



## 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

## Submission to Assembly 2016

### Introduction

The Future Directions Task Force was commissioned in November 2012 by Mennonite Church Canada (MC Canada) and the five Area Churches (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Eastern Canada) to address two questions: What is God's Spirit calling us to in the 21st Century? And, what are the best ways (programs, structures, strategies) for the church to thrive and grow? The Task Force grew out of awareness that our church faced new challenges in a fast changing post-Christendom secular society marked by a growing number of congregations with declining and aging membership, the role of church in society being questioned, and declining funding for work of our wider church. We also knew we weren't alone; these challenges are being faced by all denominations.

Previous reports mention the research, input from a broad range of groups and experts, and conversations with countless individuals that informed a number of interim documents for testing of ideas, principles and directions with constituents at area church and national assemblies in 2013 and 2014. In November 2015 a penultimate draft of its Final Report was submitted for review by the General Board, accepted in principle, and released in December for consideration by our nation-wide church body (a copy follows).

Its longer supplement *the Backstory* and related material, along with previous documents, are available on line at: <http://www.commonword.ca/Browse/2092>.

At its heart, the *Report* sets out a series of propositions as a guide to address our yearning as a church for: strong, healthy and vital congregations as centres of worship, faith formation, supportive communities and mission; strong regional churches connecting, supporting and empowering congregations in ministry locally and in the larger church; and, a strong national church that resources area churches for ministry locally, regionally and internationally, and fosters strong national identity as a Mennonite Anabaptist faith community. To lead, it proposes a simpler, more integrated organizational structure.

Starting in early February and ending late April, all five Area Churches brought the *Report* to their respective annual meetings for delegate consideration, debate and action. Four approved the *Report* in principle, and one (Alberta) decided not to decide until it had more information addressing its particular needs. The *Report* is now brought to Assembly 2016 for final joint review and action.

### Incorporating feedback into consideration of the report

*Release of the Final Report was followed by critical scrutiny, conversation and, sometimes, intense debate on various propositions. As the Task Force observes, that is as it should be. It's in engaging with content of the report that clarity emerges. These conversations informed Area Church discussion and decisions.*



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*Task Force members listened to the views expressed, both as received and responded to in a large number of written and an untold number of oral conversations. In early May it reviewed the main themes of critique, and prepared an Addendum speaking to them for General Board consideration. Specifically, the Addendum speaks to what was heard in six main areas of concern: process, structure, national identity, international relations and witness, vulnerable area churches and financial and emotional sustainability, each concluded by a recommendation (see below).*

*On reviewing the Addendum, the General Board decided the provisions of these be added to its resolution recommending approval of the Report for delegate action at Assembly.*

#### **If we say 'yes', what then?**

*Some have asked, 'what will happen if we say 'yes'? Is that a blank cheque?'*

*The answer is 'no'. The Report is not a blueprint. It proposes directions for us to take in this uncertain time for the church, with propositions to be carefully considered and details to be worked out. The General Board's motion is to accept the Final Report in principle, taking into account provisions identified in the Addendum. The details need to be worked out in a transition time during which a number of important decisions will have to be made.*

*The General Board and Area Church leaders anticipate a transition time of up to two years. If done well, such a transition time should be a time of renewal, even as we lament changes to once treasured programs.*

*The major tasks, along with process as conceived so far, may be summarized as follows, and in the illustration following.*

#### **Major tasks**

- **Covenant.** Prepare and finalize a covenant binding our regional bodies to a common vision (global, national, regional, local), common regional priorities (with allowance for variation), national priorities, shared ministries, governance, costing and flow of funds, polity and related matters.
- **Work Plan.** Prepare and implement a work plan that considers changes in the program emphases proposed in the Report, each involving a:
  - Review of what is currently done
  - Consideration of alternative approaches that hold promise for strengthening church ministry
  - Gathering input from 'stakeholders'
  - Developing costing/funding and implementation scenarios, and
  - Prepare a plan for review and approval



**Leadership:**

- An Interim Council (IC) of moderators of each area and our national church bodies would take on the mandate to negotiate a covenant binding area churches to common directions, establish the work plan and timelines, arrange funding and provide oversight to the process.
- The work would be led by a Transition Team of 3 persons reporting to the IC of moderators, each member with a complementary area of expertise, all with a love for the church.
- Senior staff of area and national church bodies would conduct necessary research and develop implementation proposals for consideration. Some of this research might be done by working groups of constituents (see below).
- An experienced 'project manager' would be hired to coordinate work, facilitate research and preparation of written reports or proposals, and other activities required to assure timelines are met.

**Constituency involvement**

- A Listening Group of diverse voices to receive draft reports and proposals prepared by the Transition Team for consideration by the IC, providing their input and advice for the IC to consider.
- Working groups to research specific topics (e.g. international relations and witness) are likely to involve constituents with relevant experience and knowledge.
- Larger constituency feedback loops back to area church boards and, for some issues, back to congregations, are anticipated for important matters.
- Major decisions with policy implications would be referred to delegate assemblies.
- Regular feedback to all congregations and interested members on work in progress via joint communication channels



### **Recommendation for action on the FDTF Final Report**

The General Board has considered the robust conversation on the *Report* leading up to and at Area Church meetings and given particular attention to core concerns raised; it affirms the recommendations addressing these concerns as prepared by the Task Force in an *Addendum*; and it notes with appreciation how Area Churches wrestled with these issues at their delegate assemblies, followed by delegate action approving the directions proposed by the *Report* (Alberta not deciding).

With that as context, and keeping in mind the challenges faced by not only our own denomination, but all denominations in our post-Christendom time, the General Board recommends approval of the directions outlined in the *Report*, and expanded on by the *Addendum*. We believe it points to directions that will strengthen our identity and capacity as an Anabaptist Mennonite church in Canada to be a healthy, spiritually vital part of the world-wide body of Christ at this time in history

### **Resolution for Delegates:**

*Whereas the General Board has heard the robust conversation on the Future Directions Task Force Final Report prior to and at the five Area Church spring meetings, giving particular attention to concerns raised; and,*

*Whereas the General Board has reviewed and affirmed recommendations from the Task Force Addendum to the Final Report on ways to recognize and address core concerns raised on process, structure, national identity, international relations and witness, vulnerable area churches and finance;*

### **The General Board moves:**

*That Mennonite Church Canada approve in principle the directions proposed by the Future Directions Task Force Final Report, and collaborate with the five Area Churches (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Eastern Canada) in developing a more integrated nation-wide church body along the lines envisioned to better resource all levels of our church in responding to God's call to live out and share the peace of Jesus Christ with local through global neighbours.*

### **In approving this motion, it is understood that:**

- Prior to implementation there will be opportunity to vote on a more fully developed proposal no later than July 2018, with ongoing consultation with congregations in between;
- The final proposal will incorporate some form of area church delegate involvement in the governance of national agenda and priorities;
- The final proposal will include provision for national gatherings for study, fellowship, worship and discernment;
- Formal conversation will be undertaken (e.g. via working group, conference or other means) to review our future vision and strategy for international relationships and witness, addressing questions in the Addendum and related ones, to be completed by December 2017;



- The final proposal will include concrete provisions that recognize and respond to the vulnerability of smaller area churches; and
- Formal conversation will be undertaken (e.g. via working group, conference or other means to build on the Report and engage congregations to: (a) dream about how to live out the gospel of Christ locally, across Canada and abroad; (b) think creatively on how congregations can resource our common life together in being the church; and, in the short term, (c) work together and generously support our mutual ministry and transition from where we are to where God invites us to be.

## 2. Supplemental Resolution, if the above resolution is approved

*That Mennonite Church Canada authorizes the General Board, in collaboration with Area Church boards, to proceed with transition planning along the lines outlined in the FDTF documents. Further, to provide latitude in re-envisioning program approaches in this interim period, parts of Mennonite Church Canada's General Bylaws be suspended (those referring to the Faith and Life Committee and Christian Witness, Christian Formation and Church Engagement Councils<sup>1</sup>), with the understanding that during the transition period one or two individuals from each body will continue on the General Board to ensure representation of each ministry perspective.*

### Preparation for decision-making at Assembly

Two types of events are planned to assist a process of an informed decision on the Report and directions proposed.

1. **Workshops.** Two workshops are planned. The intent of each is to help delegates gain clarity of content in the Report and what was intended. Each will start with a brief introduction, followed by a Q & A session with Task Force and Board members. The first will focus primarily on clarifying program and ministry related propositions in the report (e.g. witness, congregation of ministerial leadership, educational strategy, communication, etc.). The second will focus primarily on questions of structure and implementation.
2. **Plenary Sessions.** Two plenary sessions will encourage reflection and debate, with round table discussions and floor debate. Each plenary will have a different focus.
  - Plenary 1 will focus on vision for the church and program related aspects of the report.
  - Plenary 2 will focus on how we work at being church, considering structure and implementation implications raised by the report.

Debate and action on a Motion to accept the report will be at a separate time.

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1 Specifically, Parts XI (Faith and Life Cttee) and XII (Ministries of MC Canada) of the General Bylaws.