

# BEING A VIBRANT CHURCH

## LEARNINGS FROM OUR SMALL, RURAL CONGREGATIONS

### A Discussion Guide by The Vibrant Rural Churches Project

#### Introduction

The Vibrant Rural Churches Project (VRCP) was introduced at the February 2003 Assembly of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan (MC Sask). Musicians, storytellers, artists and actors helped those in attendance to celebrate hope in a parched land. From April to June of 2003, we (Eric Olfert and Naomi Unger) visited the ten smallest rural congregations in MC Sask. Our first objectives were to identify and to lift up what small rural congregations are currently doing in order to maintain life and vitality in the face of rural community decline. Secondly, VRCP aimed to provide a process whereby those congregations could boldly expand their dreams to proceed with future life-giving possibilities.

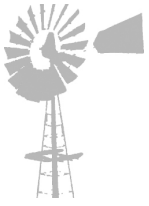
The congregations described their activities, challenges and dreams of bringing God's good news to their world. They told stories about connecting to their communities, aiming for family-friendly worship services, overcoming stereotypes and involving youth. They noted inter-church activities, women using their leadership gifts, music ministries, missions and service projects, and much more.

This discussion guide consists of four sessions. The first session contains the congregational self-reflection questions which we used for our listening task. The remaining three sessions are based on themes we selected from what we heard during our visits. We offer them as a means for your congregation to listen to and to learn from those ten congregations, whether you are large and small, rural or urban.

Our prayer is that your congregation will take ownership of this discussion series so that it is useful for you. May it help you to reflect upon how you are being a vibrant church and lead you forward with the Holy Spirit's presence and power into the future.

#### About the Authors

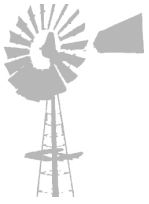
Eric Olfert, Saskatoon, is on the staff of Mennonite Church Canada Witness as Missional Formation and Partnership Facilitator in Saskatchewan. Naomi Unger, Rabbit Lake, is on the lay pastoral team of the Hoffnungsfelder Mennonite Churches and a member of the Christian Formation Council of Mennonite Church Canada. Both have Mennonite Central Committee experience in Africa, and significant connections to small rural congregations in Saskatchewan.



## Use of the Discussion and Study Guide

- Allow approximately one hour for each session. Surround each session with the singing of hymns related to the nature and life of the church or congregational favorites. Together identify why the selected songs are meaningful to your group. This sets the stage for further sharing about your congregation's life.
- Utilize settings that encourage participation, such as adult Sunday School classes, small groups or evening gatherings. If your group is large, break into subgroups of 6-9 people for the discussion times. Circle seating helps everyone to hear and see all the others.
- Each group should have its own facilitator. His or her task is to assist the group to move through the given questions, to draw in quieter people and to encourage frequent contributors to hold additional comments until later. Facilitators should read the report booklet entitled "VRCP Phase I Report for General Distribution" prior to the sessions, for background material and resources.
- Copies of the "VRCP Phase I Report for General Distribution" should be made available for the session participants to read. The report has been sent to all MC Sask Churches and is available on the MC Sask web site at [www.mcsask.ca](http://www.mcsask.ca).
- Each group should have its own recorder to take notes on the discussions as they happen. For Lesson One, it is best to write the comments on large newsprint sheets located for all to see.
- Allow time after Session Four for the whole group to evaluate the entire series. Talk about what people learned and how they want the congregation to move forward.
- We invite you to share your feedback with us, as well as the material that was recorded during the sessions. We plan to explore ways of sharing your reflections and stories with other MC Sask churches. Our objective is to promote relationships and communications between and among urban and rural churches, encouraging each to live and grow as vibrant centers of faith within their communities.
- For assistance, further information or for sending your feedback, contact:  
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## SESSION I : EXAMINING OURSELVES

Thinking about who we are and what is working for us!

### Scripture Texts

Psalm 135  
Galatians 5:22-26  
Ephesians 3:14-21

### Background

This session attempts to provide your group with the same opportunity for congregational self-examination through five focus questions that was experienced by the ten congregations who participated in the Vibrant Rural Churches Project. We suggest to you, as we suggested to them, that this not be a time of grieving or detailing frustrations, but a time of looking beyond difficulties to present successes and future potential. The VRCP congregations we visited found it inspiring and insightful to name how God was active in their church. Together, they began with an assessment of what was working. Identifying gifts and strengths is a way of beginning to lay a foundation upon which the future of a congregation will be built.

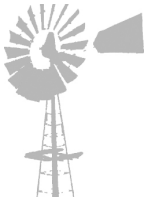
This session worked well as a whole group. We encouraged the selection of hymns or songs that spoke of courage and of finding strength and inspiration to go on in hard times. A person recorded responses in a way that was visible to everyone in the group, such as with markers on newsprint sheets. This encouraged greater involvement and made it easy for further comments to be added on any question as the discussion proceeded. Again, the objective for you is to name, record and understand what gives your congregation hope, as you move with God into the future.

### Discussion Questions

1. Think of your congregation's various programs and projects. Which are the most fun, satisfying and energizing?
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. Name any uneasy feelings that make you think there is trouble in your congregation's future.
5. If a miracle occurred tonight, and you woke up tomorrow and found a vibrant rural church serving your community, what would it be or look like?

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?



## SESSION 2 : BEING WELCOMING

Expanding our understanding and practice of hospitality!

### Scripture Texts

Matthew 25: 31-46  
Hebrews 13:1-2

Romans 12:13 and 15:7  
1 Peter 4:7-11

1 Timothy 3:2  
3 John 5-8

### Background/VRCP Findings

Michelle Hershberger, in *A Christian View of Hospitality*, writes that “true hospitality is more than food and lodging or even a strong desire to be welcoming. It is seeing the stranger through the eyes of Jesus” (p.31).

Congregations work at extending an open Christlike welcome to all, both to their adherents, old and new, and to unchurched visitors. Warm greetings and relaxed conversation help guests to feel comfortable before and after church services. Hosts strive to be genuine, rather than fawning over guests or “attacking” them because they want new members so badly. The feeling of “extended family” that characterizes many small churches can be attractive to strangers. Visitors observe the involvement of many people in the church and their obvious joy in serving the Lord together. Congregations demonstrate hospitality by their nonjudgmental care for each other in difficult times, through prayers, visits, and practical help. These actions help the congregation feel like ‘home’.

Being welcoming to people outside of the church building happens in various ways. Pastors offer spiritual care to local people as “community chaplains.” Congregational members who are active in their local communities, as volunteers and in the workforce, find opportunities to show the love of Jesus. Prayers and deeds of caring are offered to people in need in the community.

Congregations recognize that more can be done to welcome strangers to Christ and his church.

- A strong sense of family can be excluding. People who are not part of the biological cluster may feel as if they are outsiders for a long time. Inclusive practices need to be established.
- The “Mennonite” label may put off some people from coming and from staying. There are long held stereotypes of Mennonites, such as religious superiority or of being closed to outsiders.
- Activities that appeal to contemporary families, to children and to youth may be limited or lacking, but even small efforts are attractive to outsiders, such as DVBS and Christmas programs.
- Acronyms and “insider language” can be as unwelcoming as a foreign language.
- Being involved in the local community as friends and neighbours, rather than spectators, is necessary to see God at work and to join in.

### Illustrative Stories

Mayfair Hoffnungsfelder Mennonite Church is the only Protestant church within a twenty mile radius. In the 1950’s, a Sunday School teacher realized that her students did not understand their German lessons. She switched to English and convinced the leaders that all church services and meetings should be in English. This freed the congregation to welcome their non-German speaking neighbours to church. In the same spirit, she welcomed non-Mennonite in-laws into her family. Today, that congregation is made up of a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds and continues to be a warm and inclusive group.



Fiske Mennonite Church is the last church remaining in that community. Some years ago a Catholic woman from the community was brave enough to attend a service and found a welcome to her liking. By her presence it has become thinkable for a growing number of other community people from a variety of denominational backgrounds to make the Mennonite Church their faith home. News and events of the Fiske church are printed in the Rosetown paper. Some people now drive from Rosetown to Fiske, instead of the other direction! The congregation does not use abbreviations which Mennonites take for granted, such as MCC or RJC. Explaining the Bible comes first, then explaining Mennonite beliefs, history and institutions.

Some congregations offer youth group or kids' club on weekday evenings to both church and community children, and are intentional about child-friendly worship services. In Fiske, there is always a children's time, a task given to those who are gifted in relating to children. In Mayfair, an older woman is always ready with a children's story, just in case children are present. And another woman has a multi-age children's Sunday School lesson prepared, for the same reason.

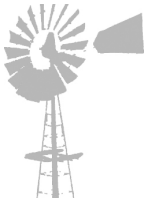
### **Discussion Questions**

1. If Jesus came to your congregation in disguise for a visit, would he feel safe and at home? Why or why not?
2. Describe your congregation's hospitality, noting your facilities, worship styles and language, as well as greetings, helpfulness to and acceptance of strangers. Identify both inclusive and exclusive behaviours and attitudes. For example, are you friendly to others beyond your families and familiar faces?
3. What stereotypes or "old baggage" are there in your community about Mennonites? What can be done to change stereotypes that make your church seem uninviting? If the stereotypes no longer exist, how were they overcome?
4. Describe the impact of having traditional non-Mennonites on your congregation? How are you blessed by their presence?
5. How does the Matthew 25 passage speak about being welcoming as a whole congregation, as well as individuals and families? Which of the six actions are the easiest? Which are the least comfortable?

The following books are recommended for further congregational study:

Hershberger, Michelle. A Christian View of Hospitality, Expecting Surprises. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1999.

Bernhard, Fred and Steve Clapp. Widening the Welcome of your Church, Biblical Hospitality and the Vital Congregation. Elgin: The Andrew Centre, 1996.



## **SESSION 3: BECOMING INTERGENERATIONAL**

Paying attention to intergenerational dynamics in our churches!

### **Scripture Texts**

Deuteronomy 4:9-10  
Luke 2:41-52

Acts 2:17-18  
2 Timothy 1:3-7

Luke 18: 15-17

### **Background/VRCP Findings**

Many of the small rural churches 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, the informality of worship, fellowship and decision-making felt like functional family dynamics. This sense of healthy family can be empowering for all ages.

An intergenerational environment creates a dynamic and powerful setting for growth, understanding, positive self-esteem and a sense of belonging to happen. Adults and elderly learn how to talk to children and youth, and vice versa. Children, youth, young adults and all the rest, right through to the elderly are accepted, known, loved, encouraged and valued. There is little age-group stratification, and a strong sense of solidarity and common commitment.

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

We are told that 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 the tomorrow we face, then it seems that a church where intergenerational dynamics empower and encourage, and that functions like a healthy, welcoming family is what can provide the experiences that create and foster loyalty.

### **Illustrative Stories**

Superb Mennonite Church has a reputation for good singing, as do many Mennonite churches. Musically gifted pastors have nurtured this talent and ministry. A ‘Superb Men’s Group’ was followed by ‘Simply Superb’, which has now produced a number of musical dramas including ‘Wheat Belt Gospel’, a variety of parables and ‘Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.’ As congregational numbers have declined, those participating in these productions represent an increasingly broad age group. The members who are drawn into this energizing and meaningful experience grow in their abilities and faith.

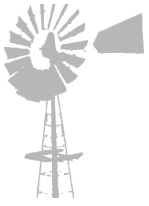


In the Glenbush Hoffnungsfelder Mennonite Church willing youth have been involved in participating in the Sunday School opening, worship leading, playing piano for services and co-leading the youth group. During the community's interdenominational DVBS, high schoolers work as song leaders, actors, classroom aides and recess supervisors. In Rabbit Lake, the Hoffnungsfelder congregation has a history of drawing their whole flock into 'being' church. They have created a supportive environment where learners are encouraged to grow. In both congregations, the contributions of all, including children with learning disabilities, in music and taking the offering, are valued. Many young people who were nurtured in these congregation are now using their abilities to serve where ever they are.

Horse Lake Mennonite Church is among the smallest of the churches we visited, but its twenty members and their families are very active. The congregation has a choir, weekly Bible studies, monthly services in the Duck Lake Nursing Home, and seasonal events throughout the year. When asked how they manage all this, they said, "Everyone in the congregation is willing to get involved when asked." When asked "why?" they responded, "We learn by doing. We encourage everyone to try. By letting people do things, like reading Scripture and praying, they (and we) discover new and hidden abilities. We don't just use those who've already shown their abilities. All ages get along with each other. The older ones stay young at heart, and the younger ones mature more quickly."

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Is 'extended family' a good way of describing how your church 'feels'? Give reasons for your answer.
2. During a congregational survey done by the MC Sask Ministries Commission a few years ago, many churches indicated that the 'under forties' and the 'over forties' looked at church in very different ways. In your congregation, what do these age groups say about the meaning of the church?
3. Is the 'generation gap' a factor in the difficulties your congregation has in making decisions and moving forward? If so, what are you doing, or could you do, to close that gap?
4. Identify ways in which your congregation's life is organized by age groups?
5. What programs and functions within your church, either deliberately or as a byproduct, provide opportunities for intergenerational interaction?
6. Evaluate how your congregation works at identifying gifts, encouraging people to develop their abilities and mentoring their development? Listen to each other's stories of how this was or wasn't done.
7. How could your congregation become more nurturing, more helpful to the development of the gifts of your members?
8. Someone has suggested that a healthy community is one that is "welcoming at the edge," that is, always seeking new people to bring their unique strengths into the group, and then identifying and nurturing those strengths. Is this a good model for the church? What would your congregation look like if we took this description seriously?



## **SESSION 4: WORKING INTER-DENOMINATIONALLY**

Learning to work together with churches of other denominations  
in our communities!

### **Scripture Texts**

I Corinthians 12:4-31  
Ephesians 4:1-16

### **Background/VRCP Findings**

Mennonite Churches have a history, and certainly a reputation, for working on their own and for seeking to be 'deliberately different.' Anabaptists were neither Catholic nor Protestant, and in that niche, we have 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 the strongest, Mennonite churches are finding new life and energy in working closely together with churches of other denominations. The Mennonite history of isolation from (and suspicion of) other denominations has deep roots, but it is clearly no longer 'useful' in today's society. Finding life through ecumenical cooperation has happened as congregations responded to disasters together, including offering 'Mennonite' housing to a pastor of another denomination when a manse burned. Other examples are community projects and worship events, sharing pastors, welcoming those of other faiths to participate fully without forcing them to become Mennonite and dreaming together of 'churches without signs.'

The dynamic in many shrinking communities is the 'survival of the fittest.' The last church standing tends to get the most dedicated Christians left from the other denominations, but many people just drift away from church entirely. One senses that the Mennonite reputation for deliberate separateness makes it extra hard for a Mennonite 'last church standing' to attract members of the closed churches of other denominations.

Some congregations are trying to imagine what a multi-denominational church in their community would look like. This leads to many further questions, such as, "Will we need to close our Mennonite church buildings in order to participate in planting a multi-denominational church?"

### **Illustrative Stories**

Eyebrow, Saskatchewan has three churches: a fairly large United Church which represents the gathering together of a number of closed rural churches, a Free Methodist Church of similar size and the smaller Eyebrow Mennonite Church. The Mennonites have good relations with both of the other churches. They frequently find themselves acting as a 'bridge' with whom the other two churches can cooperate for the good of the community.



Emmaus Mennonite Church in Wymark has tried to cooperate with its two closest neighbor churches, both with Mennonite connections. Emmaus finds that inter-Mennonite relations with close neighbors are cautious and often difficult. As an example, in doing joint youth programs and events it is hard to avoid suspicions of 'sheep stealing' intentions. Relationships to the more distant Swift Current Ministerial which includes all denominations are often easier.

The Bethany Mennonite Church at Watrous finds itself in a setting where there are 7 or 8 churches in a town of 2000 people. When the congregation began, they were seen as German immigrants; that uniqueness has not kept them from being accepted and involved in their community today. The congregation, made up of seniors, called a retired United Church pastor to serve them and her leadership has blessed their worship, fellowship and witness.

Rabbit Lake Hoffnungsfelder Mennonite Church has been the last church functioning in its community for some years, but has found it difficult to attract new members from other denominational backgrounds. The Mennonite pastors have an unofficial but important community pastoral role, offering personal support, conducting funerals, weddings and seasonal worship services for all denominations and praying at community events. This public ministry is deeply appreciated, but has failed to break down the barriers that keep people of other denominational backgrounds from coming to the Mennonite Church.

In Herschel the United Church meets only once a month. When that happened, the Mennonite Church was deliberate about inviting those members to their worship services. As well, the Mennonite congregation initiated a 'recycling-through-quilting' project that continues to be a meaningful interdenominational, community activity, with half the blankets for Mennonite Central Committee and half for United Church projects.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How important is it to your congregation and community that churches of all denominations relate to each other and work together?
2. Give examples of interdenominational cooperation in our setting.
3. What things *should* we be doing together with the other churches in our community? Imagine what more could be done and how you'd go about reaching that goal.
4. Is it possible to retain our distinctive Mennonite/Anabaptist identity while cooperating more fully with other denominations? Is it important for us to do so? Why or why not?
5. Consider what the benefits and blessings of multi-denominational churches in your setting would be.
6. What would be the difficulties/dangers/costs of multi-denominational churches?
7. Are we ready to give small rural churches permission to explore these and related questions and possibilities? To support them? To think of church in new ways?