

ReFresh ReFocus ReNew

Prepared by the MC Sask Reference Group

January 28, 2018

Background

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” (Frederick Buechner) What is MC Saskatchewan’s deep gladness? What is the world’s deep hunger?

As seasons change and one generation makes space for another, the deep hunger of the world also changes. What is the world’s deep hunger today? What we know is this: We are living in what is believed to be the loneliest time in history; mental health issues are on the rise, and the yearning for inner rest is profound. The world’s deep hunger can be summarized as a longing for meaning, purpose and belonging. This longing is not just in the world “out there,” it is also a longing in our pews!

Alongside the world’s deep longing, we are observing a fresh openness to wonder and mystery. The world’s longing is a profound and even urgent missional moment for the church: Meaning, purpose and belonging have been at the center of the church’s deep gladness. We believe in a God to whom we belong and in whom we also belong to one another! This gives meaning and purpose to our lives. What would it look like for Mennonite Church Saskatchewan to claim (or re-claim) its sense of meaning, purpose and belonging? What would it look like for each congregation in MC Sask to do so? How would this reclaiming define our congregations and drive our relationships with our neighbours near and far? What would happen when our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger would meet?

As MC Sask we have been on a renewal journey entitled ReFresh, ReFocus and ReNew for one year now. All renewal journeys are first and foremost spiritual journeys; they are a time of deepening and coming close to God. This has also been true for us: Over this year we have listened for the place to which God is calling us. We have sought to understand both the world’s longing and our deep gladness. The following report shares where we have been and where the journey may take us in the years to come.

Where we have been

The MC Sask ReFresh, ReFocus and ReNew journey began in early 2017 with a survey. The closing summary of the survey results stated the following: *In summary, MC Sask is more about community, relationships and belonging than about structure. As congregations, we very much want to follow Jesus’ command to love each other and our neighbours. We are clear that this requires interaction, communication, worshiping together, Bible study, spiritual growth, and being present to God and each other. We want to be disciples of Jesus in a post-Christendom context, living out the messages and examples of Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. It is important to us to share and practice Anabaptist faith traditions and to be part of a bigger, wider Anabaptist movement. As congregations, we want to do what Jesus called us to do: Feed the hungry, visit the sick, welcome the stranger, practice peace and justice – all of this, jointly with other Mennonites. We want to spread the love of God, to be a blessing and a reminder of God’s love for the local communities and the whole world. One person put it this way: we want “to form communities where people live according to these core values: Jesus is centre of our faith, community is centre of our lives, and reconciliation is centre of our work.”*

We followed the survey with a gathering in April 2017. During that event we considered the role of the church in the context of the world's deep longing in the midst of the 21st Century dynamics. We explored the discipline of prayer, the rhythms of renewal and ten indicators of thriving congregations for the time we are living in. Many found this event worshipful and inspiring. Each person was sent away with an invitation to pray and to listen for how God was calling MC Sask. When we gathered again in September 2018, we wrestled and discerned together. We concluded that MC Sask and its people are being called to pursue three essential themes:

Deepening our walk with Christ, with each other and with our neighbours...

- Our walk with Christ: We are being called to increase our openness to encounters with God's presence in our lives, both individually and collectively.
 - This focus reflects our deep gladness as a church; it also speaks directly into the world's deep longing – the desire for meaning, purpose and belonging is often expressed as a longing for a center, for inner quiet, for living in a world with meaning, where we are not alone and where there is “something” out there that is bigger than us.
- Our walk with each other: We are being called to reground ourselves in our core Anabaptist commitments of faith.
 - In the Bible, identity and calling always go hand in hand. At the burning bush, Moses learns who is called to be and what he is called to do. The same is true for Jesus in the desert. We, too, want to open ourselves to burning bush moments, to being (re)awakened to who we are called to be and what we are called to do as an Anabaptist-Mennonite people of faith.
- Our walk with our neighbours: We are being called to turn our faces toward the world, working for wholeness (shalom), joy and reconciliation.
 - While our whole journey is missional in nature, we want to take time to focus our energies on how we are being called “to love our neighbours as ourselves.” What does this look like practically? To what new (or old) thing is God calling us?

Where we are going

The Reference Group took the outcomes of the collective discernment in September and wrestled further, asking, “What does it mean to live into the three themes we have discerned?” In response to this question, we are proposing the following:

- Collectively, we will engage with one theme per year, in the order identified above.
- A task group will be selected to help guide each year's focus.
- We will extend an invitation to each person, leader, pastor, congregation, church committee, denominational committee and MC Sask, inviting all to participate in this next phase of the renewal journey.
- We will commit ourselves to practices that reflect each year's focus. MC Sask will provide a package with ideas, information, reminders and resources to support these practices.
- With the help of the task group, we will share our experiences with one another, encouraging each other on our journeys.

What we will do (Year One)

Each person, committee and congregation is invited to choose from the ideas in the two “buckets” below.

- The left bucket/column are ideas that require less energy, therefore one can do more of these. Feel free to choose up to two items from this list.
- The right bucket/column are ideas that have impact but require greater energy, therefore one can do fewer of these. Choose only one item from this list.

After six months, you can evaluate the ideas you pursued, as so led by the Spirit. You may choose to continue an idea, add a new idea or exchange an idea you have tried with another one. When choosing from among the items in these buckets, consider the question: If we want to profoundly lean into the intersection between our deep gladness in God and the world’s deep longing for meaning, purpose and belonging, what would we do?

Bucket 1: Limited energy	Bucket 2: Greater energy
Congregation: Allow for silence and/or contemplative prayer as part of the worship service.	Region: Engage in a regional event for worship and prayer.
Committees: Begin each meeting with several minutes of silence and/or contemplative prayer.	Congregation: Plan a congregational retreat to learn about spiritual disciplines.
Committees: Begin each meeting by inviting each person to share for a minute about how they are doing; follow each person’s sharing by praying for that person.	Congregation: On the fourth or fifth Sunday of the month, plan a differently-styled worship service that help your congregation to meet God in a new way.
Committees: Commit 5 minutes of every meeting (midway or toward the end) to listening for how God is calling your committee at this time.	Congregation: Invite one person per Sunday to share in worship about their encounter with the mystery of God.
Church Councils: Devote one meeting / year focused on deepening faith / reading Scripture with new eyes.	Committees: Fast from one activity, replacing the energy you would normally devote to this activity with prayer and/or spiritual reading.
Personal: Commit 5 – 20 minutes per day to prayer (spoken prayer or contemplative prayer).	Congregation: Teach practices of prayer via a book study.
Personal: Commit 5 – 20 minutes per day to walking in a spirit of prayer.	MC Sask: Collect and develop prayer and worship resources that allow people to hear the Scriptures in new ways.
Personal: Ask a person to be your “spiritual friend,” inviting them to ask you about your faith journey.	MC Sask: Send out prayer requests for each congregation (once or twice / month) so we can pray for each other.
Personal: Read one or more book on the theology and practices of prayer.	Committees: Review your existing work. Ask how it is deepening people’s belonging to God and how it is addressing the world’s deep longing for meaning, purpose and belonging.

Let us talk, dream, discern, listen and pray together! We look forward to taking this journey with you!