

Executive Director

Looking Back – Looking Forward

The Mennonite Brethren story – from birth to the present – is the story of a renewal movement within the larger Mennonite tradition. As such, MBs have often self-identified as a Holy Spirit-led church, reaching outward to the watching world with Jesus' good news of God's salvation, deliverance and healing.

Because of our history, MBs can be thought of as a "blended family," one that merges the Mennonite vision together with two particular evangelical visions, those of the German Baptists and the more charismatic-oriented Lutheran Pietists.

These two additives are most clearly seen in the church organizational structure and the practices of personal piety that MBs adopted early on in their development.¹

Mennonite with a (mostly) Baptist structure. In the early years after their 1860 succession from the Mennonite Church, MBs were known as "jumpers" for their exuberant expressions of song, dance and emotion. A few key leaders brought experiential charismatic practices into the Russian Mennonite communities. After five years, the German Baptist preacher August Liebig was invited to resource the MBs and introduce "organizational order" to the fledgling MB movement, which still carried the traditional Mennonite *Aeltester* or bishop structure.

In addition to immersion baptism, several Baptist structures were added to the MB renewal movement:

- annual conventions with delegates representing congregations,
- a conference structure with committees, commissions and parliamentary procedures for processing resolutions, and
- a mission focus with ear-marked funding and budgetary priority

It was sometimes said that MB meant "Mostly Baptist."

Mennonite with an emphasis on charismatic personal piety.

The MB renewal movement adopted several charismatic features, as did other 19th-century Protestant denominations that were shaped by Lutheran pietistic reforms. The emphasis was on personal conversion experience, personal devotional Bible study, personal assurance of salvation, personal walk with Jesus, personal discernment of the Spirit's leading – the key words here are "personal" and "experience."

There was steady traffic from Russia to Germany to learn new evangelistic methods – tent meetings, altar-call preaching, Bible school curriculum, prayer meetings, dispensational prophecy charts, gospel-revivalist songs, etc. Leaders brought these "charismatic" practices back to the Russian villages and then to the Americas with enthusiasm.

Because the MB church blended three theologies – Mennonite, charismatic and German Baptist – MBs resisted writing a definitive "theology" for themselves. The early MB leaders realized that since

theirs was a merger of three distinct theologies, not one of the theologies could be pressed for ultimate clarity, alignment or precision. If any of the three did so, it was sure to offend at least one of the other two.

This is why MBs have chosen to write Confessions of Faith and uphold the Bible as the final arbiter. Consider these examples:

- MBs confess that God is sovereign, but our confession does not delineate the exact relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom.
- MBs confess that Jesus' work on the cross saves, but the confession does not spell out which theological atonement model is essential to MB theology.
- MBs confess the glorious hope of Jesus' return to judge at the end of time, but the confession does not insist on a particular dispensational or millennial theology, a particular understanding of the State of Israel or the post-mortem reality, etc.
- For MBs, these details have always been the domain of theology, not confession. When pressed for precision, we would say, "What does the Bible say?"

The "blended family" status explains why many from different Christian traditions have found a church home among MBs. The fact that MBs have historically not pressed for complete theological alignment makes us a hospitable option.

This is not because MBs are so smart, but simply because it would

¹For more on this assessment of the MB story, see Jon Isaak, "Mennonite Brethren and Charismatic Renewal Movements," *Direction* 44/2 (Fall 2015): 200-207.



be impossible to achieve complete theological alignment without doing damage to someone in the MB family. Such theological hospitality helps to explain why there are now some 22 denominations accessing assessment and coaching from the MB church planting network called C2C and another 12 denominations accessing leadership development resources from L2L.

Mission mindset.

Rooted in our historic priorities, the Canadian Mennonite Brethren movement was birthed in mission. In 1883, at the USMB conference in Hamilton County, Neb., delegates expressed concern about the spiritual condition of the Mennonite church in Manitoba and wondered whether they had a responsibility to help. A motion was put forward that they send Heinrich Voth of Minnesota and David Dyck of Kansas to Manitoba to investigate the possibility of beginning a missionary work there. The result of this action was the birth of Winkler MB Church in 1888. From there, mission efforts were launched in Gretna and eventually Winnipeg.

Our historic commitment to mission motivated the CCMBC Executive Board in 2011 to commission a national office review that resulted in two significant decisions. 1) The EB received and approved the national office review report and its recommendations to move into a more intentionally integrated ministry model with provincial partners and churches. 2) The EB, along with provincial representatives, received and reviewed a document titled “Four messages from the heart of God” from our consultant. The document was presented for discernment to provincial leaders and the Board of Faith and Life. These MB leaders discerned that this “word” was to be received in all

seriousness as a leading from the Lord for CCMBC and our national work.

The word that CCMBC leaders discerned had four key messages:

1. This is a sacred moment in time.
2. We have a window of opportunity.
3. We will be held accountable by our children for what we do at this time in history.
4. If we lower the MB flag and raise the flag of Christ, God will work through the MBs to impact Canada for his glory.

The purpose of New Testament prophecy is for “strengthening, encouragement and comfort” (1 Cor. 14:3) and is to be discerned in community (1 Thess. 5:19-21). In January 2012 meeting, the EB together with provincial staff and

provincial representatives discerned God’s leading to begin to “behave as one team” for the sake of people who do not know Jesus and the benefit of the church.

The EB then instituted a process to discern a new mission, values, guiding principles and central ministry focus that has come to be known as the CCMBC “sandbox.”

The CCMBC mission, preferred culture and guiding principles provide a framework for CCMBC budget development. This means all budget decisions need to be tested against the CCMBC mission.

It is our conviction that the results of our central ministry focus – to “help to



Executive Board

Report

The Executive Board would like to thank you for your prayers and support as we discern God's future for us together. Your comments, suggestions and questions throughout the year are very helpful. We have tried to offer more opportunities for conversation through venues like breakout sessions when we meet together. These events have been well received and provide us with valuable input. We have also been meeting annually with representatives from our provincial partners to pray and discern together. Interacting at provincial events such as annual conventions is always a highlight. All of these events create great listening opportunities for us as an Executive Board. We are accountable to you as we work together with you to resource ministry, and we continue to be grateful for your input.

There are very good reports covering ministry areas in our booklet, and we encourage your comments and questions on any of the information. We will highlight a few areas of focus for us as an Executive Board.

Financial Sustainability:

When we made the decision in 2012 to expand ministry, our churches asked good questions regarding longer term financial stability. Ministry opportunities continue to grow but at a faster rate than our finances can support at this time. Our reserves are primarily for managing risk factors within Legacy. Lower interest rates and a levelling off of donations also have financial impacts. Many of our churches and provinces are facing similar situations. As a result, we have cut expenses wherever possible

and put a much greater emphasis on financial sustainability. These decisions – regarding where and how much to reduce expenditures – are often challenging.

Legacy Fund Inc. work is continuing. Most of the work of deciding how to structure the fund and how it will work has been done. It took longer than we had hoped, but the transition to this new entity is going well. We are always mindful of the responsibility and the trust you have placed in us to manage the financial resources you provide to us.

Communication:

At our October 2015 AGM in Winnipeg, we presented the results of our consultant's report regarding the *MB Herald*. It was very encouraging to us to hear of the significance of the *MB Herald* in peoples' lives over many years. Our members expressed a strong desire to keep publishing the *MB Herald* – with a goal of expanding its readership. The Executive Board wants to continue hearing how God is at work as we grow in our faith journey. We will be reporting on CCMBC's communication. We welcome your comments and questions.

C2C-MB Mission-USMB Conversations:

It has been very encouraging to us to see how God has been moving us toward greater ministry collaboration with our provincial partners and agencies. We own MB Mission together with our sisters and brothers in the U.S., and the U.S. MB conference has requested assistance

with church planting. For the last year, we have been praying and discerning God's guidance for ministry in this area. The Executive Board has facilitated conversations with our provincial partners and breakouts at the 2015 AGM and 2016 provincial conventions. We have received strong affirmation for continuing collaborative ministry. Many of you have also encouraged us to "do this right" and to take the time required to do this well. As the next step in this process, we have included a report that will guide our conversation and decision making at Gathering 2016. We continue to ask for your guidance and prayers as we pursue this collaborative ministry opportunity.

We look forward to seeing you at Gathering 2016 in Toronto and discerning God's will together!

Harold Froese

Moderator, CCMBC
Executive Board

