



## Future Directions Task Force

### Formed by:

Mennonite Church Alberta  
Mennonite Church British Columbia  
Mennonite Church Canada  
Mennonite Church Eastern Canada  
Mennonite Church Manitoba  
Mennonite Church Saskatchewan

# Future Directions Task Force Report

## Overview: God, Mission, and People

A Draft for Conversations and Testing

February 2, 2015

The Future Directions Task Force has prepared this overview of *God, Mission and a People* for discussion at Area Church annual gatherings, as well as from other groups and individuals. Feedback from discussions at Area Church meetings and groups will be assembled at the time of discussion and forwarded to the Task Force Chair directly.

Others interested in providing feedback on these documents are invited to send them to:

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### Future Directions Task Force:

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### Background

The Future Directions Task Force (FDTF) was created on the recommendation of the Area Churches by the General Board of Mennonite Church Canada, and reports to both the Area Churches and Mennonite Church Canada. The most immediate concern was a growing reality that current programs are not financially sustainable in the long term. A larger reality noted was that our churches, along with all other denominations, are caught in the immense changes within North America where many young adults, and older as well, have come to view the church as staid and possibly irrelevant. Given these changing times, the FDTF mandate is to discern future directions in regards to two central questions:

- What is God's Spirit calling us to in the 21st Century?
- What are the best ways (programs, structures, strategies) for the church to thrive and grow?



## PART I – A Vision for Mission

God created the world, and loves it. God created humans in God's own image, with the freedom to choose whether to trust God or themselves. Invariably humans choose to trust their own wisdom, in the process thoroughly messing up God's wonderful creation. God is pained by this, yet continues to love us and all creation.

Scripture is the story of God's love made real - the mission of God is to reconcile and restore the world into relationship with God and God's good purposes. God chooses the people of Israel to be an instrument for bringing life and blessing to all the peoples on the earth (Gen. 12:1-3). Jesus is the word made flesh (John 1:14), embodying God's love for the world in an unprecedented and dramatic way in this story. Through his birth, ministry, death and resurrection Jesus announces and inaugurates the Kingdom of God (Luke 4:43), and then sends the church into the world, with the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), to be witnesses to and participants in God's mission of reconciliation.

God intends the church to be a community formed by and for the Kingdom. As part of the Kingdom community, we experience healing and are infused with hope for ourselves and for the world. God intends that the church become a sign, instrument, promise, and foretaste of the kingdom of God.

In doing this the church is guided by three convictions, which become three inseparable, intertwined priorities:

1. We are called to be **followers of Jesus Christ – Christian Formation**
2. We are called to **live in Christian community – Christian Community**
3. We are called to **offer healing and hope – Christian Witness**

This vision and mission is enormous, and potentially overwhelming. Yet God has promised the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us in this endeavour. We thus can move forward with joy, hope and confidence.

## PART II – The Church Incarnate

Human participation in the mission of God unites divine love and mission with human action and arrangement. The way this divine love and mission "become flesh" continuously evolves as the people of God interact with and witness to a changing world. The current human arrangement, at least in North America, of congregations and denominations, of institutions and programs is under severe stress. Dramatic changes in the society around it (e.g., growing reliance on technology; the politicization of ethical discussion; growing diversity through multiculturalism and multifait realities; increased individualism and secularization) deeply impact the church. This stress is reflected in significant decline in congregational membership, decreased financial and human resources for programs, loss of denominational loyalty, diversity and conflict over worship patterns, etc. The institutional church of today, at both congregational and denominational levels, must change in order to effectively incarnate God's love and mission in the world of today. This is true in most denominations, and it definitely applies to our reality.

But there also is hope. It is God's church and God's mission. We thus can have confidence that God's church will prevail. More particularly, there is hope for our distinctive family within the larger people of God. Suspicion of authority, widespread loneliness, and a weariness of war are elements of the context today to which historic Anabaptist emphases on mutual discernment, community and peace are relevant.



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A recommitment to formation, community and witness can lead to a new era of growth, vitality and mission, impacting the very culture within which the congregations are situated.

The Task Force affirms the following as elements of moving forward:

**1. The congregation is the foundational unit and expression of God's work in the world.**

The congregation is the primary place where people experience the church (through baptism into Christ as members of a congregation, worship, fellowship, teaching, mutual support, etc.), and it is the primary instrument of mission (as it reaches out into its community in diverse ways). The 21st century, however, will require a much greater diversity of congregational models so as to more effectively serve as cells for God's mission.

**2. Each individual congregation is an incomplete sign of the body of Christ, and so it must unite with others, pointing to and reflecting the unity of the body of Christ.**

The local congregation may be the foundational unit, but by itself it is limited in what it can do. It is limited geographically, it is limited in its perspectives (e.g., through racial or social homogeneity), and it inadequately reflects the world wide body of Christ. Even our larger body of congregations is only one small part of the family of God. But it becomes a window into, an example and reflection of that larger body.

**3. The role of the larger grouping of congregations is**

**a. to resource congregations, inspiring, provoking and assisting them to more effectively direct their focus to formation, community and witness so as to become cells for mission**

Since the congregation is the foundational unit, the primary role of the larger grouping is assisting and resourcing congregations in their priorities of formation, community and witness. This may include developing some uniquely Anabaptist resources, but more significant will be human resources with the wisdom and experience to encourage, inspire and provoke congregations as they (re)imagine themselves for mission. It also includes providing models and ways in which congregations can resource each other.

**b. to offer some programs local congregations cannot,**

Two primary examples of this are international witness and leadership development, but they could also have a role in schools and camps.

**c. to represent one distinctive family in relationship to the larger body of Christ, Anabaptist and beyond.**

**4. In a time of change leadership teams reflecting a diversity of gifts will be increasingly significant.** Affirmation of leadership is not in tension with a "priesthood of all believers," but rather has the potential to inspire and empower that "priesthood" in becoming cells for mission. In changing times, leadership is essential, and the church of tomorrow needs leaders that are biblically and theologically grounded, and responsive to the congregation's unique context for mission - not to do it all or direct it all, but to serve as example and catalyst, to mobilize and provide leadership. A way of imagining leadership is needed which appreciates and recognizes the diverse gifts that young and old, male and female have to offer, without forcing them into set molds or types, a leadership which fuses together into dynamic partnership committed, dedicated people called from within the congregation, together with salaried staff commonly called from the outside. We need to move beyond the strong, sometimes autocratic, leadership of the first half of the 20th century, and

beyond the solo (or even multi-staff) professionally trained and salaried pastors of the last of the 20th century. The partnerships we envision would form leadership teams in congregations, guiding and inspiring each congregation with vision, teaching, preaching, shepherding as the congregation serves as salt and light in its unique community.

### **PART III – Organizing for Mission**

The Task Force has consistently heard that our changing context requires significant change, not simply rearranging current programs and organizations. A fully integrated model is needed so as to increase our effectiveness in mission. This will also generate necessary cost savings and contribute to increased sustainability. Below are two possible arrangements.

Further, with both models the Task Force recommends the following:

1. A unified identity or “brand,” reflected in name, logo, web sites (of structures & congregations);
2. A common resource network and resource centre strategy;
3. A unified flow of information (e.g., periodical, mailings) between the larger church and the local congregation;
4. A unified flow of finances between the larger church and the local congregation, i.e., a congregation sends funds to only one place;
5. An executive minister (bishop? overseer?) with responsibility for providing spiritual oversight and vision for mission for the whole body;
6. A “Congregation of Ministerial Leadership” – an association of all those who are members of congregational ministerial leadership teams (i.e., both salaried and non-salaried) which meets biennially for fellowship, mutual support and counsel, and study of ethical and theological issues.

The Task Force also recommends that the formation of an arms-length Support Services Agency be investigated (cf. Everence and others). Such an agency might provide consultation and support services to congregations and staff on matters like: human resources, governance, legal matters, finances (e.g., pension plans).

Whichever governance model is adopted, it is recognized that some tasks are better done in a unified manner across the country, and some are better done regionally, closer to the congregation. Tasks better done in a unified manner across Canada would include large picture visioning around identity and mission, international mission, developing standards and processes for leadership, and representing the congregations ecumenically and internationally, etc. Tasks to be done regionally would include resourcing and supporting the local congregation; regional programs like camps, schools, social justice ministries; etc.

Governance and staffing for the above could be organized in one of the following two manners:

#### **Model A – An integrated national conference/church with dispersed staff and centres of energy**

- each congregation is a member of the national conference/church;
- representatives of the congregations meet biennially for times of worship, setting vision and direction, and elections to a national Board;



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- the Board (a combination of those elected at the national assembly plus additional representatives from other groups, e.g., schools, Congregation of Ministerial Leadership) is responsible for national agenda (i.e., #1 above), allocation of financial resources (with some effort at equalization) and setting guidelines for how regional staff lead in regional programming (whether by the region as a whole, e.g., congregational resourcing, or by congregational partnerships, e.g., camps, schools);
- regional centres of energy take responsibility for programming in their area as determined, with regional gatherings as needed for worship and direction setting;
- the majority of staff are located in the dispersed centres of energy, with Congregational Resource Ministers (1 per 15 – 20 congregations) dispersed through these centres.

### **Model B – As regional conferences/churches working as one on national agenda**

- each congregation is a member of one of three regional conferences/churches (Eastern Canada, Prairies and British Columbia);
- representatives of congregations meet annually in their regions for times of worship, setting regional vision and direction, and elections to a regional Board – national assemblies may be planned as needed;
- the regional Boards (a combination of those elected at regional assemblies plus additional representatives from other groups, e.g., schools, Congregation of Ministerial Leadership) are responsible for programming (e.g. congregational resourcing) in their regions;
- the regions work together in large picture visioning around identity and mission and on national agenda (how they work together needs to be determined), with some staff dedicated to the national mission and agenda (e.g., the national executive minister), albeit accountable to the regions together, and on the formula for allocating financial resources;
- national assemblies for worship and study may be called as determined.

Every organizational model has both strengths to build on and weaknesses to guard against.

- In Model A the main strength is its suitability for pursuing a common vision and expression of faith across the whole of our body. This model lends itself to more easily seeing and reducing unnecessary duplication and, perhaps paradoxically, may be more able to support congregations distant from other clusters of congregations. If this Model is selected, safeguard needs to be included to protect the ability of the regions to work at local agenda since the overall governance is centralized.
- In Model B the main strength is its sensitivity to regional differences and nuances in how programming and mission may be carried out. It may also be easier to imagine and transition to this model from the current structures. If adopted, those in elected positions may feel closer to and be known by congregations. If this Model is selected, safeguard needs to be included to protect the ability of the church to work at national and international agenda in that the natural momentum is toward regional interests. In the absence of some binding covenant, the unity of the whole body is at risk of coming apart over time.



## **Conclusion**

Holy Spirit, inspire us with wisdom, clarity, creativity, and courage. Work in us, in our congregations and wider church that we might more effectively follow Jesus, extend that call to others, and grow as communities of grace, joy and peace. May we be open to the challenges and new opportunities before us, as we seek to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We offer you our continued prayers in the name of Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, who is God with us. Amen.

*(See the full document, "God, Mission and a People" at the Mennonite Church Canada website)*