



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

Final Report

ADDENDUM - MAY 2016

An Addendum

to the Future Directions Task Force Final Report

May 2016

Introduction

Six months ago or so, the Future Directions Task Force submitted its *Final Report*. The good news is that this report stimulated very significant exchange. Members of the task force have had countless conversations and written exchanges with individuals and groups since. Mennonite Church Canada General Board, Area Church leadership, and denominational agencies have reacted, the *Canadian Mennonite* has given it significant attention and, perhaps most significantly, delegates at the five Area Church assemblies have had very meaningful and constructive interaction with the report.

It is difficult to summarize all reactions, but it is clear they included both positive affirmation and expressions of concern and critique. That is as it should be. The future directions report is not meant to be a blueprint with absolutes; rather, it is meant to set out directions and markers as a guide through an uncertain time. It's in the wrestling with these that clarity emerges on specific steps to take. While the report has been written, submitted, and voted on in area church delegate sessions, and thus not subject to change at this point, we as a Task Force have prepared this addendum to share some additional reflections acknowledging what has been heard and expanding on what was said.

It is understood the General Board will recommend to delegates in Saskatoon that the *Report* be approved in principle. The Task Force continues to support that. But, as a way of taking the conversation of the past number of months seriously, we suggest adding to that recommendation a number of provisions arising from feedback received.

In our assessment, six main clusters of concern were raised having to do with: process, structure, national identity, international relations and witness, vulnerable area churches, and financial and emotional sustainability. Following is a brief summary of main themes heard within each, and suggested responses.



1. Process

The Task Force has heard significant concern on adequacy of process and consultation. While the Task Force sought to initiate serious conversation on some of the issues over the past few years by way of interim documents, we recognize that too little of it occurred until the *Final Report* was released.

Concerns on release began with a few public voices with opposing arguments – some that acceptance of the report was a ‘done deal’ because the outcome was prescribed and financial matters were paramount, others that much more detail was needed before a decision could be made. As initial response gave way to engaging with content in the report, debate became more focused on several topics in particular (international witness, organizational structure, several theological topics), other topics less so. The over-riding question became: do we have enough time or information to consider, debate and respond to these issues. Area Church meetings to consider motions of acceptance in principle gave urgency to these debates.

That a large number of people in our church constituency wish to be engaged with and have a say on the range of topics covered in the *Report* is a good sign. That they wish to have continuing input as and when issues raised by the Report are addressed in the proposed transition time is a sign of continued commitment. That a sizable number of people in many congregations have become engaged in these debates, and thereby more knowledgeable about the larger church of which they are a part, is the best sign of all. It promises the beginning of a change in how people in congregations think of themselves in relation to the work we should/must do together as church beyond congregational walls, an outcome the Task Force desired.

To embrace this interest and speak to the concerns, we propose that provision be made for a formal vote of congregational delegates on a more detailed proposal along with consultation during development of that proposal. The transition team, if approved, would determine how this consultation might take place, but it might even include sending specific questions to congregations for their reaction.

It might be noted this proposition is consistent with the statement added to the resolution approved by MCEC in April, and seemingly with the sentiment of many delegates at other Area Church meetings.

Recommendation: That prior to implementation there be opportunity to vote on a more fully developed proposal no later than July 2018, with on-going consultation with congregations during the transition phase on development/refinement of major program directions.



2. Structure

Despite broad acknowledgement that change is necessary, reaction to the report often questioned the direction of the change recommended. There were concerns that the proposed model could lead to regional self-centeredness at the expense of the national, and that essential functions provided by the national body could be lost, as could our identity as a country-wide Anabaptist Mennonite people. Some understood the recommendation as implying the demise of a national body. Small area churches in particular felt themselves vulnerable, given they depend heavily on the national body for support.

The intention of the Task Force was not that Mennonite Church Canada come to an end, but that the area churches would take on direct ownership and governance of the national agenda. The goal was a simpler, more effective organization which could strengthen congregations as centres of mission even as it retained a strong national family of faith (see #3 below).

The debate over how to do this is a healthy one, and will continue. If the direction is agreed to in principle, the next step will be to prepare a covenant binding our regional bodies to a common vision (global, national, regional, local), common regional priorities (giving allowance for variation), national priorities, shared ministries, governance, and flow of funds, amongst other considerations.

It should be noted that although the report recommends that the area churches become the owners of the national church, it does not address **how** they will do this. It does not assume that this is managed strictly by area staff, but could very well include a form of delegate sessions.

Recommendation: That the final proposal incorporate some form of area church delegate involvement in the governance of national agenda and priorities.

3. National Identity

A Task Force statement that has received considerable reaction is the affirmation of the congregation as the foundational unit of the church. Unfortunately this affirmation has been taken to imply a de-emphasis of the larger church, whether the national denomination (i.e., Mennonite Church Canada), or the church beyond that (Mennonite World Conference, world-wide body of Christ). The intention of the original statement was not to de-emphasize the larger church, but rather to highlight that this larger church consists of local communities. It thus becomes paramount that these local communities understand themselves as kingdom cells within that larger body.

The commitment of the Task Force thus is for a strong national denomination through which congregations participate in, dialogue with, benefit from, and contribute to the larger church. The national church serves as the passageway between the individual congregation and the larger church through which resources, wisdom and identity flow both ways. In addition to resourcing the congregation, the national church provides the larger identity for the congregations, and the



setting within which larger dialogue takes place.

The Task Force report recommends a few features with the goal of strengthening this larger church identity (e.g., Congregation of Ministerial Leaders, a national program and strategy for leadership development, a national strategy for higher education, unified communications and branding). Regular national gatherings for study, fellowship, worship and discernment could play a further significant role in shaping this larger peoplehood.

Recommendation: That the final proposal include a provision for national gatherings for study, fellowship, worship and discernment.

4. International Relations and Witness

Perhaps the most intense response of all those received or made public at area church meetings was to the proposition "...we envision a shift toward more local and domestic witness/service, and toward more collaborative, shorter term international assignments in response to invitations from global partners" (p. 15, *the Backstory*).

Relatively few comments were made in relation to domestic witness; and, of those that were, they were affirming. But, on international witness, many voices argued in particular the importance of long-term over short-term arrangements (some equating 'short term' with 'tourism'), the importance of national leadership in partnership development and in evaluating and screening invitations for mission partnerships, and questioning the idea of congregations becoming involved in a 'confirmation of call.' Over time, the tones on the latter became more muted to speak in terms of congregations needing to become more aware and engaged.

Such strong affirmation for international witness is a testament to the work that's been done, and speaks to the international connectedness many within the church feel with our international church family. International witness manifests a commitment of the churches of Canada to the world-wide body of Christ.

The Task Force affirms the conversation the report has instigated, and suggests a more formal conversation should take place. In such a conversation questions like the following could be considered:

- How do we best relate to the national churches of other countries?
- What is the focus or emphasis of our international contribution?
- What are the pros and cons of short-term and longer-term assignments?
- Where does domestic witness fit into this picture?
- How do congregations most effectively engage in international witness?

Recommendation: That a formal conversation be undertaken (e.g. via a working group, conference, or other means) to review our future vision and strategy for international relationships and witness, addressing the above and related questions, to be completed by December 2017.



5. Vulnerable Area Churches

If only all five area churches had a similar mass and resources. But that is not the case. Concern was expressed that the governance model proposed by the Task Force places additional stress on those area churches with fewer congregations, and fewer financial and human resources. It thus becomes critical that in developing the detailed proposal concrete provisions be included which take that disparity into account.

Recommendation: That the final proposal include concrete provisions that recognize and respond to the vulnerability of the smaller area churches.

6. Financial and Emotional Sustainability

Prompting formation of the Task Force was concern that programs, services and structures once serving the church well were no longer sustainable emotionally or financially in the rapidly changing context of the early 21st century. As a Task Force, we have tried to respond prayerfully and thoughtfully, both with vision for the future and attention to practical functions such as communication and many other tasks we take for granted.

Since release of our Report, feedback on financial issues has been modest, with most seeming to take it as a given. Comments included words to the effect that: 'money was driving the report too much'; or a more neutral 'money is a problem'; or, 'how do costs of the new model compare with what we're doing now'; or, 'money is not the real problem, the real problem is peoples' priorities.'

Knowing the combined costs of our ministries is helpful as a benchmark, which we expect will be worked on during the transition time if the Report is approved. What seems important now is to continue the conversations begun after release of our Report, engaging members of our congregations in dreaming dreams of being church at this time in history, and catching a vision of the gift we as a Mennonite Anabaptist people have to build on and share with others – a vision of daring to live out the gospel of Christ in a hurting world.

Recommendation: That a formal conversation be undertaken (e.g. via a 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.



Conclusion

Recognizing and acting on these six clusters of concern promises to be a first and important step in a longer transformation process. Other concerns undoubtedly will gain prominence in the days ahead. Our encouragement is that each of these be considered carefully in their turn, whilst keeping our eyes on discerning what it means to be the body of Christ in this 21st century.

Respectfully submitted

Task Force members:

April Yamasaki (BC)	Ken Warkentin (MB)
Rebecca Steiner (ON/MB)	Anita Retzlaff (SK)
Aldred Neufeldt (Chair)	Chad Miller (AB)
Terry Keller (ON)	Gerald Gerbrandt (MB)

Ex officio:

Hilda Hildebrand (Moderator)	Willard Metzger (Executive Director)
------------------------------	--------------------------------------