

What is the FUTURE of the Mennonite Church?

A two-session Youth Curriculum centred on the recommendations of the Future Directions Task Force (FDTF) of Mennonite Church Canada.



Youth Leader Guide, March 2016

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Introduction

Thank you for engaging in this conversation. New expressions of culture and worldviews demand that we ask ourselves how we as a church maintain our unity, theology and connection to each other.

In 2013, the FDTF formally began its work – though early discussions among area church leaders had already begun in 2011. How can the church continue to do its work in light of significant cultural, financial and generational challenges? The Task Force, comprised of representatives from all Area Churches and Mennonite Church Canada, has given the church recommendations that will be voted on (in principle) at the Assembly this July in Saskatoon.

This year, adult and youth assemblies are being joined together for certain sessions in hopes that the youth voice will be present as we discuss and discern together as the Body of Christ. Mennonite Church Canada strongly encourages each congregation to send one youth delegate to national assemblies, and at Assembly 2016, all youth and sponsors are invited to attend and participate in the conversations of FDTF and Being a Faithful Church. To vote, register a youth delegate who is a baptized member of your congregation (this must be done at the time of initial Assembly registration). While there is only one youth vote per congregation, groups registering a youth delegate are encouraged to use this vote collectively, and to discuss ahead of time how they would like to vote on behalf of all the youth in their congregation. Youth are an important part of our national church family, so we hope that you will want to have a voice in this conversation.

This curriculum is intended as a tool to help youth understand the FDTF process. Each session has summary points with primary information at the beginning. You can read these with your group or read them ahead of time; you can expand on them or just go over them briefly; you can highlight each point equally, or just briefly touch on some and spend more time on others. Questions are provided to stimulate group conversation and can be used before or after each section. The primary purpose of this curriculum is to get youth informed and aware about the work of the task forces so their voice can be present in the discernment at Assembly 2016.

As we begin, there are some important things to make note of:

1. Use this guide in the way that best suits your group. It is intended to be a two-session curriculum. You are free to change the format and to bring in other resources as well.
2. This is not a complete guide about all of the logistics behind the FDTF. The recommendations will be voted on in principle. This means that there is still a lot for the church to figure out before changes are implemented. This curriculum is intended to begin a conversation in your group about proposed changes to our Mennonite church system. It is our belief that a more complete discernment process should be undertaken by a church community as a whole, using FDTF recommendations as well as the many other resources that can be found on the Mennonite Church Canada website.
3. This is not the first time the church has experienced change. The Protestant reformation and the Anabaptist movement that began over 500 ago are examples of significant changes made to the church structure of the time. Most recently in the late 1990s, the Mennonite Church in USA and Canada changed the relationship they had with each other. Historically, change has formed the church into what it is now. It can also be an opportunity for it to be better.
4. The FDTF has framed the congregation as the basic unit and expression of God's work in the world. This statement is essential to understanding the model proposed by the FDTF. To help explain further to your group, we suggest you use the "Vision and Structure" on page 1 of the FDTF bundle and compare it to the diagram of how the national church currently works in the "Current Structure" document (see resources links below).
5. Allow yourself time. Time to listen, study, pray, share, and listen some more. The FDTF process started in 2013. If you are starting this conversation now, remember that others have had years of conversation about this already, and that there is yet much discussion to be had. Don't expect to have it all together in a few weeks.

Context

Mennonites in Canada have experienced a lot of changes in the past century. We have developed many valuable programs and organizations with varying levels of connection to the denomination. These organizations include Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), our Mennonite schools, *Canadian Mennonite* magazine, Mennonite Foundation of Canada, and more.

With the post World War II economy, and the large baby boomer demographic, passionate and active Mennonites established many good organizations. The body of believers that comprises Mennonite Church Canada supported all of these ministries. However, with the baby boomers easing into retirement, and a much smaller generation taking its place, there are not as many resources available for the body of congregations that make up Mennonite Church Canada to do the work we have traditionally done.

Some of these organizations, like MCC and MDS share the same constituency but are otherwise independent. Others are partially funded by the Mennonite Church Canada family, but retain independence, like the *Canadian Mennonite* magazine. But there are other programs, like the international Witness ministry and the Mennonite Heritage Centre and Art Gallery that are currently part of the denomination itself. The FDTF report does not really impact the more independent programs of MCC and MDS, but it does impact questions of funding, governance and even existence for programs and structures that are directly tied to Mennonite Church Canada.

Resources

FDTF Summary report: <http://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/43/18226>

Future Directions bundle of materials and feedback:
<http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/FutureDirections>

FDTF summary video: www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/48/18369

Current Structure Documents: home.mennonitechurch.ca/structure

Vision and Structure Document: Page 1 of the FDTF Report

Emerging Voices: Emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com

Session 1: From past to present

Introduction

In this first session, we begin with two questions:

- In what ways is your generation different from your parents and grandparents?
- What things about church need to be different and what should stay the same? (e.g. tithing, participation in church life, worship, baptism, preaching and teaching, etc.)

Perhaps there will be obvious answers and also not so obvious ones. These questions are designed to begin the conversation about our future as a wider church by acknowledging that change is inevitable. It happens over time. New generations bring in a different perspective on things.

The FDTF identifies three main convictions that are at the core of our identity as Anabaptist Mennonites. They recommend we build on these main convictions in whatever direction we may take:

1. Jesus is the center of our faith.
2. Community is the centre of our lives.
3. Reconciliation (restoring relationships) is the center of our work.

The following points are an attempt to summarize the content of the FDTF final report. These points outline the vision the FDTF has for our churches. The national church is being asked to vote on these recommendations in principle to guide the future direction of our denomination. The discussion questions are an aid from the authors of this curriculum for leaders to use as conversation starters. Use them as you see fit. In some cases, you may want to ask the questions before talking about the section, to allow the youth to work through some of these sections before hearing what the FDTF recommends.

Nurturing Faith, Networking and Resourcing

Proposition: Congregations need to have good leaders that:

- Talk about Jesus and want to know God.
- Find a way to encourage ALL people from their congregation to live in a Christ-like way.
- Encourage ALL people from the congregation to get and stay involved.
- Encourage ALL to actively love and care for one another.
- Are in contact with other congregations so that congregations can help each other.
- Encourage ALL to participate in the outreach of the church.
- Encourage others to participate as leaders in the church.
- Affirm and acknowledge others in the ways they give to the church.
- Plan goals, timelines and ways in which the church can stay true to their mission and faith.

Challenges:

- Irregular worship and Sunday school attendance.
- Parents often don't take the time to study or talk about the Bible with their children.
- People don't often make time or a commitment to help with leadership roles in the church.
- The constant changes in culture and differences between generations.

Things that can help:

- Think creatively from an Anabaptist Mennonite perspective. We have a deep history to build on.
- We should encourage individuals and congregations to learn from each other and exchange ideas and experiences.
- Have a resource centre (bigger than what we already have).

Conversation Starter: What are some things that good leaders in the church do or should do? What are some of the challenges leaders face today? How can we use technology as a tool for worship and to keep people engaged yet avoid it being something that keeps people from being fully there (e.g. swiping through your phone during worship or Bible study)? What materials should the church put together, and what resources can we use from other places (in terms of worship, Bible study, our heritage and Anabaptist history, etc.)? What other things do you think can help?

Regional Churches as Catalysts

Proposition: The regional/area churches should, like the leaders in the congregations, encourage their regional congregations to do things together, learn from each other, share responsibilities and draw plans for the church.

Other wider church oriented things would be:

- Gather volunteers to be creative and give new ideas of how to do service.
- Assist congregational leaders and help run mentoring programs for church workers.
- Credentialing pastors.
- Encouraging diversity of all kinds.

Challenges:

- The individualism and feelings of independence from our culture that have infiltrated the church.
- Congregations often feel like they are independent from other congregations and there aren't close ties with other faith communities, even within clusters of area churches.
- People are often shy about sharing their feelings, don't feel comfortable working with others and the overall sense of mutuality is very small.

Things that can help:

- The area church can encourage congregations and individuals to collaborate while facilitating these interactions. They don't have to "solve problems"; rather inspire, through theory and action, to work for healthy interactions and encouraging unity and theological identity.
- Having clusters of congregations that are close by or have similar interests.
- Have ministers available and active with the congregations and their leaders in guiding them as they follow their mission.
- Creating volunteer teams that would help as support for congregations.

Conversation Starter: What are some things your Area Church does? What are some of the challenges the Area Church may run into? What are some things that can help the Area Churches?

Ministries at Home and Abroad

Proposition: Proclaiming the good news of Jesus to the whole world by facilitating opportunities for ALL people to do service that encourages peace, love and relationships with God beyond our congregations. We can do this by challenging tribalism, reckless global consumption needs, and the growing militarism of our world through an Anabaptist Mennonite faith.

Background:

- The Mennonite church around the world has changed. Mennonite Church Canada needs to keep their relationship with the global church.
- In the past, the church has hurt minorities and imposed beliefs on others. To ensure that the church is doing a good job serving others, working with other churches is necessary for feedback.
- Financial and emotional support for international work of the church has decreased. People want shorter service terms. However, strong relationships between service workers and partners have shown to be more beneficial to both.
- In the past, there was a great focus on international missions. Churches have become more focused on serving their home communities.

Things that can help:

- A change in focus for more local service opportunities, and more collaborative, shorter term international assignments after receiving an invitation from global partners.
- People assisting with financial support and oversight, publicity, discernment of calling to service, maintenance of relationships, operational support such as medical and visas, etc.

Conversation Starter: What are some ways we do service/mission? Do you think that we should keep a relationship with the global church? Why? What are some things we can do to address the challenges of mission?

Faith Formation and Leadership Development - Schools and Camps

Proposition: To look at camps and church schools as a way of shaping faith and identity of children all the way into adulthood. These are spaces to develop leaders and encourage people to serve and learn from each other.

Background:

- Post-secondary schools have a more focused responsibility in leadership development.
- There is a recommendation that Colombia Bible College and Conrad Grebel remain regional schools, with Canadian Mennonite University also becoming a regional school for the prairie area conferences. Questions remain around Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS).
- Elementary and secondary schools and camps have a more regional focus.

Things that can help:

- Approach post-secondary education as a priority in our denomination.
- To have more conversations around the particular gifts and strengths each school has and how these can complement each other.
- For other church camps and schools to exchange ideas, collaborate, and learn from each other.

Conversation Starter: How do camp and/or schools help shape our faith? What are the relationships between camp, schools and universities/colleges to the church? What can we change about camps and schools to make them better?

Debriefing

- What did you learn today?
- What are some things that you didn't understand?
- What are some things that you agree with? Don't agree with?

Session 2

Introduction:

In this final session, we continue to look at the specific recommendations of the Future Directions Task Force as the vision for the future of our area and national church. Since these recommendations are more structural in nature, perhaps this is a good place to discuss what is distinctive to an Anabaptist approach to leadership and church structure.

Congregation of Ministerial Leadership

Proposition: A group of church leaders and academics will gather regularly to discuss issues of ethical and theological significance. They will guide the vision for the denomination when it comes to theological issues.

Background:

- Developing leaders, whether Lay or Professional, for the church is important.
- This body is meant to help nurture leaders and discern what is important for the church.

Conversation Starter: How do we make decisions as the church? Discuss the role of trust when it comes to making decisions.

Integrated Program for Leadership Development

Proposition: Develop a system for pastoral formation for both paid and unpaid congregational leaders.

Background:

- Previously it was assumed that church leadership development occurred in our schools.
- Denominational Ministers focused on hiring and supporting pastors trained by the schools.
- The Denomination will refocus its attention on how church leaders are formed. This is important considering how few people are completing Mennonite education, the number of pastors with non-Anabaptist education, and the need for strong leadership in order to have vibrant congregations.

Things that can help:

- Form a board that is responsible for keeping track of those preparing for ministry.
- This board would also plan educational opportunities such as workshops and seminars.
- This board would also relate to AMBS, Conrad Grebel, CMU, Columbia, and the Congregation of Ministerial Leadership.
- Create a new-pastors orientation program, and mentorship programs for new pastors.

Conversation Starter: Why is leadership so important? What do Anabaptist leaders look like? What role do lay leaders play in your church? Why do we need pastors? What are some different models of church leadership you have heard about? Why do we need to support new pastors?

Active Communication Channels

Proposition: Develop more active communication channels between the congregations and the wider body. This communication would express the church's vision and mission, energize mission, encourage the church and provide space for discussion.

Background:

- Communication is important for both nurturing a common identity and for working together.
- Technology both enables communication, but also increases the need to be intentional.
- This plan would look at both what we are sharing and how we are sharing it.

Challenges:

- The physical distance between congregations.
- The social and cultural differences we face as congregations.
- The ever-changing technology.
- The quantity of information being shared, and what exactly is being shared.

Active communication channels: The Task Force recommends that the Church review how it communicates and ask questions about how to best streamline communication with the congregation; how to use technology to supplement face to face communication; how communication occurs when not everyone speaks English, and what role the *Canadian Mennonite* plays, since its mission is to be an "independent publication".

Conversation Starter: What role does technology play in church? How can technology be useful? How can it be detrimental? Why is freedom of the press important? What role does it play in the church? How do we communicate across cultural lines?

Features of an Integrated Organization

Proposition: The FDTF recommends a simpler, more sustainable structure where each congregation is a member of a regional body to which it sends delegates – much as it exists now. The Regional leaders meet and work together on agenda that is shared across Canada, consulting with congregations as needed. A national church Executive Minister and board would provide overall leadership. A covenant among Area Churches to share ownership of and accountability for national church ministries, such as national and international programs. Hopefully this structure would more efficiently use church funds and possibly equalize the availability of funds so programs are consistent across Canada. This covenant would also set common priorities while recognizing the importance of regional differences.

Division of Roles and Tasks:

The regional and congregational levels will be responsible for things like:

- Inspiring and supporting mission
- Keeping congregations connected to resources
- Regional witness, camps, social justice programs, and schools

The regional bodies will work together as a national entity for:

- Big picture visioning
- Developing resources to share with congregations via CommonWord Bookstore and Resource Centre
- Equalizing resources when appropriate
- Support regional initiatives
- Develop leaders
- International witness
- Archives
- Representing the congregations in ecumenical and international bodies

Working out Detailed Organizational Arrangements: This proposal is based on feedback received from testing two models across Canada. Congregations are members of regional bodies with regions working together to form a national identity. In order to do this, some details need to be worked out, including a possible new name and logo, church governance (how churches make decisions), and programming and staffing changes.

Conversation Starter: How does this structure compare to what we have now? How do groups build self identity? Why do churches work together?

Transition Team

The FDTF recommends the formation of a team of 1-3 members at large who are passionate and experienced in organizational change to work with senior staff from area churches and the national church to prepare a covenant and transition plan. This plan will be implemented within 2 years with final by-law changes being presented for approval at the area and national assemblies in 2018.

Conclusion:

There has been quite a bit of passionate conversation surrounding the FDTF. This curriculum is meant to help youth understand the proposed changes. The church faces many challenges in the 21st century and the FDTF report is an attempt to help congregations and Area Churches respond to these challenges.

Now is the time for your youth group to determine whether or not they support the proposed motion. Do you support the direction we are going in principle? How might you participate in a new future for the church? Are these proposals faithful to your understanding of what it means to be the church? Are they feasible? What are some of the questions you want answered? How is your group going to decide?

Debriefing

- What did you learn today?
- What are some things that you didn't understand?
- What are some things that you agree with? Don't agree with?

Groups are encouraged to share a summary of your conversation with your pastor and local church leadership. Whether you are coming to Assembly 2016 or not, the national church would also like to hear what your group has to say. Please share a summary of your conversations with the Mennonite Church Canada by emailing wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca. Thank you.