

God's People Now!

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*Face to Face with
Mennonite Church
Canada*

Robert J. Suderman



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*To all who participated in and made possible
the God's People Now! listening tour.
You have served the church well.*

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Foreword

Jack Suderman's trek across Canada, during which he visited members of every congregation in Mennonite Church Canada, is in the spirit of Paul the apostle:

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.—Acts 15:36

Suderman did not plant the churches in Canada, as Paul did the congregations he visited. But both Paul and the general secretary of Mennonite Church Canada have given their lives as missionaries. Both understand the joy and challenge of living out the gospel in a multicultural world, and both take a long-term view of what God is doing with the church.

As is true for many denominations, Mennonites in North America have been buffeted by conflict and change in the past decade. Maintaining the unity of the church while living the gospel in diverse cultural settings is work of the Spirit, and God uses leaders with big vision. Even though the Mennonite Church in North America overall has not seen numerical growth in the past decade, there is rapid change. *God's People Now!* provides a valuable freeze-frame picture of the church in motion. Mennonites in Canada now speak more than a dozen languages. The church has morphed from rural Germanic agricultural communities to multicultural, often urban congregations in which many members work in the professions. Older "cradle" Mennonites, who in their youth

never met a person of another world religion, now have neighbours or work colleagues who are Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist.

No wonder the Mennonite Church has growing pains! But Jack Suderman, like Paul, has traveled among scattered congregations with the heart of a missionary and the hope of God's reign. Jack and his traveling companions rediscovered and confirmed that God is wonderfully at work even in the clay vessel we call the church.

Many leaders across Mennonite Church Canada have befriended me, and I have witnessed close-up some of turmoil conferences and congregations have been through. It is encouraging to see afresh in this book the deep commitments that unite us as a Mennonite people (chapter 3). Jack reminds us that unity is God's gift, not something we engineer.

As a pastoral and theological educator, I pay attention to what this book reveals. I take to the seminary community questions of how we can best serve a church that has relatively few young adults or that seeks leaders who can "make the Bible come alive and become more relevant." Suderman's travel notes provide data that can help seminaries, universities, mission agencies, conferences, and other entities discern what God is calling us to be.

But this book reminds us that the church is not about institutions and programs. It is about "incarnational communities of salvation"—worshipping, witnessing, and reconciling congregations (chapter 9). *God's People Now!* moves beyond data reporting to set a direction and a vision for the future. That vision is about God's work of shaping a people—ordinary and sinful individuals like you and me whom God calls into communities of wholeness and hope.

Thank you, Jack, for listening so well to the people of God and to what the Spirit is saying. Your careful listening is a model for the rest of us. Your hope and your wisdom will encourage many, and the leadership you give strengthens the church. To God be the glory.

J. Nelson Kraybill
President, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary
Elkhart, Indiana

Introduction

When I was appointed general secretary of Mennonite Church Canada, I knew what I most needed to do my job well. It was to get a firsthand, up-close look at the challenges, activities, and spirit of the life of our 230 congregations. But how could this best be accomplished? In conversations with my wife, Irene, MC Canada staff, and general board members, one idea rose to the top: I needed to find a way of visiting every single congregation in our denomination, from Vancouver Island to New Brunswick and from north to south, on their "turf." I was aware that this would be a daunting undertaking, but the time to do so seemed right. Our church was in a good situation.

As a new leader I wanted to hear what the churches were saying, to understand how they were doing, and to help them hear each other. Firsthand conversations seemed to be the best tool for this. We were not in a financial crisis. In fact, giving had been good, and it would be a pleasure to thank congregations and to encourage this generous trend. This would not need to be a fund-raising tour.

Recent delegate assemblies had been positive and the trust level was up. We could build on positive feelings and expand and deepen these conversations. We do have significant issues facing our church. We will need to develop and count on much goodwill to work at them. By listening to each congregation, we would trust each other more, and this would be healthy when we face tough issues in our midst.

And so the vision for the God's People Now! listening tour

emerged with the ambitious goal of visiting every congregation in Mennonite Church Canada in a short time. Our competent staff began to organize the logistics. Area churches were invited to participate in these visits. Our executive staff volunteered to take turns accompanying me in different regions. I'm thankful my wife also was able to accompany me on significant parts of the tour.

We hoped to meet the following goals:

1. Visit each congregation in its place of worship.
2. Gather information that would help us “take the pulse” of the church.
3. Generate a positive “buzz” from congregations knowing that their issues, joys, and concerns are being listened to and taken seriously.
4. Encourage the goodwill and closer relationships that can strengthen the church and its ministries.
5. Tangibly demonstrate cooperation and partnership among congregations, area churches, and the national church. (Mennonite Church Canada uses these terms for what would be known in other areas as congregations, area conferences, and the denomination.)

The format of the conversations was not complex. I developed four simple questions, and congregations were alerted that these would be used as the basis for our ninety-minute conversation with them. The questions were as follows:

1. How are you?
2. What are you doing?
3. What are your concerns?
4. What are your needs?

We also reserved a few minutes on the agenda to offer the perspective of the national church. We said thank you on behalf of the many ministry partners at home and around the world. We shared the purpose and identity of our church as it has been defined. And we prayed with each congregation.

The God's People Now! listening tour exceeded all my expectations. Indeed, some of the more important results were those that I had not anticipated. For example, I had not expected the tears that flowed so often and so deeply. Sometimes these were tears of appreciation and joy for the visit, sometimes tears of pain and struggle. Sometimes these were tears of relief for finally being able to share worries about the church with a person who would hear them in context of the concerns of others. And often these were my own tears and those of the people who accompanied me.

I had not anticipated the sacrifice people would make to meet with us. We arrived at congregations at odd times, and the number of persons that took time off from work, lost wages to be there, and sacrificed personal agendas to make this happen was astounding. Farmers stopped their tractors for a few hours, a carpenter closed his shop and came with sawdust on his overalls, professionals took time off from work, and shift workers juggled schedules. It seemed important to people to be there.

I had not fully anticipated that our church would speak about itself so honestly, passionately, fearfully, sorrowfully, and joyfully. Persons and leaders were willing to make themselves vulnerable in front of these “knowing strangers.” And frequently we were told how helpful it had been for them to think through the simple questions we had asked.

I had not anticipated that these visits would serve as a catalyst for conversation within the congregations themselves. Often we were told that they had never talked to each other like this before and that they had not said some important things in each other's presence before. Our presence and listening ears seemed to liberate folks to speak to each other.

And I had not anticipated the growing perception that this tour was a significant act of leadership in the church. The idea was simple, but it seemed to catch the imagination of young and old as being a good, timely, and important thing to do. Many pastors told us that they would do something akin to this in their own congregation.

During the tour, I was often asked how I was doing, if I was

tired, and if the experience was encouraging or overwhelming. There were times of exhaustion and periods of deep dismay and struggle. Visiting over two hundred congregations in seventy-one days and inviting people to tell their stories resulted in significant sharing of joys and deep pain, and it was an ambitious undertaking. Before I began, I fully expected to be discouraged by what I would encounter. But invariable I was more impressed, energized, and encouraged by the visits than I was discouraged. Our church is an instrument of hope, committed to its vocation of bringing God's healing to a challenging world.

Our people are wise and creative, and I eagerly wrote down the wonderful ways in which they described what it means to be the church in the twenty-first century. In my mind, the most significant parts of this book are the quotes I gleaned from our people. These are delightful, creative, salty, pointed, humorous, and sad. They made us laugh and cry. They also reveal the pain that is present among us. These quotes reflect the graciousness and generosity that characterizes our people. My desire in this book is to communicate faithfully what I heard so that the church can listen to itself. I trust that the quotes and my reflections on them can serve to inform and inspire us as we reflect on our vocation of being God's people now.

We gained remarkable insights about God's people and specifically about Mennonite Church Canada. This book is a modest way of giving back some of what we experienced and learned. God's people care deeply about the church and each other. They desire to be faithful to God, and they sincerely want to be who God wants them to be. My hope is that others may be encouraged and inspired as I was while listening to our experiences of being God's people now.

This book contains my reflections on the experience. However, I trust that the reader will understand that the heart of the book is what others have contributed. It was the wisdom of our people that inspired my passion to share what I have heard. And the quotes in this book represent but one small layer of the wisdom and insight we heard.

Some of these quotes are interspersed into the chapters in the spirit of illustrations. All are gathered in the appendix by topic. The heroes of the book are the people of our churches. It is their insight that I am trying to respect and convey. They have inspired me and provided hope for the future of the church.

I want to say a special and a deeply felt thank-you to so many who contributed to making the tour and the book a reality. To our executive and other staff who sacrificially gave of themselves to accompany this tour and who took on extra duties in my absence. To the operations team that worked persistently and with excellence at the details and logistics of the tour. To the rest of our staff, who needed to function more independently while their supervisors were away, especially to my own executive assistant, who kept things running so smoothly. To all those from the area churches who were able to participate in parts of the visits. Special mention and thanks go to David Martin, executive minister of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, who accompanied me to all but one congregation in that region. To our general board and councils that affirmed and encouraged this process in many ways. To my wife Irene, who participated in parts of the tour and steadfastly encouraged it as a good thing, even though that meant my being away from home more often. To the editors and staff of Mennonite Publishing Network for their willingness to undertake this project. To the pastors and leaders of congregations who did not see our visit as a threat but as an opportunity for growth in their congregations. To the special editors who helped prepare the material and make it more readable. To our communications staff, who creatively provided ideas in communicating the results of the tour. And to the hundreds of persons who opened their hearts and gave their time to us, meeting us at unusual hours and pouring out their hearts to us.

This book is a very modest effort to give back what we received, so that the church can hear itself and use what is heard for the glory of God.

Face to Face

So, what did we experience on the God's People Now! tour?

In broad strokes, we experienced that our name, Mennonite Church Canada, aptly describes who we are and what we want to become.

We are *Mennonite*. There is a fierce insistence on our Mennonite/Anabaptist identity. This identity, however, is variously understood within and among those of Swiss, Latin American, German, Asian, French, Russian, Native Canadian, and other ethnic backgrounds. Some continue to define identity in terms of particular ethnic and cultural heritages, while others passionately define Mennonite identity only in terms of faith.

We are a *church*. There is a strong desire to be the church together, beyond any particular congregational or regional expression of being church. We are serious about our vocation in the world: we are and we want to be God's people now.

And we are *Canadian*.
It is clear that our church is impacted and shaped by the broader culture. We are experiencing shifts and trends that are also present in our country. We are both modern and postmodern;


we mirror vestiges of Christendom, even though it is crumbling around us, and our spirituality is nurtured by pluralism, secularism,

***“Every time someone
leaves, part of our heart
goes with them.”***



consumerism, and materialism. Within this context we yearn to be faithful to God's Spirit.

From Black Creek, Vancouver Island (west), to Petitcodiac, New Brunswick (east); from Leamington, Ontario (south), to Cross Lake, Manitoba (north), Mennonite Church Canada is ministering to God's reign in our country. From the smallest congregation (eleven members) to the largest (over a thousand members), Mennonite Church Canada is nurturing, discipling, and encouraging its people.

 "Transition will be a permanent part of life, and we need to learn to deal with transition."

"The church can't address the crisis in agriculture. But the church can address the crisis in the lives of the people."


In thirteen languages and among many cultures (there are forty-three congregations whose first language is neither German nor English) Mennonite Church Canada is proclaiming the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ. From the oldest congregation in Canada (there is a friendly rivalry whether this is First Mennonite Church in Vineland or Rainham Mennonite Church in Selkirk, Ontario) to the newest congregations (the Gathering in Kitchener and the Laotian Canadian Mennonite Evangelical Church in Toronto), Mennonite Church Canada is embracing evangelism and growth.

Our congregations have identifiable demographic bulges (seniors) and gaps (eighteen- to twenty-eight-year-olds). We face significant challenges in rural areas (depopulation in Saskatchewan and Alberta; high costs of farming and low commodity prices) and in urban centres (inner-city poverty; multiplicity of competing

options; chronic busyness of members). But within these challenges MC Canada is struggling to be faithful to God's will and way.

Our congregations are facing some divisive and conflicting practices. Preferences for worship and musical styles and responses to same-sex realities head the list. We don't always agree on how to interpret the Bible for our faith and practice. We wonder whether we should be a church with more centralized authority or if it is better to promote strong congregational autonomy. Debate on such questions is often intense and sharp. We experienced this intensity in our visits to congregations. We are a church that is hurting deeply in places but that at the same time is responding to the opportunities for ministry that are before us. There are many opportunities to engage our society, high levels of spiritual interest, and a strong desire for an authentic and faithful Christian life. MC Canada is experiencing waves of energy, joy, exuberance, and growth.

And *everywhere*, in every congregation, there is much goodwill nurtured by the golden hearts and sincerity of persons wanting to be God's faithful people. Mennonite Church Canada people are sincere, well intentioned, and eager to be effective agents of God's gospel in our world. I realized after the tour that I had not met a single person I didn't like. In spite of many difficult and heart-rending conversations, we ended each day of the tour with a profound sense of gratitude for the people in MC Canada and for what God is doing among us.

 *"We've now developed an atmosphere in which folks are praying for the congregation instead of against it."*

"Our advice is that when you come together, eat first, and then you don't have as many tensions."

