

"Everyone gets involved
and out of that comes
incredible energy,
and
'work' becomes 'fun'."

Vibrant Rural Churches Project

Phase I Report for General Distribution

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For Ministries Commission of
Mennonite Church Saskatchewan

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Introduction to the Vibrant Rural Churches Project

The majority of congregations in Mennonite Church Saskatchewan (MC Sask) are located in small towns or in the country. Saskatchewan Mennonites have a long history of being people of the land. Over the past decades, our agriculturally -based congregations have been facing significant declining populations and economic difficulties due to climate and political factors in recent years. People, finances and energy have moved and continue to move from rural areas to urban centers. Among other Kingdom tasks, rural congregations have a ministry to those who are hurt by these trends. Therefore, it is important for our denomination to support rural churches in their ministry of being a strong presence for Christ in their communities despite these losses and other stresses.

Mennonite Church Saskatchewan, through its Ministries Commission, set up the Vibrant Rural Churches Project (VRCP) in January, 2003, in order to help us all learn about and from the experiences of small rural congregations in Mennonite Church Saskatchewan. Naomi Unger and Eric Olfert were contracted to implement the project. Naomi grew up in rural Saskatchewan and presently lives in a rural village where her husband serves as pastor of three small rural Mennonite congregations. She has experience in education and administration with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Africa. She recently began a term in the Christian Formation Council of Mennonite Church Canada. Eric Olfert grew up in a small rural congregation and still has a stake in the family farm. Most of his career has been in education and administration with MCC. He currently works half time as Missional Formation and Partnership Facilitator in Saskatchewan for MC Canada.

The VRCP objectives were originally stated as follows:

1. To identify and hold up what small rural congregations in MC Sask are already doing to maintain their life and vitality in the face of rural community decline; and,
2. To provide a process to allow them to dream even more boldly about life-giving possibilities for the future.

The hope was that the results of this process would be a catalyst:

- a. to help all small rural congregations to live and grow as vibrant centers of faith in their communities; and
- b. to engage other MC Sask churches (especially urban) in thinking about how they can return energy and resources to small rural churches.

The project was launched at MC Sask's annual meeting in February, 2003, with an afternoon program that celebrated hope in a parched land. Eric and Naomi visited the ten smallest congregations in MC Sask from March to June of 2003, and heard many stories of what energizes them and keeps them vibrant. We discerned common themes and attempted to analyze what we had heard. One of our conclusions is that these small rural churches have much to teach us. The depopulation of their rural communities tends to force remaining members of these congregations to become more engaged, more committed and more active, just for their congregation to continue to survive. They have learned by experience that for each member to take up his or her part in the work of the congregation is vital to being church. In this way and in many others they are an example to all of us.

Naomi Unger, Eric Olfert

An Analysis of Phase One Vibrant Rural Church Project Data

From April to June of 2003 we, Naomi Unger and Eric Olfert, carried out 'congregational interviews' with the ten smallest Rural congregations of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan, in the context of the Vibrant Rural Churches Project. Information on how the interviews were conducted, copies of the notes from each meeting and a compilation of responses according to selected themes are available on request.

This analysis will attempt to draw out some of the meaning of the responses we were given in those interviews, according to somewhat subjective categories, chosen by Naomi and Eric.

I Issues Related to Being Rural Churches:

A. Small Rural Churches have Much to Teach Us about being 'Missional'.

We are beginning here from the understanding that 'Missional' refers to the model of church that is emerging as Christendom reaches its end. Under Christendom (the union, or at least close symbiotic relationship between church and state dating back to Constantine) the 'playing field' was clearly tilted towards the church, tending to keep the church full, however nominal the commitment of those Christians might be. As we move into a society where the playing field is at best neutral, and increasingly tilted against the church (as it was against the early church); nominal Christians drift away, and the church that is left is (forced/able) to be more clearly defined and active. Commitment, dedication and active involvement become increasingly important criteria for membership.

We are certainly not arguing that the societal 'tilt' against the church is stronger in rural than in urban communities; in fact we would suspect that this dynamic may be stronger for the urban church. But the larger rural-urban dynamic in our society has had a strong tilt in favour of the urban for at least a half-century in this province, and our rural communities are under severe stress. This stress has clearly impacted heavily on our rural churches in the same ways as on their communities, draining away their youth (seeking education and employment), their elderly (seeking an easier retirement and better health care options), and many of their productive members (tired of the struggle to survive in the rural economy).

It is our sense that the stress our rural communities (and thus our rural churches) are under has accelerated and increased the urgency of developing new models of doing church that was described in the first paragraph of this section. Those small rural churches who have found ways to survive have done so by involving everyone, by calling out the commitment and gifts of all their members and in doing so have found new vitality and vibrancy; new meaning for the concept of church.

Comments we heard in support of this analysis included; "We are so few that we can't afford and don't need to tolerate 'pew sitters'." "Everyone gets involved and out of that comes incredible energy, and 'work' becomes 'fun'." And "Sometimes we feel sorry for those big city churches where the majority just warm a pew."

B. There is Life in Working Together with other Churches in the Community

Mennonite Churches have a history, and certainly a reputation, for working on their own; for separating themselves from other churches by seeking to be 'deliberately different'. We have historically sought a niche that was 'neither Catholic nor Protestant', and often worked harder at defining our differences from, rather than our similarities to, our neighbor churches.

In those rural communities where population loss is felt strongest, our rural Mennonite churches are finding new life in working closely together with churches of other denominations. The Mennonite history of isolation from other denominations has deep roots, but it is clearly no longer 'useful' in today's rural Saskatchewan communities in the ways it was in the past. Examples of finding life in ecumenical cooperation range from responding to disasters together (including offering 'Mennonite' housing to a pastor of another denomination when a manse burned), to community projects and worship events, to

sharing pastors, to welcoming those of other faiths to participate fully without forcing them to become Mennonite, to dreaming of 'churches without signs'.

The dynamic in many of these small rural communities tends, as the population shrinks, to be one of 'survival of the fittest'. The last church standing tends to get the most dedicated Christians left from the other denominations, but many just drift away from church. It is our sense that the reputation for deliberate separateness described above makes it extra hard for a Mennonite 'last church standing' to attract members of the closed churches of other denominations.

Two of the ten churches visited (Fiske & Mayfair) have found ways of lowering the 'Mennonite cultural barrier' and have attracted very significant numbers of adherents from non-Mennonite background. How does this happen? What can be done to help it happen elsewhere?

At least two of the ten congregations (Rabbit Lake & Superb) are daring to begin to examine the question: 'What would it look like to try to do a multi-denominational church in our community?' Will we need to close our Mennonite church buildings in order to participate in a multi-denominational church plant? What would such a church look like?

Variations of these questions are a part of the fabric of all ten congregations. Is there permission to explore these and related questions and possibilities?

C. Creative Solutions to Pastoral Leadership Needs

The search for Pastors is an ongoing issue for these churches, as they are generally seen as 'undesirable' assignments by seminary graduates and experienced pastors. The reasons are often similar to the reasons others feel drawn or pushed to the city: financial uncertainties, distance from 'amenities', worry about opportunities for their youth and concerns about the prospects for the future.

The amazing part is how creative and generally successful these churches have been in finding good and varied solutions to this problem. Multi-charge pastorates, part-time or tentmaking pastorates, creative use of lay ministry teams, putting trust in young and/or relatively untrained pastors, identifying, calling and nurturing gifted pastors from their ranks, and learning to thrive through long interim periods between pastors, are all part of the experience. One church said "We've been without a pastor for 11 years of our existence, and we know we can be church quite well without a pastor; the problem is that new people won't join a church without a pastor."

While finding a pastor is an ongoing concern and too frequent task for these churches, they are, for the most part, still able to find good and creative ways of resolving it.

D. Strengths of the Rural Community Mindset

The above lines of thought and possibility arise out of the very real flexibility and resourcefulness of our rural communities. The strong sense of survival, the farmer's irrepressible hope for tomorrow, and the adaptability and ingenuity to find a way through all stand these churches in good stead. The historic Mennonite sense of preservation remains strong, and together with a sense of being under siege makes change difficult. At the same time, the immigrant/homesteader spirit of overcoming all difficulties is alive and well, and the ongoing rural-agricultural crisis itself forces ongoing adaptation. At times one smells whiffs of desperation, but mostly the sense we got was of 'thankfulness for what was good' and of 'buckling down to find a good way through'.

II Issues Related to Being Small Churches

A. Hollow Core vs. Solid Core Churches

At the ministers and Deacons Conference that preceded this summer's MC Canada Assembly, Gary Martens talked of a growing sense that our larger urban churches are increasingly feeling like they are 'hollow core'. He said it is increasingly difficult to find people in those churches who feel as if they are at the centre or well-connected to the decision-making processes of their congregation. Everyone seems to feel in some way alienated from where the decisions are really made. No one will admit to feeling as if they have their hand on the levers.

Our sense of the situation in these small rural churches was exactly the opposite. While not everyone felt like their input was always considered as fully as they would like, people consistently felt strong ownership of the process and results of decision making. Several congregations said that a Church Council meeting was basically a congregational meeting, implying that all decisions were group decisions.

B. The Dynamics of Smallness

Many books have been written about small groups and small churches, and we will not try to review all that material here. There are obviously both strengths and dangers in the small group dynamic. The following is a quick analysis of how these factors were talked about in the interviews.

Many of these churches felt like (and used the self-description) 'extended family'. The banter, the trust, the ability to forgive each other personal quirks, the knowledge of each other's weaknesses and strengths, informality of worship, fellowship and decision making and much more felt like functional family dynamics. In some cases there was a high degree of biological family connection. All of this helped to create a tight-knit group that could put their energy into 'being church' rather than into sorting out internal relationships. Where this 'family' dynamic is an open and inviting one, it can be a powerful way of witnessing to God's love. In several cases new members from non-Mennonite background talked of how natural and warm their welcome into the church had been; how much it had felt like coming 'home'.

The danger is obviously that a strong sense of family can be excluding. People who are not part of the biological cluster can feel like they are outsiders for a long time. For instance when significant church business is done in the context of biological family encounters outside church, it can make those who are not part of the family circle feel very isolated from the process.

C. Intergenerational Empowering and Engaging

The sense of healthy family described above tends to be empowering for all ages. The intergenerational relationships that become possible are wonderful, powerful dynamics that produce growth, understanding and sense of self-worth and of belonging. Children and youth know how to talk to adults and elderly and vice versa. Children, youth, young adults and all the rest, right through to the elderly are accepted, known, loved and encouraged. There is reduced age-group stratification, and a greater sense of solidarity and common commitment.

Mentoring dynamics develop naturally, without formal organization. Handicaps are made 'normal' and abilities emphasized. Gifts are identified, talents brought into the light and developed further and all are drawn into the tasks and rewards of being church. Producing well-polished, professional output takes a back seat to drawing the widest possible group into the vibrancy of participation, involvement and commitment.

And out of this come some amazing events and processes!

D. Creating Experiential Loyalty

We are told that the shift from a modern to a postmodern world view brings with it the demise of institutional loyalty. In the Postmodern world, loyalty is/will apparently be limited to the community of those with whom we share meaningful personal experience.

If this is indeed the tomorrow we face, then we cannot expect to attract people to the church by appealing to the institution or denomination. It would seem that what is described above, that is church where intergenerational dynamics empower and encourage, and church that functions like a healthy, welcoming family, is what can provide the experiences that create and foster loyalty. It is in these areas that we find much hope, especially for youth and young adults who are so much a part of the post modern thinking.

E. Youth

In most rural communities it has already been many years since the cycle of young farm people growing up to become farmers has slowed or stopped. As a result, in many of these small churches there are few young families left with children and youth. As these few children move into their teens, this often becomes a real concern, and some families feel forced to leave small rural congregations to look for churches with larger youth groups. Their concern to give their youth a meaningful peer-group church experience and help them be solidly connected with Christian youth as they move through important transitions and into the years where they prepare for courting, is appropriate and to be respected, but their leaving is painful.

Many of these small rural churches have done an excellent job of helping their youth to 'belong' and blossom in the strong inter-generational congregational dynamic described above. This doesn't work as well for everyone, however, and there is still a strong 'worry' about how to help youth build peer-connections to other Christian/Mennonite youth.

Some churches and families have used RJC and earlier SCBI very effectively to this end, and camps and SMYO continue to play very important roles, but there still seems to be a sense of deep concern in this area. One thought voiced was that church-sponsored and supervised internet chat rooms might help nurture and maintain connections between camp and SMYO activities.

Conclusion

While the struggle of these small rural churches is very real, and the future will clearly call for yet more courage, change and adaptability, the vibrancy identified in our project title is also very real. In their search for survival and meaning, these congregations are discovering some truths and possibilities that can benefit us all. Can we unite in giving them permission to change, to explore possibilities and find new ways of being vibrant church communities in their settings?

Eric Olfert

VRC Themes

1. Involvement by all (or many) is the usual, with positive results

People with gifts are certainly used and appreciated. Because everyone is needed, those who don't feel gifted are also expected and encouraged to participate in church life. This can release new gifts in people, old or young, male or female. Abilities are stretched and growth in knowledge and confidence happens. Youth esp. are trained in leadership, public speaking, committee work, etc. However, being begged or pressured to help doesn't sit well with both parties. Often the "already-willing" are the ones who volunteer to do more work just so that things will get done.

Congregations do not expect perfection. They are tolerant, patient with the efforts being made, and they do not taking such involvement for granted.

2. Intergenerational activities mean increased inclusiveness

Youth and adults doing things together is much more common now than in the past. This makes church people feel like a family, with all ages talking together and knowing each other, and all ages are blessed.

3. Importance of Sunday School for all ages.

Much effort is put into keeping S.S. for children as long as possible, even with fewer kids present. The Christmas program, when children perform, is a big highlight for the church, and the community if their kids participate.

Adults also find S.S. to be a meaningful time with honest discussions of issues, collective discernment and continued study of God's Word together, which may happen nowhere else.

Difficulty is finding teachers, even hesitant adults take their turns. Alternatives to adult S.S. class are weekly Bible Studies in homes, which can enhance fellowship and hospitality.

4. Singing is significant in worship & nurture, and community service

Communities expect Mennonites to sing, and when this happens in Nursing Homes, at Carol Festivals, and special services, etc. it is a much appreciated ministry. Could music be used in outreach programs?

When a church has a pianist and good congregational singing, or musicians who have fun while participating in worship, the church tends to feel good about itself. But, when the numbers are so small that the singing is a strain or there is no pianist, people don't like those worship services.

5. Women are often the ones committed to the work of the church, in traditional and new ways.

Some women's groups are vigorous, but not all. Quilting as a form of fun and fellowship for women, of community involvement, and of raising money was identified.

Women still "feed the multitudes" at church or community meals. In some cases, women may be weary of this work but the churches still feel that food is important for hospitality, fund-raising and outreach.

Women are also taking on new roles, and when they speak they are listened to by the whole congregation.

Their commitment to teaching S.S. and DVBS, even when they are very busy with families and jobs and to having children's features on Sunday mornings, is strong because they believe that family-friendly services are important.

6. Flexible programming means changes in the summertime

Watrous closes for the summer and members attend elsewhere. Rabbit Lake moves its' services to Meeting Lake but this worries those who think some will use the move as an excuse for nonattendance. Fiske and Herschel change their format on Sunday mornings into intergenerational services, led by families. Other churches do not hold Sunday School classes.

7. DVBS offered in the summer

Some combine with neighbouring churches to conduct DVBS, others go alone. Youth can get involved in teaching, singing, child care, etc. Grandchildren from away and community children attend, so it's seen as worthwhile even if church children are few. In some cases, further activities are done as follow-up, such as youth group and kids' clubs on week evenings.

8. Hospitality is relaxed and genuine but not pressured

Welcomes are warm and genuine and guests are made to feel comfortable but there is a concern not to seem insincere, or to fawn over guests, or to “attack” them because the church wants newcomers so badly.

The Mennonite label may put off some people from coming and staying. Other barriers may be perceptions of religious superiority or being closed to outsiders. There is a recognition that more can be done to invite the non-churched to come and to witness in the community.

9. Participation in interdenominational events

Where there is a community ministerial, the pastors are involved and contribute their perspective. Congregations expect their pastors to be involved in community and inter-church events (and appreciate that they do so on behalf of the church people). Sometimes, pastors may take very strong leadership in organizing ecumenical services. If the Mennonite church is the only Protestant church in an area with an active Catholic church, cooperation between the two seems to be very dependent on the local priest.

Traditional inter-church events such as World Day of Prayer, and community Christmas and Easter services seem strong.

10. Churches share in hiring a pastor

Two groups have arrangements for sharing a pastor. In the Hoffnungsfelder churches, this is how they have kept going throughout their history. For Fiske and Herschel, it is a more recent arrangement. Other groups feel that this model is what they will need to explore in the future to keep them open, when they can't afford their own full-time (or even part time) minister.

11. The pastor serves as community chaplain

In several locations the Mennonite pastors frequently conduct funerals and weddings for non-Mennonites, and say prayers at community events. They may visit the sick and lonely from the community, not just from the congregation. This is viewed positively by all. As a result, old stereotypes of Mennonites as a closed ethnic community are breaking down and opportunities for outreach and spiritual care created.

12. Combined activities with neighbouring Mennonite churches

Good fellowship happens at combined summer picnics, combined Communion services, Passion Week services, educational weekends, camp outs, and at congregational exchanges.

These help alleviate loneliness and a sense of being too small to do things well. The cooperation that happens is very supportive to all involved. If these exchanges are with other rural churches, the common bonds of understanding are strong. If the exchange is with a larger (or urban) church, the dynamics are a different but still spiritually enriching as personal relationships are developed and strengthened

13. Denominational loyalty is present

The older generation, which is very loyal to Mennonite institutions and identity, would miss the Mennonite component if their church closed or changed into a multi-denominational church. For others, this is less significant because what is important is to be a presence for Christ in their community, not a name on the church sign.

Questions of how to function ecumenically were raised, e.g. donations designated to denominations, modes of baptism, liturgy vs. informal worship, communion.

14. Churches recognize the needs of their youth

Youth need Christian peers which can be found at camp, retreats, etc. and youth groups need leaders and resources. Attending RJC is a way of meeting youth needs and has other benefits but many youth stay at home throughout high school.

Being valued by their home church helps them feel good about themselves. For example, when they are involved in the church through choirs, doing S.S. opening, helping in DVBS, and taking offering and when adults in church don't look down on their participation, when they are treated as equals by older people in keeping the church functioning, and when they are affirmed for their efforts.

Creative options for making church “good” and faith relevant for our youth while they are at home need to be considered, such as a supervised internet chat room.

15. Families with children and youth may go elsewhere

Some families have decided to worship in other churches because that's where there is something for their children. They don't want their kids to be lonely and bored in church. This saddens the congregation even while they recognize the validity of the decision.

16. Seniors continue to participate in and support the church

Seniors seem to have a realistic recognition of what they can and can't do, e.g., teach and learn in adult Sunday School classes or Bible Studies, relate to elderly in the community, and support the church in fellowship and prayer. As long as they are around, they try to attend church, to be helpful, share their wisdom. They have strong denominational loyalty and are generous givers to MCC, missions and Mennonite institutions.

Problems tend to be health related, driving long distances and a lack of energy and motivation. It's their time to rest and let others do the work, and so they tend to be very supportive of the efforts of others to keep church functioning.

17. Bringing closure to a church - how to do it wisely and well?

Watrous named this specifically, and is dreading it. Other churches are already thinking about this, that they may need to close perhaps 10 years from now, and are wondering what the indicators will be that it's time to close. Should they be proactive or let closure happen through inaction?

Churches are also thinking of alternatives to closure - physically moving to the nearest town, combining with other Mennonite churches or becoming a multi-denominational community church.

18. Guardian/preservation mode stifles outreach

When morale is low because of population decline, or having no pastor, the congregation has almost no energy or motivation to invite people to church, or to be creative in worship, etc. The focus is just maintaining what the church is doing now. They try to do be friendly and helpful neighbours but not much more.

However, even in such situations there are some people who do have ideas and energy who are to be cherished and supported before they become lethargic, too.

19. Church members serve Christ beyond the church

Whether it is participating in Meals on Wheels, refugee support, owning and operating the Mennonite Clothes Closet (N. Battleford), conducting DVBS or aiding neighbours in a crisis, these forms of serve/ministry are a significant witness for Christ. Church people working together for a common goal is a witness to the community.

Individuals also bring their faith perspective to their workplaces and other personal involvements.

20. The family feeling

Numerous people mentioned that church feels like an extended family, and in some cases, actually is a biological family. Words were used like: feeling comfortable with each other, knowing strengths and weaknesses, familiarity, trust, acceptance, informality in worship and decision making, sense of belonging, children returning home for holidays are welcomed by everyone, rootedness, being a faith family.

This quality is a strength as long as it does not mean being exclusive and unwelcoming.

21. Challenges

Reaching to the unchurched in their neighbourhood and continuing to live faithfully as Christ's followers.

Increasing age and smaller size means reduced energy and motivation. But it pushes churches to be flexible, inclusive, more participatory, and to enter into new conversations with other churches (getting together, working together) in order to be a strong faith community. So, while there is some depression, discouragement, and negativity ("siege mentality") there is also realism, enthusiasm, creativity and willingness to try.

Naomi Unger

Outline of VRCP Visits to Small Rural Churches

- Initially, we contacted pastors or church chair persons in order to schedule our visits and describe our program for our time together.
- We suggested, ahead of time, that the evening begin with a pot luck supper at about 5:00 pm. This was optional, but we Mennonites get comfortable over food, and we hoped to establish a comfortable atmosphere for the evening. It also helped us to get an early start, which made it easier to travel home after the meeting. In fact, this only came together a few times, but when it did it worked well.
- Before the meal, we had the pastor or leader introduce us briefly and we took a moment or two to introduce the reason for our visit. We requested that a local person open in prayer for the meeting and the meal.
- After the meal (or before the meeting), we moved the chairs into a circle (or around a table, or shifted pews around, or just gathered in a corner) and then sang a congregational hymn together. We asked the group to select two songs that speak to them of steadfastness, perseverance and hope in difficult times.
- We presented a short Bible reading and meditation (attachment A).
- From there we moved on to a more detailed introduction of the Vibrant Rural Churches Project and presented our expectations: “We trust that rural congregations of MC Sask will view our time together as a positive event, where the focus is not on reliving the pain of decline or grieving the past, but on present successes and future potential and possibilities. We certainly do not want to deny or minimize the pain and frustration, but in this meeting we hope to look with you beyond those difficulties. Our desire is for the congregations we visit to take ownership of the event and its outcomes. We are not coming to tell you what to do, but to learn together from your experiences.”
- We reviewed the statement of objectives which we had brought along, written out on large paper, and hung on the wall (attachment B).
- Then we called for the second congregational song.
- We introduced the discussion period with comments along these lines: “After these introductory comments and explanations, we want to listen to what your congregation has to say. We have previously shared five questions that we hope will help us all talk about the internal faith life of your congregation and its outward expression in community ministry (attachment C). We will have additional questions to expand on these, and will use them to lead/encourage discussion (attachment D). Again, our objective is to understand and record what is working for you and what gives you hope, so that others may learn from your experience.”
- We did this as a whole-group discussion, unless there were more than about 20 people present. We used flip charts so we didn’t lose what the group had to say. This proved to be very important, both in helping the group to think about and get excited about what they were doing, and in terms of building their trust in our ability to record carefully what they were saying. We normally did our own recording, although occasionally we needed to ask one of those present to be a recorder.
- Closing prayer.
- Those groups that had chosen not to do a ‘carry-in supper’ normally provided a snack after the meeting and there was good fellowship around this food.

Attachment A

I'd like to read a number of short scripture passages to start our evening.

Isaiah 52:7

Mark 16:14 & 15

Acts 5: 40 - 42

What do these three readings have in common? At least in the NRV version they all talk about 'Good News'.

God sends the entire church - each one of its members and all of its activities into the world to fulfill His restoring reconciling and saving purpose for the world. Like those recharged disciples after the resurrection so many years ago, we in the church have all received the good news and we are all charged with passing it on, despite our problems. We are all, each and every one, called to proclaim good news.

Jesus always spoke His Good News in response to the bad news in people's lives. To the blind he brought healing, to the lepers He brought cleansing, for Lazarus he brought victory over death, and to the woman at the well he brought truth and a new beginning. True evangelism is always contextual; that is, it is always related to the reality of people's lives. It is about supplying the good news that heals the bad news in people's lives. Billy Graham speaks to one kind of bad news; that of feeling lost, alone, purposeless and without hope. Martin Luther King brought good news to another kind of bad news; that of racial oppression. When you visit an inmate in the Prince Albert Penitentiary through P2P, you bring good news to that inmate's bad news of rejection, loss of self-worth and friendlessness. When you have coffee with a lonely widower or baby-sit for a single mother, you are an evangelist, one who brings good news to their bad news. We are all called to be evangelists, working alongside God to bring His Good News of healing and hope to the world, across the street and across the seas.

You folks here at _____ Mennonite Church have spent a lifetime working out how to live out the Good News in your community and in the rural Saskatchewan context. We're hoping that you will share some of what that experience has taught you. Teach the rest of us what you have learned. Share with us what is working, what gives life and energy to your spiritual walk as a rural congregation in times that are, in their own way, as difficult as those experienced by the disciples in Acts 5.

In these difficult times, can we too 'rejoice to be counted worthy?'

Eric Olfert

Attachment B

Objectives of the Vibrant Rural Churches Project

1. To identify and hold up what small rural congregations in MC Sask are already doing to maintain their life and vitality in the face of rural community decline.
2. To provide a process to allow them to dream even more boldly about life-giving possibilities for the future.

The results of this process will be made available to all MC Sask churches in the hope that shared reflection can be a catalyst:

- (a) to help all small rural congregations to live and grow as vibrant centers of faith in their communities; and
- (b) to engage other MC Sask churches (especially urban) in thinking about how they can return energy and resources to small rural churches.

Attachment C

Focus Questions for Congregational Discussion: Vibrant Rural Churches Project

Below are five questions we would like you to think about before the upcoming Vibrant Rural Churches meeting. We will ask a number of related questions as well, but these represent the areas we are interested in. We are deliberately focusing this project on what is positive and life-giving for Small Rural congregations.

1. Think of your congregation's various programs and projects. Which are the most fun, satisfying and energizing for your congregation?
2. What do people in your community think about and expect of your congregation?
3. How does your congregation equip your members for, and encourage them in, Christian ministry?
4. What are the challenges that you as a congregation need to face related to the future?
5. If you were to wake up tomorrow to find a vibrant congregation meeting those challenges and serving your community, what would it be or look like?

Attachment D

Focus Questions for Congregational Discussion

1. Think of your congregation's various programs and projects. Which are the most fun, satisfying and energizing?

Are the programs size and context appropriate?
What are your most innovative programs?
What new ideas have you tried?
How are programs evaluated after they've been tried?
How does your church discontinue programs?

2. What do people in your community think about and expect of your congregation?

How do you project a positive image to the community?
Identify at least one community need to which your congregation is responding?
What community need could you respond to in the future? How is awareness raised of this need? Is it deliberately studied or haphazard? Is the response seen as the task of a single person or the group? How do you get all involved?
What expectations does your community have of your church and your pastor? On what is this based? How did you earn your "reputation"?
How does participation with other churches energize your church?
How does your congregation welcome/adopt newcomers? Is your worship inviting to strangers?
Are you an open or closed congregation?

3. How does your congregation equip your members for, and encourage them in, Christian ministry?

What gifts and talents are already present that could be utilized more or in new and other ways?
Are the efforts of all participants acknowledged, appreciated?
How do you feel about being a sending congregation -a training ground - a place where church leaders elsewhere came from? Do you have ways of blessing/confirming this role?
What support systems are in place (or would you consider using) to help your members to develop skills in ministry?
Lay leadership empowerment?
Does the whole congregation see itself as pastoral, missional?
Seeing individual potential?

4. What are the challenges that you as a congregation need to face related to the future?

Identify pain in your congregation or community that hinders unity, hospitality, outreach, involvement, creativity, optimistic energy.
How do you see conflict, as something to avoid or as an opportunity for growth?
Threatened by change or open to trying new things?
How does your congregation deal with anxiety and the issues that caused it? With difficulties finding people and resources?

5. If you were to wake up tomorrow to find a vibrant congregation meeting those challenges and serving your community, what would it be or look like?

Are you a cautious or risk-taking church?
How could you develop and implement new programs/projects?
Are creative and visionary people heard or are they silenced?
What more can you do to build up your church?
In worship?
In service?
Outreach?
Nurture?
Collaboration of pastor and people?

Optional Question (used when some people didn't seem to have had an opportunity to speak); asked of each person in turn:

What, for you as an individual, is the very best thing or the best part of being a part of _____
Mennonite Church?