They responded “we feel it is important to belong to something larger than ourselves.” David commented further by asking: Who shows up to a national meeting? The ‘usual’ people – national meetings were more like a “family reunion.” And it is the churches and individual members with the available finances who usually make it to national gatherings. Our new Canadian and smaller congregations are not represented at national gatherings. So given these issues, why not have a national study conference? David commented how the “Dusting off the Bible” conference was one of the best attended and enjoyed because it was less ‘business’ and more focused on fellowship/worship and study. The Congregation of Ministerial Leadership gathering is also envisioned as a significant gathering of leaders across Canada – paid and unpaid.
- Doug Amstutz asked what the new structure would look like at the national level. Will Willard still have his role? David responded that there will be reduced staff at the

national level and more discretionary funds available for adding roles, perhaps not long term staff. Doug commented that Willard speaks on behalf of the national church among other denominations. How many staff will there be at the national level in the new model? David responded that his hope is that electronic resources would continue to be made available. The hopes are that resources like CommonWord would be strengthened and continue to provide nationwide Anabaptist resources for congregations. David responded that the Executive Director role would continue and that current relationships with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, the Canadian Council of Churches, the Canadian Council of Anabaptist Leaders as well as government representation.

- Len Rempel commented that much would not change for him essentially since he feels more connected to MCEC and has not felt as close a connection to the national church. David responded that what you have experienced will be the 'new' norm. Congregations will relate to regional churches not to the national church. Each congregation will be members only of their regions and not also to MC Canada. This new model clarifies the 'face-to-face' relationship of congregations with their respective regions. Under the current model there is very little national church exposure at an Area Church AGM, but in the new model there would be increased exposure of national priorities because Area Churches will hold together the national agenda. If done well, each Area Church will be promoting national agenda, and the hope is that more delegates will engage with the national agenda. Len also asked: Will MCEC need more staff? David indicated that since the Area Churches for example will own the international Witness there may be more staff added to connect with congregations and share the international needs. MCEC will need to be open to adaptation in the new model.
- David commented that at MWC gatherings those in attendance do not have voting power, but enjoy worship and fellowship together. His hope is that this would be happening at future national gatherings.
- Fanosie Legesse observed that there is great urgency within our national/regional 'body' since we are declining in numbers, we are not agreeing on theological issues, etc. How much attention is being given to prayer in this process? What about our new immigrant churches within MCEC? I haven't heard much about our new immigrant brothers and sisters: what about taking the gospel message to our neighbors? David responded in agreement. The document does not spell out the purposes necessarily of the church, but structures for the future of the church. The structure is intended to help us do mission. The church has typically hired pastors/leaders as "chaplains" – to marry, bury and preach, but we haven't done as well expecting our pastors to evangelize and reach out to neighbors. This process needs to mean transformation individually, regionally and

nationally. The structure may not be meaningful to the person in the pew, but what is of importance is how that structure will enable us to fulfill God's mission in the world.

- A question was asked: Is there a vision for the 'domestic' witness? David responded that MCEC has done well at making connections with new immigrant congregations; other Area Churches have done well with Indigenous Relations. What could be learned from other Area Churches and then implemented across the country? David admitted that there is not a plan "A", "B" or "C." The specifics will still be determined for Canadian Witness.
- Craig Frere asked: What would a BFC-type conversation look like in the new model? In a conversation where a decision needs to be made? David responded that the BFC was run by the national church done in its 'own' way. MCEC did not fight it, but might have done things differently. In the new model, this kind of conversation will have greater ownership by the regions and hopefully among congregations. Perhaps at a study conference this kind of conversation could be had. David hoped that deeper congregational engagement would be envisioned in tackling these important conversations.
- Dave Tiessen commented in the new structure, we will be moving in the same way as we have in the last 20 years - not paying attention that we are not on the same page. It is good that we are not a 'top-down' denomination as in a hierarchical church system. My concern is that we are not attending to our own faith formation as a conference of churches. We seem to allow everyone to do as they please. Unlike Menno Simons we are not forging a common Anabaptist vision. David responded that the concern is important and valid. Our values, identity and theology must hold us together – a common commitment to Jesus Christ. In the past it was easy to recognize a Mennonite distinctive. It was important for us to move beyond those external identifiers as Anabaptist/Mennonites to focus on our identity following Christ. In the BFC process for 7 years we looked at the Bible together in a prayerful process. We were challenging each other to deepen our capacity to look at our identity.
- Fanosie commented that a structure is important, but I want to see a theological/Christological description of who Jesus is. Are we painting a different Jesus? If a pastor preaches a 'gospel' other than what we read in the Bible? Is there discipline for such a pastor? What should we do? There should be a body that will discipline. We need to be able to tell our faith story, not imposing it on others. David responded that we do need to be clear on who we are. We have the Confession of Faith. We do not want to be a body that fences off persons into different categories. David admitted that in our churches he does not see the vibrancy of who we are called to be. We need healthy conversation to talk about these issues.

- Len Rempel commented that the Faith and Life Council helps to keep leaders theologically accountable. How will that happen in the new model? David responded that we do want to have a national community with a strong focus on theology and accountability. The Congregation of Ministerial Leadership would have this kind of function – to challenge our congregations via our leaders on issues that concern us a national church.
- Len also raised the question of money: Has someone worked with financial figures re: the future structural changes? David responded that the finances are being looked at. Sean East (MCEC) has been tasked to work on some of this. There must be financial responsibility in this process. Any questions about finances need to be asked. We are working on this as we speak.
- David thanked folks for attending and for their level of engagement and invited their prayers.
- Fanosie closed the meeting in prayer.