



Congregational Consultation Fall 2011 A Report to Congregations

Between September 18 and November 20, 2011 Mennonite Church Saskatchewan (MC Sask) Council, and Vision and Wholeness Group (VW) invited all the congregations that are part of MC Sask to a series of seven consultations, hosted by various churches around the province. All members of Council and VW attended some sessions as listeners. In addition, 218 persons from 32 congregations participated in the discussion process. Most participants represented congregational members over age 55. The same questions were also asked of about 40 participants from Commissions and Committees at the Spring Leadership Assembly. Youth were represented by SMYO members.

Highlights of Responses

Congregational Realities:

- Many congregations are getting older.
- Some congregations are getting smaller.
- Commitment to church is changing as other things compete for our loyalty.
- God is at work in our communities. Congregations are engaged and committed to worship, nurture and spreading the gospel.

Affirmations:

- Area Church minister and Area Church Youth minister serve vital roles.
- Programs of support for pastors and congregations through Pastoral Leadership Commission are important.
- Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization and Vacation Bible School Troupe are affirmed.
- Camps play a significant role in the faith nurture of children and youth.
- Rosthern Junior College has an important ministry that needs to reach more young people to remain viable.
- Outreach initiatives are important and should be increased.

Suggestions:

- Improve communication with members and congregations.
- Focus on making effective connections and sharing our faith in our communities.
- Focus on children, youth, and young adults.
- Support seniors.
- Focus on clear articulation of our faith and calling people to discipleship.

The first question dealt with congregational realities now, and how they may play out in the next decade. Issues for congregations in Mennonite Church Saskatchewan center around three general concerns:

- 1) changing demographics related to aging and shifting population patterns,
- 2) adapting to changing ethnic demographics, modifying structures and programs to fit new realities,
- 3) ecumenical cooperation with others to be faithful to Christ's commission.

Aging populations affect most congregations. Rural churches see seniors retiring into Saskatoon and young adults coming into the city for education and jobs. (Rural and city churches working together can facilitate connections if rural churches provide information and city churches follow up with contacts.) Especially for rural congregations, questions about long term viability arise. Increasing financial pressures and large debt loads are being faced by young families and young adults. Decreasing funds are anticipated. Programs such as children's Sunday School will change or disappear in some churches. Changes in how congregations are organized will be necessary as fewer people are willing to accept leadership roles.

Another reality that was often mentioned was how busy we have become. Church activities are no longer automatically the top priority. Regular attendance no longer means weekly attendance. These changes in the place of the church in our lives have major implications for how we develop community, nurture faith development and reach out beyond our core members.

Our history from 50-60 years ago was growth from within (large families with most of the children, the majority of attendees at the consultations, staying in the church). There were expressions of sadness that many of our youth leave the church or affiliate with other churches. In some cases there appeared to be a feeling that this was a cause of congregational decline, and very few ideas about how to correct this phenomenon.

Churches across MC Sask feel a sincere desire to bring a variety of segments of society into the church, but are frequently not sure how to do that. This was expressed differently in the various contexts, and included reaching out to people of different cultural backgrounds and nationalities, seniors, young families, single parent families, children and youth. Both rural and urban congregations support their communities by providing services such as weddings and funerals, and allowing community organizations to use their facilities. A challenge is how to turn this into active participation in the life of the church. Faithfulness will require that we nurture faith in our own children and learn how to be relevant to and share our faith with our communities. At every meeting we were challenged to corporately help each other understand how to do that, and how to do it more effectively, more faithfully.

As communities change and congregations become smaller, cooperative programming with other denominations will increase. In some cases this may mean dual denominational congregations. Ecumenical activity is already occurring, and will strengthen.

At a number of the consultations, there was a strong call for a return to the key message of our vision statement "**Christ Centered and Sent – Voicing our Hope**". We are being called to speak clearly and publically about our commitment to Christ and the full message of His gospel.

In some cases, this was contrasted with commitment to Anabaptist faith distinctives. In others, it was pointed out that Anabaptist faith principles are centered on Christ and that we must continue to emphasize those things which Christ taught and modeled, that our heritage has given us and to share them with people brought into the church as well as Christians of other denominations.

In our consultation, we were again reminded of the different gifts each congregation brings to MC Sask. Evangelism/outreach is a composite of service and preaching. Different congregations have different gifts, and like the body of 1st Corinthians 12 we need each other and we need to value each other. Part of imitating Christ will be teaching and preaching, not only doing. And neither can discipleship be reduced to a confession or belief structure. Acceptance of a holistic gospel may be a challenge for all of us. We are encouraged to continue to pray for each other and learn from each other as we follow Jesus' Great Commission.

Question two asked about Mennonite Church Saskatchewan programs, whether they are helpful to congregations, and how they should be changed to make them more relevant.

Most of the comments were centered on denominational leadership programs, and conference youth related programs.

Pastoral Leadership Commission and the work of our Area Church Minister, Jerry Buhler, serve a vital need across congregations. Pastoral searches and transitions, congregational/pastoral evaluations, support for pastors through mentoring, pastor-peer groups, in-service training, retreats, involvement in special occasions such as ordinations, are among services that are appreciated. The Congregational Life Resources Team's support for congregations experiencing conflict was acknowledged; with requests that the involvement be strengthened. The speakers list that MC Sask provides is used and appreciated, as is Jerry and Anna's willingness to speak in churches.

Conference related youth programs are often mentioned. They assist congregations in the nurture, faith development and leadership training of children and youth. Camps, Vacation Bible School, Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization and Rosthern Junior College form a continuum of support. Anna Rehan's role as Area Church Youth Minister is seen as essential in planning retreats and youth events, mentoring youth in SMYO, organizing and mentoring VBS leaders, and supporting youth ministers. Can MC Sask support two VBS troupes? There was a call for increased support for youth in small rural churches without formal youth programs.

The possibility of using Shekinah Retreat Center for congregational events is appreciated, but concern is expressed over the rising cost of renting the facility. The question of three camps was raised. Some felt it is too expensive, but others felt that they serve complementary roles, and are not duplication of service.

A challenge for congregations and the wider church is to stay connected with young adults, when focused programming is no longer provided by MC Sask. We need to look for ways to keep this group connected to church and to use their gifts.

The work of Restorative Justice Ministries, Saskatchewan (RJMS) is very important to sectors of our constituency. The support is somewhat regional in nature, centered more in the three centers

that have programs – Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and Regina. It is seen as valuable ministry and is closely connected to many individuals who serve as volunteers with the programs, including some who have driven long distances for many years to be a part of this mission.

Other programs whose value was acknowledged at the consultation were:

- The continuum of services for seniors in Rosthern. People living in other parts of the province would like similar programs in their area.
- Touring Mission Fest
- Relating to indigenous people, especially events at Stoney Knoll and the Spruce River Folk Fest.
- Equipping Day
- Songfest

We were reminded that much of the programming in MC Sask happens in Saskatoon and the valley area. Long travel times are the reality for those who live “at the edges”. This often reduces the level of participation and also of awareness of MC Sask in those areas.

Concern about lack of communication and inadequate information to congregations about MC Sask programs was mentioned at each consultation. Many people feel that they do not have sufficient timely, clear information about events and programs. Preference was given for in person, face to face information. No one mentioned the critical role that congregational leaders, church secretaries and others in the church play in making sure that information that is sent to church offices is conveyed to congregational members. We will also have to become current in using technology in order to communicate with our younger population. (editorial comment!)

Our third question tried to direct conversation into directions for the future.

Many had difficulty arriving at definitive answers to questions that talked about finances and future directions when there are many unknowns.

The first part of the question asked about reducing or eliminating subsidies to camps, RJC and RJMS. There is mixed support for this idea. It is seen as a temporary solution at best, with more negative than positive results. Strong favorable comments for the camps, conference pastor and youth pastor together with SMYO, speak to the need for continued support for these programs. Other programs are also favored but not to the degree of children's camps and youth programs. Reducing subsidies for RJC received mixed responses. Some voices suggested a maximum of five years subsidy for any program, by which time it would need to be self-supporting. From the comments received, it seems that each program within MC Sask has a strong, but not universal support base within the congregations. The need for the Every Home Plan for the Canadian Mennonite was questioned by some, with the suggestion that those people who want it pay for it directly.

The latter part of the question dealt with visions for new programming and programs that could be eliminated. New initiatives called for deliberate support for outreach by congregations to youth, young adults and young couples, immigrants and refugees, aboriginal neighbors, and our neighbors in general. Equipping congregations by providing education for the laity in understanding how to connect to the wider community and learning to support our aging

members was called for. Youth members of SMYO dreamed of local community outreach to youth through drop in centers sponsored by congregations and supported by MC Sask.

We were challenged to explore church planting as an area church initiative.

Many young adults congregate in Saskatoon. How do we help them to connect them to churches? (Initiatives such as Bunch o' Guys, Sonrisa, young adult pot lucks and discussion groups were noted and affirmed.)

- Rural congregations would appreciate the support of an itinerant minister.
- Churches with few youth, no youth pastor and limited youth programming are looking for support in mentoring their young people.
- More assistance in congregation/pastoral conflicts was requested.
- It was suggested that RJC needs to explore options, possibly bussing from Saskatoon or relocating to the city as a dayschool.
- Areas away from Rosthern would appreciate help with seniors' programs and housing options.
- A question was raised about creating programs that would generate funds for MC Sask and provide needed services to meet wider societal needs. (Providing faith based care for children in government care was cited as an example.) Are there entrepreneurs among us who can help us dream in this direction?
- Interaction between congregations in more ways than are currently in place was suggested. These could include information sharing about MC Sask programs and issues, education and faith formation and building of relationships. The events might also serve a fundraising function. They should not always be held in the same area of the province.
 - Groups of congregations might arrange to connect on a regular basis for mutual learning and fellowship.

There was much discussion about the various aspects of decision making at the area church level. It is clear from the diverse comments that there are theological, policy and accountability issues related to the choices and the plans various leadership groups make. The criteria and rationale for decisions must be communicated. When major changes in program or direction are anticipated, it will be necessary to refine methods for keeping congregations informed and soliciting input and feed back. There is interest in MC Sask activity. The participants in the consultations indicated appreciation for the consultation process and encouraged future dialog between MC Sask leadership and congregations.

What did we not hear?

- Very little mention of worship in congregations.
- Not a huge outcry for collective projects.
- A few comments focused on those age 19—30 who have come from our congregations, but few suggestions for keeping them engaged.
- Only one idea about starting a ministry of MC Sask that might generate money to underwrite other ministries of MC Sask. Are there other ideas from the entrepreneurs among us?