

Summary Report on the Missional Action Team

Franconia Mennonite Conference

October 18, 2005

Introduction

The following report describes and summarizes the work of the Missional Action Team (MAT) appointed by the Conference Board Executive Committee of the Franconia Mennonite Conference (FMC). The MAT was appointed early in 2005, received an orientation from Alan Roxburgh on February 15, and had its first full meeting on March 15. The work formally concluded on October 18, 2005. In all the team had 12 meetings, with the final meeting scheduled for December 13 for team evaluation and closure.

The report follows the stages in the MAT manual prepared by Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk. The MAT was designed as an experiment in “adaptive change” around an issue for which there is no readily identifiable solution. A challenge – resolution model of learning was followed as a means of addressing one critical issue confronting congregations and area conferences in missional transformation. Three other MC USA conferences (Lancaster, Virginia, and Illinois) also appointed a MAT and worked concurrently on a missional challenge unique to their conference. All four conferences participated in this process at the request of the Missional Action Team of the MC USA led by executive director, Jim Schrag.

Since about 1997 the FMC has publicly reclaimed the Great Commission of Jesus as its central mission. This represents no small step for the oldest conference in the Mennonite Church USA (1725), and arguably the conference currently impacted most broadly by urbanization. At this point congregations vary in how they attend to the mission of Jesus, but few churches if any resist this as a focus for their life as a church. Rather many are in a quest for what this actually means and wrestle with the practical challenges that being missional presents for their church.

The appointment of a MAT reflects a strong desire by FMC leaders to release congregations to more courageous and effective fulfillment of the Great Commission of Jesus. Those appointed to serve on the MAT were Helen Baker, Greg Bowman, Ryan Kolb, Jean Noel Ndjali, Erin Odgers, Dawn Ranck, David Stevens, and Joy Sutter. Jim Lapp was designated coach and leader for the team.

Stage One – The Challenge

Following some preparatory work around the nature of the task, the MAT began to analyze the challenge as given to them by FMC leaders.

What will Anabaptist/Mennonite congregations look like in a post-modern world, and how will FMC lead its congregations and leaders in the fulfillment of such a vision? What disciplines, behaviors, beliefs, and leadership patterns will inform and shape congregations with an Anabaptist perspective in northeast USA in the 21st century?

At least six meetings were devoted to analyzing this challenge, exploring why it is a challenge, and how this challenge intersects with the desire of congregations to be missional. MAT members engaged in a simple survey in their congregations around what members perceive to be the key themes in an Anabaptist congregation. Extended discussion occurred around the fears many Mennonites seem to have that mission will result in a loss of identity (corroborated by research in the broader denomination). A major process of the MAT involved analyzing a matrix listing five stages of development among Anabaptist/Mennonites from 1525 to the present and what this might say about identity and mission. Readings from John D. Roth, Brian McLaren, and others were given to the team for stimulation and elucidation of the challenge.

In an effort to make the challenge clear and manageable, the MAT reframed it as follows:

What are the marks of a vibrant and faithful Anabaptist congregation for the 21st century in the northeast USA?

Before long the challenge evolved to:

What are the questions the leaders of a vibrant and faithful Anabaptist congregation in the Franconia Mennonite Conference will attend to in their life together and mission in the world?

Considerable frustration occurred in the process of seeking to understand and state clearly the dimensions of this missional identity challenge for Mennonites. It became increasingly clear from reading and personal research that Mennonites generally know the key Anabaptist themes (although likely not always understand the depth of their meaning). What eluded the team was what makes “missional” seem threatening to many Mennonites beyond some immediate cultural adjustments it might entail. cursory conversation suggested the largest concern seems to arise from popular evangelicalism and the current phenomenon of mega-churches.

For a meeting or two the team seemed stuck. Through helpful guidance from the “coaches of the coach,” new insight about the challenge gradually began to dawn on the team. While Mennonites presumably could do better in defining their faith, the challenge for many Mennonites has more to do with risking the loss of identity for the sake of Christ’s mission than it does with knowing and professing to believe the right things. It was observed that to focus too extensively on our identity may be counter-missional, and result in exclusion and a defensive posture in the church. We began to wonder if a congregation can ever become truly missional if it is preoccupied with defining, examining and protecting its boundaries. Might it be that the real challenge for contemporary Mennonites is to risk missional actions and in so doing to find one’s true identity? We hypothesized that action may be more instructive to identity than another list of defining statements about a faithful Anabaptist church.

The Biblical metaphor of a tree (Psalm 1:3, Matthew 7:17-20, etc.) became useful in understanding this shift in perspective on the challenge. It is clear that without planting and nourishing healthy roots a tree will not develop. But it became equally clear that when all the attention goes to the roots to the neglect of the shoots, sprouts, and fruit, the

tree will not flourish long-term. If the tree is pruned too severely the roots will eventually wither and die.

Might it be FMC Mennonites have nurtured strong roots (historical consciousness and distinctive beliefs) and neglected the sprouts, branches and fruit of the tree? Depending on how the roots are treated, the tree might appear healthy but remain small and ornamental (like a Bonsai tree). Is there danger of simply becoming an “ornamental” people rather than a missional church? Excessive attention to roots may result in a loss of missional vitality and reduction of missional capacity. Could it be that our identity will actually be strengthened and deepened through attention to fruit-bearing at this stage in our life as a church? In this context reflect on the following pictures.



In pondering these realities we noted with interest that members and congregations in the Southern Hemisphere, or people of color congregations in our own nation, are experiencing far greater growth than the Anglo portion of the church in Europe and North America. In spite of their lack of deep historical connection with 16th century European forbears (roots), they often catch a fresh vision of what it means to be Anabaptist. What does all this mean for the challenge with which MAT wrestled around the intersection of identity and mission?

The result of this search and reflection resulted in one more statement of the missional challenge for FMC Mennonites concerned about mission and identity.

How can the congregations of the FMC become vibrant and faithful Anabaptist congregations in mission?

Through this statement the focus of the challenge shifted from what we believe to “how” we will, in fact, become missional congregations with an identity honed through engagement with the world rather than in the safety of rational discussion and study of our roots.

Two important meetings of the MAT with the Executive Committee of the FMC occurred during this stage of its work that contributed significant feedback and stimulus to the

process. The communication in these meetings clarified expectations of the MAT and resulted in continuing conversations that fostered mutual understanding and trust.

Stage Two – The Resolution

Increasingly it became clear to the MAT that the stages in this process seemed to overlap, with ideas for resolution arising throughout the analysis and reframing of the challenge. After the final statement of challenge was agreed to, the MAT addressed options for resolution in more depth. Through three sessions a preferred option with two parts became clear.

Part one of the resolution:

That in the next three years FMC leaders encourage, support and bless congregations in missional experiments focused on a specific aspect of fulfilling the Great Commission of Jesus in their context, with the goal that at least 25% of the congregations will participate. Guidelines for leading these experiments will be provided to participating congregations, along with coaches to support them in this process of carrying out the experiments.

This resolution works with an “action to reflection” model of learning and growth. More traditionally we work out of a study/reflection to action model. It is observed that frequently the study/reflection gets confused with the action itself resulting in little actual change. It is proposed that the quality and level of change required to become vibrant and faithful congregations in mission calls for risking some new behaviors that will allow us to experience our way into missional change rather than to think or reason our way into being missional.

The MAT debated several times the wisdom of calling the plan of action “experiments” lest they be discounted as “scientific” or less than serious steps in mission. However, the word remains since the team believes that “experiment” includes the notion of risk which seems essential to missional change in a church that values its history. One way for 21st century Mennonites to live in the spirit of our forbears is to experiment and risk new ways of being the church in mission similar to the 16th century Anabaptists. In addition, the approach of experiment releases congregations from expectations of success, since there is no guarantee of the outcome. Unless congregations are willing to risk new things the lost sheep may not be found (Luke 15:3-7) or people may miss the treasure of the Kingdom (Matthew 13:44-45). There will be no way to truly find our Christian and Anabaptist identity without risking the loss of it (Matthew 16:24-26). Thus “experiments” seems useful language that can free us for important steps of growth in mission.

Since the theme of Anabaptist identity was so central to the challenge presented to MAT by the FMC leaders, a viable resolution to the challenge could not ignore this concern. While it is true that much of what Mennonites believe is shared by Christians across denominations, there are also beliefs and values perceived to be distinct to the denomination. It is these themes believed to be distinct that tend to be source of most concern lest they be lost through assertive mission activity. To be sure it remains a critical question to identify which Anabaptist values or beliefs Mennonites view as

distinctive and wish to retain in their missional efforts. It is equally important to clarify which beliefs and practices Mennonites view as negotiable in their missional endeavors.

Part two of the resolution:

To provide a frame of reference for congregations in their missional experiments (part one), six statements were presented as the essential distinctives in Anabaptist faith and practice that can inform and shape the character of congregations in mission, and provide criteria for evaluating outcomes.

1. **Priority of Jesus and the New Testament.** *Reflection: In what ways does our teaching, nurture, and spiritual discernment affirm and practice a faith viewed through the lens of Jesus and the New Testament?*
2. **Believers' church practices** (such as believer's baptism, mutual care, discipline and accountability). *Reflection: To what extent and in what ways do these practices find expression in our church?*
3. **Primacy of the Kingdom of God.** *Reflection: How does our congregational vision affirm our primary citizenship in the Kingdom of God and seek to relate to and learn from all God's people?*
4. **Commitment to love and nonviolence.** *Reflection: When and how do we teach and practice sacrificial love and non-violence as the Christian pattern of relating interpersonally and in national/international conflicts?*
5. **Leadership and ministry gifts.** *Reflection: How are leaders equipping the members in the discernment and exercise of their gifts in the life of the church and in mission in the world?*
6. **Holistic mission.** *Reflection: In what ways does our witness embrace the whole mission of God for the world, word and deed, evangelism and healing for the brokenness and injustices of the world?*

Again at this stage there was communication between the MAT coach and members of the Executive Committee that confirmed general support for the direction of the challenge as reframed and the proposed resolution of the challenge.

Stage Three – The Action

Three sessions were given to the final stage of work in clarifying the action needed to translate the challenge and resolution into a plan of action. In particular some of the anticipated steps in the implementation of the two-part resolution described above were stated as follows:

1. A name is needed for this missional effort. Two suggestions are offered: "Fanning the Flame: Anabaptist Congregations Risking for the Great Commission." The suggested name seeks to acknowledge that God is already at work among us, and many congregations truly desire to be missional. The experiments would have the effect of fanning the sparks of God rather than creating a fire.
A second suggestion plays off the tree metaphor: "Roots to Shoots" or "Roots to Fruit" which suggests we need both roots and shoots, but the movement is to toward the shoots or fruit and not unduly focused on the roots. Faithful and

vibrant congregations see life emerge out of the roots resulting in fruit. Perhaps the imagery of Isaiah 11:1 could be used a scriptural motif.

2. Communication will be urgent in moving this effort forward.
 - a. Communication with the Conference Board Executive Committee. (Plans are underway for the scheduled October 18 meeting.)
 - b. Communication with pastors and congregational leaders to inform and invite their participation. (This could happen in pastors' breakfasts, cluster meetings, conference Assembly, *Intersections*, with youth ministers, at Mennonite schools, etc.)
 - c. Communication with key lay leaders (mission, youth, elders, congregational chairs, etc.)Some one will need to be assigned responsibility to develop a communication plan and materials necessary for this process.
3. Development of a logo – Communication will be greatly enhanced with a graphic that readily identifies activities related to this theme. For the “fanning the flame” imager it was suggested a “bellows,” or some representation of the Holy Spirit blowing to create a glowing, transforming fire. For the “roots to shoots” some elements of a tree could be used for a logo.
4. Some process will be needed for how congregations discern their involvement and the nature of the experiment they wish to undertake. In determining the nature of the experiment, it was suggested congregations might find it helpful to ask, “Where is the Holy Spirit already at work in our congregation and our mission in the world (so we can build on this)? Or “What are we willing to risk to really find out where the Holy Spirit is leading us in our connections with the world around us?” (For discernment of the experiment a congregation might wish to initiate Plains congregation has worked with a process that other congregations might wish to adapt to their setting.)
5. Equipping will be needed for congregational leaders to guide the processes of discernment around participation and the type of experiment to undertake.
6. Coaches will be needed to walk with congregational leaders as a resource as they participate in these experiments. (What will the role of conference ministers be in this process?)
7. A “coach for the coaches” to empower and resource the local coaches in these experiments will be necessary.
8. Resources or ideas for congregations to celebrate small steps along the way in their experiments, and to assist them in reflecting and learning from the process will need to be provided.
9. Guidance will be needed on how to use the “Anabaptist distinctives” in working at the experiments so the distinctives provide positive energy and do not constrict the experiments.
10. Prayer support and resources for spiritual growth through the experiments will be very important.

Some anticipated objections to the implementation of these plans were also identified.

- *These experiments will precipitate conflict.* Conflict will inevitably arise in working with missional experiments. Some training may be needed in how to

work with conflict as a normal and natural phenomenon. If there is no conflict, it is likely that little is being risked.

- *The missional experiments are too vague and undefined.* Specificity will come as congregations participate in discerning and owning their next steps in mission. It is not a new program being launched, but an invitation to churches to take concrete steps toward being missional as they say they wish to be.
- *We might lose our Anabaptist identity in this process.* Yes, this is possible, but there is an equal risk in not trying new missional activities. Ultimately we believe Anabaptist roots will be strengthened and deepened through these experiments.
- *Congregations may not be interested.* We think there is much evidence that many, if not most, FMC congregations do wish to be missional and need guidance on how to take a step that moves them on in a dynamic way.
- *This will overwhelm staff resources.* It will call for seeing this venture as part of what FMC is already committed to do. It is a way of “equipping leaders to empower others to embrace God’s mission,” is directly connected to the FMC value of being missional, and connects to the core process on “identity formation.” Instead of adding work, it can focus staff energy. It also assumes that staff can utilize the gifts of early participants as resources with later participants so that it does not all depend on staff for its success.
- *It is just another program for already busy churches.* Instead of launching a new program, these experiments are an attempt to change the culture of a congregation toward mission. What is being envisioned is central to what a missional church is all about. The goal is to support congregations in clarifying vision and in being/doing what God intends, not add to their busyness. If congregations are already functioning in missional ways, they are fully free to not participate in these three-year experiments.
- *FMC may not give this the attention it needs.* FMC leaders have already committed to implementing the plan of action from the MAT. It is important that it be owned by FMC. There is latitude in the ideas being suggested to fully integrate these missional experiments into the current priorities of the FMC.
- *What if the experiments fail?* That is a possibility. But without trying we will not know if a given experiment is a good idea. Congregations will determine the degree of risk with which they wish to experiment, based on various factors, including, the level of their desire for missional impact beyond themselves. God “experimented” with the incarnation, the crucifixion, and in entrusting the church with the Gospel message. Was God wise in these “experiments?” Did God risk too much for us? God’s people have always been experimenters. Often what humanly appears to be a foolish idea turns out to be the plan and will of God. We believe that can happen again in our congregations.

At the October meeting with the Executive Committee the responsibility for these perspectives and this plan of action will be entrusted to these formal leaders of the FMC. It is anticipated that some persons will be charged with responsibility to follow through on the plans. As noted above the MAT plan of action fits squarely into the vision of the FMC for itself, and can readily be integrated into its identified values and core processes.

Conclusion

One final meeting will yet occur on December 13, 2005, for the MAT to debrief on their work together over these past ten months, and to evaluate the process in which they have been engaged. This evaluation will be appended to this report.

Several preliminary general observations are here noted as part of this report.

1. Adaptive change is difficult work. While adaptive change need not be limited to a select few people, not everyone will find the patience for a process that does not lead to more immediate technical resolution.
2. The composition of the current MAT would have benefited from a few more persons directly linked to the formal structures of the conference.
3. The role of the MAT coach evolved from a facilitating role to a more overt leadership role. Earlier clarification of this role would have been helpful.
4. The MAT workbook offered good structure for the work but seemed lacking in conceptual material and at times felt limiting by the way it was formatted.
5. The coaches available to the coach of the MAT were extremely helpful and invaluable to the outcome of the process.

To God be the glory!

James M. Lapp, Coach

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