

June 29, 2019

Listening Committee Report
Mennonite Church Canada Gathering 2019 – Igniting the Imagination of the Church
Abbotsford, British Columbia

We, the listening committee were tasked to listen and observe the proceedings of the Annual General Meeting, to compare observations and discern the spiritual tenor of the room. This report reflects our observations and includes some of our affirmations and concerns.

Our meeting began with a song from the Voices Together Convention Sampler, “We are people of God’s peace,” about which the song leader noted that a second verse was added to temper the confidence of the lyrics (“We are heralds of God’s peace...”). Our worship and fellowship continued with a prayer for unity in the spirit, and a land acknowledgment that affirmed the values of mutual recognition and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. We also heard the good news that 248 people were in attendance, including all of the assigned delegates. The parliamentarian Edward Janzen called us to patience, kindness, and forbearance during the open microphone discussion time. We noticed that these guidelines were respected by those who spoke during the meeting. The minutes from 2016 were accepted unanimously, as were the 2017 Special Assembly minutes and the July 2018 AGM minutes.

In the discussion about the actions of the Joint Council a question was raised from the floor by Erb Street Mennonite Church regarding the Civil Disobedience Policy. This question was met with some confusion from the floor as delegates tried to gain access to the policy. Henry Paetkau read from the policy, partially clarifying the issue at hand. This was a helpful clarification for the delegate body.

In conversation with the delegate from Erb Street Mennonite Church during the coffee break the delegate reported that his primary concern was the question of whether there is a policy or procedure in place so that a representative of Mennonite Church Canada could receive timely approval for an act of conscience or civil disobedience.

The Listening Committee noticed that some of the silence in the room during the span of the meeting may have reflected a lack of understanding of delegates’ responsibilities in relation to the responsibilities of the Joint Council. The Listening Committee discussed several interpretations of the lack of discussion at the meeting. One concern was that delegates may not understand their mandate or have familiarized themselves with the program book. Another concern was that there is currently no standard understanding of what the role of the delegate is. Following a further question from the floor, the Listening Committee discussed the importance of further educating delegates and congregations about the new structure and its consequences.

The Listening Committee then heard reports from the work of churches in Mennonite Church Canada. From the Bergthal Mennonite Church (Alberta) we heard about the repurposing of outdoor space in a way that serves the community, and from the Peace Mennonite Church (British Columbia) we heard about the development of a community meal for the neighbourhood. From the church in Manitoba we heard about the softening of hearts and the anti-racist work of the church that occurs when the spirit moves in the church when we become convicted about our poor behaviour, and from the Petticotiac Mennonite Church (New Brunswick) we heard about the presence of God in Sunday morning worship and the possibility that the church can be a place to belong for those who have nowhere else to turn. From the Mennonite Church in Saskatchewan we heard about formative contemplative practices that help us to listen, to be silent, to read scripture, and have imagination, such that we know we are the beloved of God. The theme of hospitality for the neighbour stood out from these stories, and the healthy sign of laughter in the meeting stood out to us as a positive sign.

The Listening Committee observed people engaged with one another at their table discussion groups. We noticed that people tended to sit with regional affiliates and familiar people. The Listening Committee recommends that the leadership consider a more formal mechanism for encouraging delegates to mix and mingle with those from other regions. We noticed a greater diversity of voices across gender, age, and cultural background compared to previous years, and we encourage further movement in this direction. We also noticed that more women than men were taking notes.

The Listening Committee noticed that the second discussion question was not introduced in a clear way, but nonetheless it garnered more significant discussion than the first question. One summary of the second question responses was that those who showed up love the church and desire a flourishing national church. At the same time, some identified a sense of disconnection between congregation members and the national church body. We also recognized, in discussions, that some Mennonite Church Canada congregations and members feel threatened by new cultural and church changes, while others feel that change is not happening quickly enough.

During the International Witness time we saw the video report and the description of the Witness Support Team structure. We appreciated the clarity of the presentation and its explanation of the changes in the funding structure. Following the video report we heard from Steve Heinrichs who expressed exhaustion, sadness, and anger as he shared about the failure of Bill C-262 to pass in the Senate. Heinrich's drew attention to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission call to action #48 which calls churches to action. Following this, a delegate thanked Steve Heinrichs from the floor and called the other delegates to write to their conservative members of parliament about the bill. The Listening Committee noted that the room was not polarized or animated during this discussion, and we speculated about what reasons may lie behind this. We noticed that the posture of the gathered body was not indicative of hostility or defensiveness.



600 Shaftesbury Blvd
Winnipeg MB R3P 0M4
Toll free 1-866-888-6785
P: 204-888-6781
F: 204-831-5675
E: office@mennonitechurch.ca
www.mennonitechurch.ca

The committee would also like to note that clarity and guidance about the role of the listening committee would be appreciated in the future, including explicit instructions about meeting times and locations, reporting expectations, and identification of other listening committee members.

The Listening Committee also noticed the presence of the “Proud Mennonites: In This Together” booth amidst the other displays and observed that its presence felt natural, welcome, and welcoming in the environment. We observed a contrast with previous years.

The Listening Committee wants to extend their appreciation of the hard work that was obviously put into planning of the AGM session, and express thanks to the Mennonite Church Canada leadership for their important work.

Signed,

Ruth Friesen
Maxwell Kennel
Rachel Siemens