

# Emerging Voices Initiative

growing conversation

[emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com](http://emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com)



## Mennonite Church Manitoba Gathering Reflection

We (Emerging Voices Initiative participants) found much to be encouraged about after the Future Directions Task Force (FDTF) discussion at the Mennonite Church Manitoba (MCM) Gathering. We appreciated the affirmations and challenges that we heard in our workshop, during floor discussions, and in face-to-face conversations. We are deeply grateful to Peter Rempel, Ken Warkentin, and Willard Metzger for providing us, and all constituents, with so many opportunities to speak to the FDTF report and the relevant motion.

Since these conversations continue to shape our thinking, and as constituents prepare for other area conference meetings and for Assembly, we would like to offer the following thoughts on the MCM Gathering as an addendum to our summary, vision, and FDTF response documents.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Moving toward Clarity:

We observed a pervasive longing for increased clarity. On one level, constituents seemed confused about what exactly the proposal meant. As EVI understood it, constituents have been invited to assume that the details previously published in the FDTF *Backstory* will not necessarily be implemented. When constituents asked about other possible implementation details, the general response was that these would be discerned in the next steps. For some, the lack of clarity sometimes made it feel like we were approving an “almost-blank cheque.”

We also saw a longing for clarity about process. How did the consultation that led to choosing this model (as opposed to other proposed models) take place? Who participated? What if we voted “no” on this proposal now? What if we tabled the motion and requested that it be returned in more detail? What if an area conference didn’t pass the proposal? We affirm the space that was given for these questions to be asked. At the same time, we must admit that we remain unsure of the answers. We sensed that the MC Canada and MCM boards were recommending that we pass this model on the grounds that financial problems and layoffs would continue in a less controlled way if the proposal was not passed now.

---

<sup>1</sup> These documents are available at [emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com/documents](http://emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com/documents)



## **2. Hope & Trust:**

We noted that a number of constituents shared our concerns about how the proposed model might tilt our theology too far toward congregations and away from a more national and global identity. We also noted that some constituents shared our concern that the proposed model may not reinvigorate our congregations and finances as much as it hopes to. Ken Warkentin's report on the Gathering captures these concerns, and others, quite well. If you haven't read it, you can find it at:

<http://news.mennonitechurch.ca/mcm-summary-future-directions-task-force-conversation>.

One of the most frequent reassurances was that leadership was noting these concerns and would ensure that concerns would be properly addressed in the implementation plan. We observed constituents communicating deep trust in their leadership as they passed this motion based on these reassurances, especially since a number of concerns questioned the some of the very foundations of the model itself.

EVI also wonders if more clarity is possible regarding how these concerns will be acted on. Since a number of constituents have lamented that they did not feel consulted when the current FDTF proposal was chosen, we wonder how we might improve consultation during its potential implementation. We recognize that this is an incredibly difficult job; we applaud Ken Warkentin and Willard Metzger for their commitment to ensuring that it happens nonetheless.

## **3. Affirmations**

Along with the concerns above, there were also deep affirmations for the report, which can also be found in Ken Warkentin's report. Many constituents joined us in commending the FDTF for their hard work and leadership.

We also observed that the FDTF recommendation and discussion seem to have helped MCM to come to a significant consensus about the following:

- Some kind of structural change is needed soon.
- We all long for change that is faithful and feasible.
- If MC Canada passes the FDTF recommendation, there is still much more work and consultation needed to ensure that the yet-unspecified implementation will address deep constituent concerns and longings.

## **4. Our Changing Understanding**

EVI entered the MCM gathering with a particular sense of what was being discussed. We observed that the "principle" of the recommendation seemed to be: if MC Canada area churches emphasize the congregation as the foundational unit of the church, and if we scale denominational structures back as closely as we can to the congregations, our congregations will be revitalized and future inter-congregational connections will emerge



from there. For the most part, we did not see our summary of the “principle” challenged, and so we continue with that summary.

On the other hand, we wonder if delegates might still describe the “principle” differently. We wonder if some might simply say that they voted in favour of change, trusting that whatever change happened would be based on their feedback during the floor and workshop discussions.

EVI’s hope was to encourage others to join us in asking whether the proposed model would be as faithful as we could hope for and whether it would help our church in the ways that it was designed to. As we reported in the floor discussion, we remain unsure. At the same time, we also commit to continuing to listen and allowing our perspectives to be shaped by the body. We continue to affirm that it is the opinion of the body, and not just our own, that really matters.

To that end, conversations with other constituents have deeply shaped our thinking in a number of ways.

For one, there were a number of thoughtful responses to our concerns about the proposal putting too much emphasis on the congregation being “the foundational unit of the church.” We appreciated the insights of those who pointed out that there is an Anabaptist precedent for this statement, and that, in fact, the local congregation plays a key role in helping us resist individualism by rooting us in a tangible community. As a result, we may choose to separate our concern about the ecclesiological direction of the FDTF report from our previous critiques of the “foundational unit” statement. We still observe a concerning imbalance towards local church identity and away from a broader identity in the recommended model, but the “foundational unit” phrase may not be the root of the problem.

Second, a number of constituents encouraged us to recognize that the FDTF report “mirrors the times.” They reminded us that the report’s emphasis on congregations recognizes a hard truth: we have *already* chosen to live in a way that prioritizes congregations over broader connections. This challenge has given us serious pause. On the one hand, we recognize that church structure will not work if it consists of unrealistic hopes. On the other hand, we continue to believe that church structure must do more than simply mirror sociological trends if the church is to truly be the church.

A third concern about our work struck a particularly deep chord with us. A number of people identified, as we have, that EVI is made up of white Mennonites who can afford a university education. We had lamented this reality as a group, but these voices reminded us that lament was not enough. As we move forward using our website to solicit a wider variety of voices, we commit ourselves to doing our best to address this concern. We also hope to recognize and admit when our best has not been enough.

To that end, we recognize, as we have before, that we are part of a broken system, one in which it is much, much easier for us to have a voice than some others. To that end,



we also hope that the body would join us in evaluating the FDTF proposal in these terms too. In what ways might the proposed model help to fix or to further exacerbate a broken system that all-too-often alienates or marginalizes key voices?

## 5. Moving Forward

More than anything, and as we've said, we're still listening! And we're still honoured to be a part of such a thoughtful and important conversation with our church. The next area church gathering some of us will be at is Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, but we will be following the gatherings in Saskatchewan and Alberta with great interest. We are very much looking forward to being at Assembly in July and presenting another conversation workshop.

We also hope to encourage broad conversation on our website between these gatherings, particularly through our blog. If you would like to contribute, we welcome you to contact us!<sup>2</sup>

*Emerging Voices Initiative*  
*March 9, 2016*

---

<sup>2</sup> Our blog can be found at [emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com/blog](http://emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com/blog)  
You can email us directly at [emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com/contact](http://emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com/contact)