

## **From *Internal Squabbling to Embracing the Messiness* The story of the Mennonite Mission Network**

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### **Introduction**

Ours is a journey in two parts, and, it is a journey that is still unfolding. We have a sense of the ultimate destination, as best we can understand it right now, but the various routes and modes of transport for getting there are still being mapped out and determined. We don't have many answers yet. But, we do have stories to tell and some experiences to recount. We also have more than enough anxieties, a reservoir of questions and ponderings. Most importantly, however, we have an imagined vision of the future that fills us with hope. As we journey toward that future, minding change, in the sense of being mindful or reflective of the kind of change that is strategic and necessary, while tending to the impact of the changes, suffuses our days with challenge.

Organizational change often comes shrouded in the cloak of financial challenges or political decisions. The two change processes I will reference in my presentation were the consequences of each of these situations. The early nineties were not a happy time for the Mennonite Board of Missions. It was a time of reductions. When the organization became embroiled in painful debates about the relative proportions that should be allocated to North American ministries in relation to that which should be spent on international missions, the intensity of those debates convinced many in leadership that an intervention was needed. The decision was made that a change process should be launched, the primary objective of which should be the integration of the Home and Overseas Ministries divisions. When I was invited to lead that change process, it became clear to the leadership with which I was privileged to work that the challenge was more than dissipating the tensions between seeming competing factions within the organization, but, of greater consequence, to deal with the more fundamental reality of declining support from, and/or, declining relevance with our constituency.

The story of that change process which came to be called "The Cana Venture" is more fully recounted in a booklet in our Mission Insight/Missio Dei series called: "Repositioning a Traditional Mission Agency." In brief, a change team comprised of board and staff from all levels led a change process that sought constituent feedback through three dozen focus groups and a survey questionnaire that was mailed to more than 3000 respondents. We received a plethora of feedback. Primary among the feedback in terms of transformational impact for the organization, however, was a call for greater direct participation in mission by congregations. This led to a deliberate organizational shift to a partnership modality for mission advancement, and, by consequence, the adjustment of our organizational architecture to create a Division for Partnership. In the wake of these shifts we developed a variety of partnership arrangements and began to host an annual Partnership Consultation. This transformation forced us to shift from being long on telling/selling to a new participatory mode. It moved us from a modality that was characterized by "doing on behalf of" our constituency to a modality of "doing with" those upon whose support we depended. In addition, one of the "words" of counsel was that we should "tend the spirituality" of the organization. It has been difficult to decipher what precisely that word of counsel meant. One clear word was that we ought to be careful about keeping evangelism central to our task. This led to our adoption of a posture encapsulated in the slogan we embraced, "The Whole Gospel for a Broken World," signaling a commitment to hold in creative tension, or, rather, to seek creative convergence between a sincere commitment to justice (including a compassionate response to human suffering and need) and an enthusiastic embrace of evangelism. We have learned, however, that another serendipitous aspect to this word of counsel was that in contrast to merely being promotional about our programs, as we implemented

the counsel we had received, we found ourselves increasingly engaged in discernment of what God was about in particular contexts and what the vision was of the various participants in the discernment process.

If declining finances occasioned these aforementioned changes, the next logical, and necessary, step on this journey toward alignment with our strategic future happened as a consequence of a political decision.

In the later nineties the Mennonite Church (MC) and General Conference Mennonite Church (GCMC) decided to merge after an extended courtship. In the arena of missions this meant merging three mission agencies: Mennonite Board of Missions of the MC, the Commission on Overseas Mission and the Commission of Home Mission of the GCMC. Initially, in the spirit of merger, the temptation was to cobble together the best arrangements and practices of each of the agencies into one new entity. Besides the recognition that this course would ensure a win-lose situation, some began to realize that the imposed mandate for change could become a critical opportunity for further transformation. The team that was appointed to lead the process styled themselves as a 'transformation project team' rather than as a 'merger team.' This is how the Transformation Team described its vision: ***"We envision a Mennonite Church USA and a Mennonite Church Canada mobilized in mission in the 21st century. We envision a church that understands itself as called and sent by God to proclaim and be a sign of the reign of God in the world. The mission transformation process gives a rare opportunity for the Mennonite Church to shape a new missional identity for participation in God's mission."*** \*\*

### **Description of the process**

In pursuit of that vision a group comprised of representatives of the three agency Boards, the Mission Transformation Steering Committee, appointed the Mission Transformation Project Team comprised of agency executives and senior leadership in January 1999. In the interest of creating as broad a network of Mennonite mission agencies the executives of Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) and Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions (VMBM) were both added to the team. In the year preceding the development of the "Vision, Strategy and Organization..." document, which was the culmination of this process, we described our journey as "a time that we have committed ourselves to 'Strategic Assessment and Study.'" We said, "This has been a time to attempt to open wide the shutters, to look at our world, our church and God's mission with new eyes. It has been a rich time. As we come to end of this period, we have considerable accomplishments to celebrate."

Having engaged Church Innovations to provide consulting resources for our work, our process commenced with a our agencies participating in an Agency Resource Assessment that helped us to better understand the tangible and intangible resources we individually and collectively bring to our future. In March 1999, four Mission Study Task Groups (made up of board members as well as mission agency staff which included EMM and VMBM) were commissioned. These Joint board/staff groups developed foundational study-reflection materials in four key areas.

1. The Future Context for Missions
2. Emerging Trends in N. American Mission Agencies-an external perspective
3. A Guiding Theology of Missions
4. Emerging trends in Mennonite Congregational and Conference/district level Missions.

The reports from these study groups, plus the results of a churchwide study, "Envisioning a New Mennonite Church" in which more than 487 study groups and about 330 congregations in Canada and the USA participated, along with the interview results from many of our global partners and field workers in which they shared their hopes, dreams and visions for the future, became the basis of a Consultation on Missional Identity held in March 2000. This consultation involved about 200 people from across the North American Mennonite church plus some overseas partners. The "Vision, Strategy and Organization of the Mission Agencies..." document had its origins in this consultation. The Mission Transformation Steering Committee and the Joint Mission Executive Committee did additional work on the document at a retreat at the end of April 2000. The Mission Transformation Project Team continued to edit the document into its present form in light of the feedback received from many constituents. In September 2000 the Mission Transformation Steering Committee and the Joint Mission Executive Committee approved in principle a proposal for our mission future which was described in the "Vision, Strategy and Organization..." document pending its final approval by the responsible church bodies.

Increasingly, in our process, a shared perspective began to emerge that our transformation journey was not primarily a journey to create new mission entities, though we did expect that would happen. We determined that the success of the journey would be demonstrated to be successful "only if it (led) us to a new dynamic and faithful future in mission that is responsive to God at work in our changing world and our changing church. This is the goal (we said) toward which we strive. Organizations, strategies and goals (and I quote) are our attempt to align ourselves with God's future."

The project team assumed that while July 2001, when we were to present our proposal to the delegate assembly was an important date, it was not the end or the ultimate goal of our process. In many ways, we said, our transformation work would begin in earnest after July 2001. "The decisions of July 2001 should be seen as forming a bridge to the future rather than representing the future itself." The road map we proposed indicated an implementing period extending through July 2011. This represented "a conscious attempt to begin to imagine a future that is 10 years and more beyond where we are today. It is the dream and vision of what might be that informs what we do now so that we can truly claim and be a part of God's preferred future for us."

"From this perspective," we said, "we feel it is important to plan for continued transformation even as we enter the new." Therefore, we identified some decisions that we expected delegates to make in July 2001 that we suggested should be reevaluated in the relatively short period of four years. These are decisions that we think are appropriate for us as we move into the new but should be carefully evaluated and modified as necessary, before they are adopted for a longer period of time.

### **Definition of the Vision**

How did we arrive at our vision? We began by reviewing our history in mission. Mission in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century involved congregations in praying and giving. Mission agencies were involved in sending, and "mission fields" were viewed as recipients (or objects) of mission. During much of the second half of the 20th century, agencies established partnerships with national churches overseas or with area conferences in North America. In this arrangement the role of congregations remained the same. As we move into the 21st century, the whole church (individuals, families and households, congregations, area conferences, racial-ethnic groups, national organizations and program boards) wants to be involved in responding more fully to God's mission in the world. We noted that this "calls for increased flexibility, networking, mutually accountable partnerships both in North America and

overseas, and 'round table' consultations that include all those who share a common mission focus.

We saw that "on the verge of a new century, the older paradigms are no longer sufficient to account for the calls from churches, clusters of congregations and international partners to be full participants in North American and overseas mission. The preferred model we opted for hints that the language of partnership is not so much focused on the subject (the partner, its shape and size), but more on the action (the shape, size and development of the relationship

In order to operationalize these partnerships we determined that the next step on the journey was to embrace the modality of networking. For us this meant intentional consultation with other organizations that work toward compatible goals. Networking for us was deemed to be more than coincidental. It was construed to be a fundamental understanding of how we work. We assumed the networking modality to be "so much a part of our systems that we would sense a vacuum in process if we did not do it. While networking itself does not include accountability or decision making, it does facilitate coordination, cooperation, information flow and the possibility of joint projects." This new vision was seen as "a new way to structure for mission in the 21st century. An organic mission system brings many new players into the discernment and decision-making processes, and decreases the autonomy of the central agency. One way to think of this is moving from 'pushing' programs developed by an agency staff, toward 'pulling' the gifts discerned from the congregations and linking them into a missional learning organization system."

In order to make these networked partnerships effective we imagined what we ended up calling "roundtables." In these roundtables we imagined the gathering of representatives from other structures in the mission system who would be present in these strategic work groups and would jointly engage in planning for the designated ministry function. Initially the work of the groups would be hosted and coordinated by the executive staff and board of the national mission center. After a transitional period, it is expected that strategic work groups for international mission would be hosted by regional conferences in the various continents where the ministry is located. These strategic work groups would invite global mission partners with mission engagement in that particular region to share in strategic planning and accountability to the vision for that region. Strategic work groups may be used by the national mission center to function in a consultative capacity for initiating local mission among a variety of partners. Some of these groups will be permanent, while others may be of limited duration.

#### **Where has the process taken us?**

Over the last 10 years, Mission Network and its predecessor agencies have developed nine congregation-based mission partnerships that engage North American congregations and international counterparts directly as partners in regional and international ministries. These partnerships are collaborative groups whose members unite to accomplish specific mission objectives and who, in covenant with each other, raise support, decide ministry directions and deploy mission personnel. The partnership model of ministry has proven to be an effective model of mission that is holistic and responsive to the Holy Spirit, differing cultures and changing contexts. The person-to-person contact between partners, the shared responsibility for shaping program and the mutual accountability have made these partnerships important sources of energy for missional change and understanding between cultures.

One implication of the shift toward a partnership modality is the need for transformation of our relationships with our international partners. As I intimated earlier, for much of our history, mission vision was shaped in the North and implemented elsewhere around the world. We in the West were the subjects of mission and the rest of the world were the objects, or recipients, of mission. This situation led to awkward paternalisms and often ugly dependencies. During the

final quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we began to be aware of a growing missional consciousness among the churches in the South who were interested in becoming themselves subjects of mission (according to Wilbert Shenk during the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some 50 new Mennonite mission agencies were founded, 30 of these were from the South). In pursuit of the needed transformation of global Mennonite mission relationships Mennonite Mission Network, and its predecessor agencies, along with a coalition of other North American mission agencies gave leadership to the search for a new global mission reality. In early August 2003, after a four year process, and with 56 agencies and communions from the global Anabaptist mission family participating, the Global Mission Fellowship was born with a vision to “enable the Church around the world to better fulfill our common calling in God’s mission.” The delegates who came from about 50 different countries affirmed that “every church, whether at a local, national or regional level, has the responsibility to develop and sustain in biblical ways its God-given gifts for doing and being in mission,” and went on to express their hopes for this new entity thus: “Anabaptist-related churches and mission groups desire consultation and cooperation in order to increase capacity, mutual accountability, collaboration, and stewardship of resources for cross-cultural mission.” To this end we committed together to the formation of the Global Mission Fellowship “where Anabaptist-related churches and mission groups can meet for encouragement, vision-sharing, networking and cooperating in mission.”

For the global Anabaptist-Mennonite family this is a historic step that will ultimately transform mission relationships quite radically even if for the moment we cannot fully anticipate, or even appreciate, where this momentous decision will lead us. Minimally, we understand, we have embarked on a new course where vision for mission will be expected to emerge from all parts of the globe and we can begin to anticipate authentic partnerships that will assume multidirectional, transhemispherical mission engagements.

### **The Challenge ahead**

The challenge before us is to understand and implement what it means to more fully become a networking organization. In our strategic planning process that we launched earlier this year, we have isolated as one of our strategic imperatives the need to understand and engage the journey from being a program based agency toward becoming a networking entity. With this in mind the team that is working on this imperative has identified the following questions:

- 1). **What does it mean to be a network/networking organization?**
  - a). We need to develop common language/understandings  
Will need to “unlearn” some definitions in order to “learn” a common language and understandings.
  - b). We need to determine the “limits” of being a network.
  - c). We need to discern and define what it means to give leadership to a networking organization.
  - d). We need to define the value that a networking organization adds to other organizations, individuals and partners.
  
- 2). **What does it take in terms of staffing, skills, systems, structures, and funding to become a network/networking organization?**
  - a). We need to define communication systems and needed skills
  - b). We need to develop a financial system and needed skills
  - c). We need to develop fund raising systems compatible with the Firstfruits Funding System of Mennonite Church USA.
  - d). We need to define specific staffing roles and develop an implementation plan.
  - e). We need to define specific training goals and develop an implementation plan.

- f). We need to define funding systems for a networking agency and develop an implementation plan.
- g). We need to define an organizational structure that facilitates a networking agency and develop an implementation plan.
- h) We need to assess whether our national and international partners will provide resources to sustain a networking agency infrastructure.

The process of discerning what it means to become a networking organization instead of a program agency (where we understood our particular role and our value to our constituents has led to the initiation of a serious conversation about what is our value added contribution to our partners. Here's how we are beginning to describe our value added contribution:

*As Mennonite Mission Network collaborates with partners at many levels, we seek to expand mission capacity and add value to new or existing ministries as well as to partners or entities with whom we are in relationship.*

*We bring to function in ministry:*

1. *Particular expertise in administration of global programs (International Ministries and Service, Learning and Discipleship)*
2. *Particular regional expertise/programmatic expertise*
3. *Particular expertise in staff oversight*
4. *Particular expertise in human resources assessment/assessing suitability for service*
5. *Particular expertise in partnership formation*
6. *Particular expertise in mobilizing resources around a vision*
7. *A comprehensive world view/familiarity with groups and programs*
8. *Availability of specialized services/enabling constituent partners to pursue new ministries without having to develop services*

*Value - These gifts add value by enhancing effectiveness in mission.*

*These gifts challenge/expand missional vision; we are able to help people think bigger.*

*We bring to relationships with partners:*

1. *Commitment to collaboration*
2. *Validation of collaboration with a trusted organization*
3. *Opportunity for broader networking*
4. *Formation of a learning community*
5. *Missional integrity*
6. *Anabaptist identity/association*
7. *Cohesive focus/program prioritization*
8. *Spirit of encouragement and empowerment*
9. *Mutual accountability*

*Value - These gifts deepen connections.*

*These gifts enable faithfulness to a holistic focus.*

*These gifts enable connection within the Anabaptist stream.*

*Our value added guarantee – we will be flexible enough to always hear your idea, then either connect you to an existing program, refer you to a partner's existing program, or join you in developing something new and setting it on a firm foundation! We add value to any of our partners by networking and innovation.*

In addition, we believe that if we are to become a networking entity there has to be certain criterion that will guide us in our discernment of which partnerships we will actually become involved in. Since it is not possible to anticipate that we can engage every possible partner around the world in an evaluation of their vision and values, the kind of commitments that they

are willing to make, we deemed it imperative to clarify our identity and biblical/missiological convictions and to sharply focus our identity. In this way potential partners can self-select whether they are willing to partner and engage an entity like ours which makes the kind of commitments and embraces the kinds of convictions that we do. To this end we have appointed a Strategic Imperative team that is working among other things at “developing core values and criteria (Biblical foundations, missiological reflection) that shape our ministry commitments.”

## **CONCLUSION**

In each of the change processes I have described we were given grace and foresight not to attempt mere internal structural changes but rather to engage our ecosphere in a carefully discerning attempt to understand what were the more fundamental shifts that were happening to which we needed to respond to in order to effect those changes that deepen our effectiveness.

In describing our preferred future we found ourselves constantly returning to a what we considered to be a perturbing but apt descriptor of what we were designing: “Messy.” In using this descriptor we were seeking to describe “a multilevel, multidirectional, multifocused reality of ministry.” We said, “This system does not easily fit within clear and clean representational, regional or ministerial organizations. It is also affirmed as the way the Holy Spirit is often experienced in the life of the church, a presence characterized by unpredictability, undefined sequence and surprises in priority.” The discipline that we will need on the road ahead is to continue to be open to the Spirit’s surprises.

**\*\* All quotes in this paper are from the Mission Transformation Process of the Mennonite Church USA.**