



MCEC

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SUMMARY REPORT ON MCEC REGIONAL CONSULTATIONS WITH CONSTITUENTS

Introduction

Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) conducted a broad-based consultation process involving over 300 MCEC constituents from almost 90% of MCEC congregations, plus representatives from partner agencies. The purpose was to invite collective reflection on God's leading of MCEC into the future and to discern ways through current financial challenges.

Meetings were led by MCEC's Leadership Team, with Executive Council members as listeners, and held throughout the MCEC region in September, October, and November 2010. The Executive Council and Leadership Team sought the perspectives of participants on:

- MCEC's purpose and vision;
- Priorities for the allocation of resources;
- How to ensure generous financial support for MCEC ministries.

Undertaking a discernment process that sought to bring a concrete understanding of "where the Spirit is leading MCEC" was not an easy task. It was a challenge, however, that MCEC and its constituency embraced with enthusiasm. Participants from a variety of vantage points grappled with the significant questions facing MCEC. They offered wisdom, insight, and challenges that otherwise would not have been discovered. The work and discernment of the collective church and its concern for "Extending the Peace of Jesus Christ" was inspiring to behold. Below is a summary of key participant responses, followed by recommendations for action. A more detailed report is available separately.

Participant Responses

The three-hour consultation meetings were divided into three one hour "discernment sessions." During each session, participants were invited to discuss and respond to one key question posed by MCEC. The conversations and responses to these questions were faithfully recorded by MCEC staff and gathered together as "notes." The themes of the responses, as outlined below, are an attempt to bring cohesion and clarity to the content recorded in over 50 pages of staff notes.

¹The full report is available on the MCEC website at www.mcec.ca and includes table discussion notes. "Minority reports" available in the full version of this report offer some alternative insights to the common themes described below and are also important to consider when contemplating the future of MCEC.

Participant Responses to Discernment Question 1

What is the Future to which God's Spirit is Calling MCEC?

Who are we?

A strategic priority that resonated with all groups and that received the most discussion was the aspiration to further understand, explore, and articulate Mennonite/Anabaptist identity. Virtually all of the groups struggled with the question of Mennonite/Anabaptist identity in some form or other. There was some urgency expressed by many with regards to this question. Many groups expressed the need to grow the church and be welcoming to those who are not historically Mennonite. At the same time there seemed to be a deeply felt yearning to understand "who we are" in today's world and a calling to not lose our Mennonite and Anabaptist roots and identity.

Where are our young people?

Another concern that permeated the discussions was the dwindling numbers of people attending church, especially young people. The concern over youth faith formation and reduced youth participation in church was expressed in every gathering but one, and in some gatherings this concern was mentioned several times.

Who are our leaders?

By far, the statistic that seemed to elicit the most comments was the fact that 40 per cent of the 102 pastors installed in the past five years in MCEC churches were not trained in Mennonite institutions. There seemed to be a consensus among participants that the training of pastors in Mennonite/Anabaptist theology is a top priority.

How does the church fit with today's world?

A common theme raised in each of the regional consultations was the recognition that churches are struggling to meet the demands of a culturally diverse, complex, and technologically advanced world. "People are searching for meaning and are finding that many secular answers are appealing," one group commented. Another group lamented that the church "used to be a central part of people's lives but now is not; the church now mimics the larger culture." Another group described current challenges facing the church in a more positive way, "The new social expressions of belonging may mean that we need to rethink what church means; relationships are more important than formal programs."

Participant Response to Discernment Question 2

What are priorities for the future?

Difficulty of the question

At almost every consultation, groups reported that trying to discern where to "increase or decrease" MCEC emphasis or funding was a difficult task. There was affirmation from several groups for all three of MCEC's core priorities (forming leaders, making disciples, and growing congregations). There was a discomfort in choosing one area over the other as the core priorities were seen as interrelated, with each being an important part of the mission of the church. Many groups reported that they would like to maintain all of the current programming, and advised MCEC to find an effective way to do so.

Matching resources to core priorities

There was a general consensus that MCEC should be more explicitly accountable for allocating resources in alignment with MCEC's strategic priorities. "What is the relationship between the allocation sheet and the three strategic priorities?" one group challenged. Another group expressed that "the allocation of resources currently has little to do with the challenges facing us." Ideally, to them, the current realities and the allocation of resources should match.

Communication Gap

Although some groups had difficulty providing concrete suggestions on where MCEC funds should be allocated, many groups felt that with better communication, congregational giving to MCEC would increase. As one group put it, "We need a much clearer sense, relational sense [of MCEC and its activities] so that congregations can be motivated [to give]. We need to know the people and the faces [of MCEC]." Other ideas included telling compelling MCEC ministry stories and making the Annual Church Gathering (AGM) a community celebration and less of a business meeting. Many seemed to concur with the sentiment that information coming from MCEC is too infrequent, unfocused, and needs to be broken down in understandable and compelling ways in order to encourage giving.

What is MCEC's mission focus?

There were strong and opposing viewpoints expressed around the proportion of funds that should be allocated to new versus existing congregations. The ambivalence surrounding this important question is demonstrated by the following statements:

- "Churches must be strong and vibrant first before going out and evangelizing."
- "Despite the temptation to protect existing congregations and programs for leaders, we need to continue to focus on evangelism and service."
- "If established congregations are struggling, are we abandoning the 'best customers'?"

The importance of youth engagement and faith formation

Supporting youth programs was of key importance to many groups. For many, church camps, schools, and youth study tours were seen as important components of faith formation for youth and there was support for ongoing and increased attention to this area.

Participant Response to Discernment Question 3

How Do We Fund MCEC's Future Ministry?

Strategic fundraising

Participants encouraged MCEC to:

- Understand that money follows relationships and that MCEC "needs a face" in the congregations;
- Gather together a consolidated story (about MCEC) and "tell it and tell it and tell it";
- Help people to feel good about donating to MCEC and make the benefits of supporting MCEC clearer;
- Provide information (in more frequent and smaller portions) that will resonate with and be relevant to donor;

Ideas for the deficit

Participants offered suggestions for MCEC to consider in dealing with the current deficit including:

- Seeking funding support from Mennonite Savings and Credit Union;
- Asking each congregation for a specific donation to cover the deficit.

Increase constituency ownership of MCEC in order to increase giving

Many groups shared the sentiment that MCEC should be “closer” to the congregations in order to encourage giving.

To accomplish this, participants made these suggestions:

- Develop a sustainable strategy that is not just for the current deficit;.
- Annually negotiate a congregational donation that matches current realities.
- Encourage congregations to hold an annual MCEC Sunday for story telling.
- Appoint an MCEC representative in each congregation.
- Encourage congregations to “be at the table” when discussion of finances, programs, and vision for MCEC occurs.
- Approach individuals for support when MCEC’s budget is not being met.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are derived from (i) the responses recorded at the consultation meetings, (ii) the executive summaries prepared following each consultation meeting, and (iii) the discussion recorded at a full-day follow-up meeting of the MCEC Executive Council and Leadership Team.

The recommendations are also derived from the individual and prayerful discernment of the Executive Minister and the consultant/report writer. The process of discernment is ongoing and the reader’s continued prayerful consideration of the recommendations below is also welcomed.

Key Recommendations to MCEC

1. Continue to engage new and established congregations in exploring the fundamentals of faith such as: “Who is Jesus?” and “What is the role of the church in the community?”
2. Find more meaningful and clear ways to reinforce the purpose and value of MCEC to congregations.
3. Seek ways for new and established MCEC congregations to increase or enhance their understanding of Anabaptist/Mennonite theology and identity.
4. Continue to work in partnership with congregations and agencies in implementing effective faith formation, with attention being given to youth faith formation.
5. Build stronger and mutually beneficial relationships between new and established congregations.
6. Develop a fundraising and outreach strategy that builds stronger relationships with MCEC and actively invites congregations to support and become involved with MCEC.
7. Create a strategic rationale for resource allocation that fits with MCEC’s mission and core priorities, current realities and future trends.