

Some Comments on the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches Revised, January 30, 2017

John H. Redekop Ph.D.

First of all I wish to thank the many people who have contributed to the email forum about the CCMBC situation. In particular I thank Arthur Block and Bruce Guenther for their clear and very helpful analyses. On December 6, 2016 I contributed a brief comment and stated that I intended to add some personal observations. I was encouraged to submit my views. This is my submission.

There is merit in the old adage that in order to resolve a problem we need first to identify the causes of the problem. It is also the case that one has to learn what is true before one can do what is right. Perhaps my comments will in a small way be helpful. They grow out of my virtually continuous involvement in CCMBC boards, commissions, task forces or leadership from 1969 until the early 1990s, including two terms as national conference moderator, and as a columnist in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* from 1964 until 2003. They are also rooted in my love for the church and particularly the MB segment thereof.

At this point some background information and a personal caveat may be in order. Newly interested in Anabaptism and its tenets, following a year of study and travel in Europe, I attended some national MB conventions in Canada in the 1950s. I even managed to attend a few between 1960 and 1968 while we were living in the US. After my return to Canada in 1968 I probably missed not more than one or two national conventions between 1969 and 2004. Then the situation changed. In 2004 the national convention was held in a hotel in Toronto. The major agenda item dealt with whether we should discard our traditional board system of governance and approve a totally different structure administered by an Executive Director, a CEO. A goodly number of us, although a minority, opposed such a drastic shift. As a delegate I spoke to the proposed change, spelling out why I considered it to be both theologically unsound and operationally unwise. After I had spoken a young delegate stated that by challenging a proposal supported by the Conference moderator and the entire Executive Board, I was “slapping God in the face”. The moderator and the entire Board, who were seated on the platform, let that statement stand. I then concluded that if that was how floor debate among delegates was to be treated, then I need not attend. I have not attended a Canadian MB convention since 2004 although I do follow reports closely.

The current challenges facing the CCMBC are many-faceted: financial, organizational, ecclesiological, sociological, operational and even theological (neo-Calvinist, Prosperity Gospel, Zionism, etc.). While, like the other contributors, I have views concerning other aspects of the CCMBC situation, in these comments I shall focus mainly on the organizational, operational and especially the related financial realities of the CCMBC experience. Although like other contributors to this forum I have my own views concerning the management of CCMBC finances, I shall not comment on that aspect either but leave those analyses to more qualified observers. Actually, much of that important analysis has already been done by Arthur Block and Bruce Guenther. Let me also say that given reasonable space consideration, I must necessarily forgo many elaborations and clarifying nuances.

The Basic Realities

1. The most basic reality is that the CCMBC presently faces a very serious financial crisis, probably greater than ever before, and that strategies to resolve this very serious situation remain problematic or even elusive.
2. The second basic reality is that the financial resources of the Canadian MB community, in terms of both income and wealth, are greater today than they have ever been before. My parents' generation spent no time evaluating cruises, time-shares, second homes, winter holidays in the south, family skiing vacations, RRIF or LIF accounts, RVs, RRSPs, family foundations, tax shelters, or tax deferral strategies. My generation, especially in the last 30 or 40 years, is familiar with all of these and more. In short, the

present CCMBC financial crisis is not caused by lack of funds in the constituency.

3. Local church budgets have never been greater than they are now. It is also the case that a high percentage of these budgets, often exceeding 50%, is required to cover the cost of paid church staff. I remember a time when there were no paid staff members. Pastors “made tents”, they farmed, taught, worked as labourers or had other jobs. Volunteers, often taking turns, did the janitorial and other tasks. Such arrangements may not have been praiseworthy and probably were not biblical but they certainly freed up funds for missionary and conference causes, even in financially tough times. Paid staff, sometimes very well-paid and sometimes with costly severance payouts, require substantial tithe funding. “A workman “ is, of course, “worthy of his hire” but the relatively recent budget implications of such practices should not be ignored.
4. Two generations ago almost all of our members' charitable giving went to MB causes, almost all through local church treasuries. As a fairly active fundraiser for several MB and other causes for about 40 years I can say without hesitation that for many MBs such narrow-band giving is gone. My reasonably informed impression is that many MBs, including a high percentage of donors blessed with deep pockets, give most of their donations to non-MB ministries and agencies. For many Mennonite Brethren, MB agencies and institutions, including CCMBC, are no longer pre-eminent, let alone presumed, recipients of financial support. MB donations to non-MB agencies and institutions are massive.
5. For many MBs the CCMBC and even their local church are no longer seen as the encompassing commitment and identification, the overarching framework within which all else finds its place. Today for an increasing number of MBs, and for most Christians generally, conference connection and even local church membership have lost their centrality.
6. Some local MB churches now have more staff and bigger budgets than the CCMBC itself. This relatively recent phenomenon changes relationships. When the mother ship is smaller than some escorting vessels, then relationships among the fleet change.

The Basic Challenges

1. How can the CCMBC re-establish strong financial support from member churches?
2. How can the CCMBC establish or re-establish greater significance, perhaps also credibility, in the minds of rank and file Mennonite Brethren church attendees across Canada?
3. How can the CCMBC connect more successfully, more widely, with MBs blessed with deep pockets?
4. How can CCMBC greatly increase attendance at national conventions?
5. Perhaps the overarching challenge is how to get the average Canadian MB to become more interested in the Canadian MB Conference? Stated more specifically, how can we convince more MB members that the CCMBC is doing some amazing ministries and that various expressions of obeying the Christian mandate are done much more effectively by a conference than by individual congregations?

The Present Financial Crisis

After reviewing the financial reports I concur fully with Bruce Guenther when he speaks of “the seriousness of the financial situation”. The “enormous gap between approved budgets and year-end actuals” which he notes, boggles the mind. That some relief has been achieved by transferring substantial sums of reserve funds and by selling property is, of course, helpful but that is not a solution to the problem. We all know that the CCMBC leaders are good people who are fully familiar with the financial facts. But that is not enough. What may not yet be fully understood is the need to ascertain why this financial crisis has happened at a time when constituency resources are generally substantial. Finding short-term emergency relief is necessary but not sufficient.

What has happened in the MB constituency to create the present financial crisis?

1. Local Church factors.

- 1.1. Several local congregations have become larger than the national MB Conference. They have larger staff numbers, bigger budgets and extensive ministry programs. Frankly, to a considerable extent they don't need the conference. This reality tends to generate a sense of independence and self-sufficiency. Unless leadership in these churches is drawn into conference ministries, the relationship will weaken seriously. Such situations must be handled very wisely. Fortunately, many of these large churches know that certain ministries and activities are still best done through the national conference. More than a few also realize that just as they once benefited from conference resourcing, etc., they now have an opportunity or even obligation to assist other smaller congregations.
- 1.2. An increasing number of pastors in MB churches, including some lead pastors in both smaller and larger churches, have no MB theological training and may not feel any affinity to MB theological emphases. It is difficult for such pastors to advocate strong support for a national conference with which they sense no kinship. This reality needs to be addressed more fully by the national Board of Faith and Life, by the national Executive Board itself, and by denominational credentialing boards. In comparison to other evangelical denominations we have been very accommodating in affirming pastors with a broad spectrum of theological training to assume leadership of MB churches.
- 1.3. Beginning in the 1960s, MB pastors have increasingly become paid employees of their congregations. This means that they naturally connect more with their employer, their congregation, than a seemingly remote national conference. When local salaries were not at issue, local pastors were much less concerned about local monies going to the national conference. Something significant happens when pastors become employees, an arrangement which has sound biblical justification but which, in many cases, has not been beneficial for the national conference.
- 1.4. With the now virtually total acceptance of a paid pastorate, a large percentage of the local budget is required to engage paid staff. Inclusive staff costs can constitute 50 % or more of the local budget. Clearly, if financial times are tough, that's not the first part of the budget that will be reduced.
- 1.5. These local church factors cannot be changed, controlled or even seriously influenced by the national conference but they must be recognized and factored in wisely.

2. National Conference factors.

- 2.1. During the last 40 years there has been a major decline in national conference programs. We no longer have national Christian education programs and training, national family ministries or national evangelists conducting series of local meetings. To a large extent it has been wise to have such activities shifted to the provincial or the local level. Some ministries are best done locally and with full-time local staff, local ministry has for some activities become the best practice. But this change has greatly lessened our members' interaction with conference leaders, staff, and programs and consequently reduced their knowledge and understanding of what the Canadian Conference does. If insufficient Conference ministry is experienced by MB church members, and if Conference activities are not explained to them, then their support for national Conference budgets will be impacted. Even Christians are reluctant to give sacrificially to causes that only others consider to be very worthy.

Special mention should be made of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*. For decades it played an important role in unifying the conference. Important and often controversial issues were raised in articles and columns. The discussions and debates were vigorous and expressed in many letters to the editor. Some blood pressures rose. Unfortunately the *Herald* has lost some of its impact. All

provocative columns have been removed. Hard-hitting debates of questioned Conference issues are few. Fortunately we still read well-written and informative editorials and some fine letters and interesting news but many readers have come to see the *Herald* primarily as the voice of conference leaders and mission agencies. Its bi-monthly appearance has also lessened its impact.

- 2.2. For almost half a century the Mennonite Brethren Bible College was a major unifying factor and a source of many pastors for Canadian MB churches. It was our national school. Its professors were known not primarily as top-rate academics, which many were, but as the conference's leading preachers and Bible expositors. They often also served as CCMBC moderators. With the demise of MBBC that unifying institution, that glue, has been lost. Canadian Mennonite University has many strengths but it does not fill that need. To some extent Columbia Bible College does in British Columbia and the MB ACTS-based seminary at Trinity Western University plays a very important role, even nationally, but neither of these fine schools has functioned as national nucleus or glue.
- 2.3. The C2C church-planting agency deserves special mention. I am not here assessing its strategy, impact or success. Several realities must, however, be noted. First, it has replaced a more narrowly based, narrowly focused, and more narrowly operated church-planting endeavour. That may be a good shift but this change has affected the perception of at least some MBs for whom funding of new denominational church plants was a major reason for supporting the CCMBC. Second, funding the C2C has become, as Bruce Guenther put it, "by far the largest component of the CCMBC budget". Also, as has been noted, C2C finances have been hard to understand. They are necessarily complicated. I also believe that the vast majority of MB C2C supporters do not see the C2C ministry as a reason to become more supportive of the CCMBC. I have not detected a significant awareness, let alone an understanding, of the C2C-CCMBC connection.

Two other realities relating to C2C must be noted. First, despite its multi-denominational sponsorship and utilization, apparently "only 6% of its budget comes from other denominations". (Guenther, November 10, 2016, MB email forum) As awareness of this reality increases, some MB supporters of C2C and some MBs who have questions about our Canadian Conference will wonder whether their or their church's contributions to C2C are being used to subsidize the activities of other denominations. Such questioning does not generate increased financial support. Also, there is an issue to be resolved when an agency that places very little emphasis on denominational theology and denominational identity requires more and more MB denominational funding and receipting. This challenge exists even though C2C raises much of its own funding which is then channelled through CCMBC.

The other factor relating to C2C relates to its self-promotion. I have attended more than a few C2C fundraising banquets. They are always inspirational and encouraging. But at all of the events I attended nothing was said of CCMBC support and, more importantly, the significance of denominations was specifically minimized. Any person or agency has a right to adopt and promote such a view but a major agency that minimizes denominational identity, significance and support should not expect that such a stance will motivate MB members to increase their denominational support even if that agency, in this case C2C, is the major recipient of all CCMBC funds. The situation is only somewhat less challenging if the major recipient itself raises much of that funding.

3. Conference restructuring.

This section addresses what contributor Ron Pauls described as "CCMBC governance dysfunction". (December 5, 2016, MB email forum) The restructuring of the CCMBC has played a major role in the weakening of ties between the conference and the constituency. Led by a moderator who advocated a total recasting of the CCMBC, the six national operating boards were gradually eliminated in the late 1990s and early 2000s; the last ones were abolished in 2004. Aside from the required national Executive Board,

only the Board of Faith and Life was retained and only in an advisory capacity. Most significantly, the Board of Management was eliminated. I firmly believe that if we had retained this board with its highly-qualified members, we would not now be in the financial crisis which engulf us. At the 2004 Toronto convention I argued strongly against removing this, as well as other boards, stating that it would be unwise to assign all of this board's tasks to the Executive Director, as the proposed restructuring prescribed, but such counsel was summarily dismissed by the moderator and the entire Executive Board. For this reason I hold the moderator and the Executive Board of 2004 largely responsible for CCMBC's current financial crisis.

Some historical reflection is in order. Between 1968 and the late 1990s the CCMBC operated with an Executive Committee and six national boards generally having 11 members each. All provincial conferences were represented on each board with additional members elected at the national conventions for their expertise and experience. The system was not perfect but it worked well. This national leadership group, the Council of Boards, consisting of about 70 regionally and nationally prominent leaders, met twice a year, once in January and once in the days preceding the summer national convention. Additional assemblies, although rare, were called as needed. This assembly of leaders brought wide-ranging valuable experience, much helpful insight, extensive collective wisdom, and perhaps most importantly, truly beneficial built-in corrective criticism. And all of this was provided at no cost to the conference other than travel costs. Having observed various organizational structures in action I am convinced that this CCMBC system of having six boards and the Council of Boards direct and lead the national conference was a much better arrangement than what was put in place in 2004. James Toews made a strong point when he referred to "narrowing the leadership structure". (November 29, 2016 MB email forum)

As I see it, the fundamental flaw in the Carver/Les Stahlke model which the CCMBC adopted in 2004 was its failure to differentiate adequately between a business model and a church model, especially an Anabaptist church model. A corporate, top-down structure works well for corporations. It can be efficient and effective. It works well because a corporation sells either products or services. A church conference does not sell products or services. Its revenue comes as donations, not as sales income. In a communitarian or peoplehood or brotherhood model financial well-being depends on trust, on belief in what is being done, on transparency and clarity, and on a sense of ownership. Receiving information and direction from one CEO does not provide this requirement.

4. The transformation of the annual or biennial convention.

For decades, in fact generations, national MB conventions in Canada were community events. Typically all sessions, but at least all public sessions, were held in churches, often large churches. I attended many of these. The one which met in Abbotsford in 1984, when I happened to be the Conference moderator, attracted close to 500 delegates and about 2,000 people for the afternoon session in the Sevenoaks Alliance Church. The impact of that weekend on all churches in the area was great. Much enthusiasm and celebration was evident. The event was reported in the *M.B. Herald* and impacted the entire national MB constituency. Thus even people who did not attend were encouraged and inspired by the reports. Incidentally, delegates had the option to stay in hotels or with friends, relatives, etc. There were no accommodation problems.

I compare those earlier conventions with what has happened in recent years. Delegates meet in hotels. There is no local constituency or local church involvement. There is no local reinforcement of ownership and commitment. Not surprisingly, attendance has declined drastically even as the number of churches and the size of the Canadian MB Conference has increased markedly. The total number of delegates, other than national board and staff members and people on the program seems hardly to exceed 100. Most importantly, most churches send no delegates. Importantly, most delegates seem to be pastors who have all their expenses paid. No wonder that enthusiasm for the CCMBC has waned and that financial support has seriously declined.

The situation has, of course, also been affected negatively by charging rather high fees for people to be delegates. In earlier years there were no delegate fees other than perhaps some meal costs. Often the local churches or the provincial conference covered those costs. Now that our leaders have structured our national church conventions as if they are business conventions we seem to be surprised that few delegates come. We should not be surprised, given that delegate registration in 2016 was \$199 and the hotel costs about \$135 per day. Thus our leaders have structured and programmed an elitist assembly with declining attendance, declining sense of ownership, declining visibility, declining constituency involvement, declining sense of ownership and no local church involvement. We should not be surprised if those are also the results. Nor should we be surprised if increasing numbers of Canadian Mennonite Brethren see the CCMBC as an external agency, one of many good agencies saying, "Send Money".

Concluding observations; So where do we go from here?

I believe that it would take a few days of serious think-tank activity with a substantial praying agenda involving some 30 or more of our best conference leaders, senior pastors, conference thinkers, various professionals, and whoever else can help us to relaunch the CCMBC. That will not be an easy task. The financial realities and the distancing of many churches and church leaders are not easily remedied. In such a think-tank consultation the following items would need to be addressed:

- *A return to a more Anabaptist national organization and governance model.
- *A return to a more useful kind of national convention, not in expensive big city hotels.
- *The abolition of high delegate fees.
- *Clarification of the funding, accountability, denominational linkage and general operating philosophy of C2C.
- *The re-establishment of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* as a forum for dialogue, debate on controversial issues, stimulating columnists who speak outside the box, etc. in both hard copy and online editions. Doubtless the Letters section would then also grow.
- *As already stated, I believe that we need a major consultation to deal not with important but narrow theological and social issues but with the nature, structure and direction of the CCMBC itself.
- *After a relaunching has been programmed it would be wise to deliver to each CCMBC household a hard copy and an online version of a short Declaratory Memorandum explaining what has happened, what will happen and inviting all Canadian MBs to a relaunch of the MB Conference in Canada. If done right, this could be exciting and effective.

I am certain that many people, including some very fine individuals in leadership positions, do not agree with my rather straightforward, candid analysis and my specific suggestions. They have other ideas. They may be right. But before they dismiss these reflections out of hand I remind them of two realities. First, consider where the 2004 reorganization of CCMBC has brought us. What I consider to be the largely un-Anabaptist transformation of the CCMBC in 2004 and the preceding years has not been successful. In other words, I see the 2004 initiative as a well-intentioned experiment that failed; an experiment for which the CCMBC must now pay a high price. Second, without substantial changes, i. e. significant course correction, the possible future of the CCMBC does not evoke optimism.

It is not unusual or unnatural for churches of Jesus Christ, and by extension also conferences, to experience problems and challenges. We find biblical illustration of this statement in the Book of Acts, in the Pauline epistles, and in the first chapters of Revelation. Fallen humanity does not become perfect when Christian believers assemble and organize. But if we do our part and if we seek God's enabling, the result will be positive, Kingdom-advancing and God-honouring.

These reflections are given as one person's perspective. Let that which is helpful be considered; that which is not helpful can be deleted.