

Niagara Regional Meeting notes March 30, 2017

Congregations represented: The Commons, Hamilton MC, Vineland United MC, Bethany MC, Grace MC, St. Catharines UMC, The First MC, Niagara UMC, Westview

Louise Wideman led in prayer to begin our time.

David asked folks to identify what congregations they were from, and thanked all present for coming out. David explained the purpose of the evening's meeting: Wanted folks to understand the proposal; and, what feedback do folks have for leadership – Interim Council & Executive Staff Group. Copies of the proposal were sent around the tables.

David asked those present, on a scale of 1 – 10, where they would rank themselves. David began by providing a broad stroke of the origins of this future directions process. Willard began contacting Area Church leaders to begin initial conversation around the future of the Canadian Mennonite Church.

Start with Why – Simon Sinek (TED Talk, You Tube) Why do you do what you do? Leadership began thinking a bit differently around “why” a national denomination? Why an Area Church? Why a specific local congregation? Out of this thinking, decision made to task a specific group of people – Future Directions Task Force, to look at these questions and others; did research and wrote reports about the many changes happening in Canadian society. Report was put out to congregations and Area Churches – one of the key questions was, What is the mission of the church? What if each church thought of itself as agency of mission in its own local context? Congregations will need to be equipped for this mission, as well as still remaining connected to global mission.

The final report of FDTF provided some directions and themes, not specific details. There was some misunderstanding around this report because some believed it was a structure document a blue print for a new Mennonite Church in Canada. This report was discussed and given feedback across Canada in preparation to vote on it in Saskatoon at the National Assembly.

After the Saskatoon Assembly the FDTF was disbanded, and the report and Addendum was approved (94% in favor), a proposal was put together by a Transition Coordinator – Keith Regehr along with the Interim Council and the Executive Staff Group. The proposal is understood as an “artistic conception” of a ‘building.’ The proposal has been discussed at each Area Church annual gathering across Canada. Only MCEC is left to do this feedback work and discussion.

In addition to the proposal and feedback and discussion to it, are Working Groups and a Listening Group who have been chosen (and who represent our great diversity) to also give

their voice to this process and proposal, prior to the special delegate Assembly in October 2017 in Winnipeg.

The wisdom of the congregations to the Area Churches will collaborate on the shared national priorities. It will be the 5 Area Churches who will hold together the national agenda with MC Canada being represented by the collaboration of the 5 regions.

David invited folks to share their wisdom and ask questions:

- Doug Schultz asked: What will we hope to see if this new restructuring works? How will we know if it is working? David responded that under current model that every congregation is a member of MC Canada as well as being a member of MCEC. How can we expect MCEC or MC Canada to hold “one-on-one” relationships with congregations? That is not practical. So, under the new model, each church would not send its own delegates to a national assembly. Congregations with the funds will send their people to assemblies and those with insufficient funds don’t show up. The Assembly will have fewer people, but hopefully if the Regional Churches are doing their job, there will be a good, diverse representation from congregations at national assemblies. There will be greater profile to national issue and agendas being promoted at the Regional Church level and therefore to own it. The business side of things will be taken care of by those who really care about the business and then have the average person in the pew to be engaged in a study conference and for a time of worship and fellowship – better congregational engagement by local congregations and its members
- Jonathan Seiling asked: What will be gained or lost in the new model of restructuring? Willard responded that historically Swiss Mennonites did feel a sense of kinship with our bi-national connections. We have not however graduated beyond this kind of “family” feeling within the larger Mennonite body and now are looking at what are the things that hold us together. Willard shared a related story that is resonating across Canada: Ryan Siemens (MC Sask Area Church Executive staff) and his son – MC Canada wooden plaque that says “you are among ‘family’ whenever/wherever you see this plaque,” Ryan commented to his young son. David responded, our new Canadian churches don’t have this sense of connection to a larger Canadian Mennonite family, but we must work at this
- One woman commented: I was a “Conference junkie” – took family to the national conference for family vacation. She grieves the bi-national conference. David asked her what was the important thing that would be lost? She wasn’t sure. David hopes that the study conference envisioned will perhaps replicate some of the positive experiences from the past.

- A question was asked by a concerned gentleman: What can we do to strengthen our own congregation more? David responded that “witness” is something we need to look at locally. We need to spend some of our witness dollars on local mission. We don’t overlook international mission, but a focus on local mission would help strengthen congregations. When churches send funds to MCEC 60% is kept here and 40% is sent to Winnipeg for MC Canada; whereas some Area Churches are sending much more to Winnipeg and keeping less back and as a result are unable to do as much regionally. Our congregations need to thrive here also in order to do mission internationally.
- It seems that other Area Churches (non-MCEC/non-MC Manitoba) will feel left out and without power to move agenda. Willard responded that this is a very live conversation. This is being looked at very carefully. There is a very real fear and excellent comment. We will trust the “churchly” spirit of folks to work together as the church recognizing the imbalance at the table. David added that there will be some ‘give and take’ will be part of this. A further question was asked by this individual: Can we allow for smaller pockets of churches to collaborate with other smaller pockets for a common vision? David responded that there is nothing stopping this kind of collaboration. MCEC is currently wanting to put together a discussion group re: Israel/Palestine interests and something similar could be done for Indigenous Relations, etc. David hopes that as people across Canada are talking together about something they can engage together and do those things, but understanding that those activities will not be seen as “national” priorities, but as a priority by that group of churches. How can we contain some of the disagreement that will inevitably come in the new structure? David responded that the hope is for a stronger base for dealing with conflict and for goodwill between regions and local congregations.
- Affirmation for the future directions. It is timely. But, is there a plan b? Willard responded that a “no” vote would mean keep doing what you are doing - is not an option. We can’t keep doing what we are doing. We must do something. People are making good comments and stating that they do not like certain things, but we do need to change. There doesn’t seem to be a ground swell of disapproval by folks. We have had 4 Area Church meetings and there seems to be a sense to move forward.
- Jonathan Seiling asked re: decision making/polity. In Germany, churches are so congregationally based, independent. Are we heading in this direction? Are there parts of the church that are moving away from discipline? Is it explicit or implicit in this discussion? Willard responded that we are similar to the German Church. Practically we are congregational. We aspire to mutual accountability, but the congregation can still decide what it will do. I don’t think this dynamic will change in the new model. It is tough to be a leader in a congregation. Phyliss Tickle indicates that every 500 years there is a change where the authority is found in the church. In the past it was in the

pope, then the Bible, and now within the community. David added that in the new model the regions hold the accountability for the congregations. Like an aspen root system we are all tied together all accountable we will find ways to work together.

- Doug Schultz commented that Anabaptist/Mennonites are currently being identified by their peace building work. David responded that if this new structure gets us to ask ourselves about our mission in the world we will then work towards this identity piece. The more congregations thrive we will be more comfortable with who we are. Willard added that the delegate body voted in favor of us – MC Canada to be represented around the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada table and the Canadian Council of Churches table. In the new model there is potential that the national entity can continue and even increase its ecumenical presence as regions are relating directly to congregations.
- Randy Neudorf hoped that there will be increased representation at the October Assembly. Willard responded that the Emerging Voices Initiative have initiated a fundraising drive for youth and others who need assistance to be present at the October Assembly. David added that the EVI was wonderful to see as these young people are engaging and challenge the future directions conversation. There has been good conversation with EVI members and our schools. How will all of this structure facilitate the revitalization of the Canadian Mennonite Church? David asked.
- As we get ready for our MCEC AGM is there feedback or preparation for that gathering? David responded that certainly leadership should be engaged and participating there. Go to futuredirectionsmc.ca website and read the information available there. Begin asking questions together in our congregations about the purpose of the church. Why do we do what we do?
- A correction was made to David's opening comments that "we are not all here the Lao churches in Hamilton and St. Catharines are missing." David responded that he did mistakenly say that "all" congregations were present. He apologized for that oversight.
- Randy Neudorf suggested the idea of sponsoring a church that would vote differently from you, or to pray for that congregation, as a show of solidarity. That was met with much approval from those present.
- I am excited about the new structure. Having been part of the first board of the 3 Mennonite bodies coming together I see much work has gone into this process and can appreciate that.
- David invited those present to pray for the leadership in this process and for the congregations represented.
- Willard closed the gathering in prayer
- One woman commented after the close of the gathering that her family as well as other friends will have to make some "hard decisions" about "leaving the Mennonite Church"

which they have supported for 70 plus years. She did not say the reason why. She asked that this be documented.