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A CHURCH GROWTH CONSULTATION: EXPECTATIONS AND POST-SESSION PERCEPTIONS

Henry J. Schmidt

The North American Church Growth Consultation for Mennonite Brethren leaders was jointly sponsored by the Center for Training in Mission/Evangelism at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services; the General Conference Board of Faith and Life and the Canadian and American Boards of Evangelism. The Planning Committee included representatives from these agencies: Henry Schmidt (Convenor), Vic Adrian, Dale Warkentin, Roland Marsch, James Nikkel and Loyal Funk. The sessions were held April 2-4, 1991, at the Frazerview Church in Vancouver, B.C. Two-hundred ten registrants from Canada (165) and United States (45) participated in Bible studies, prayer times, worship, plenary sessions for input and feedback, and small group discussions.

Historically, the Mennonite Brethren have been a biblical, missionizing people. The impetus for this Consultation came from three sources. First, a concern to implement the General Conference Vision statement calling for Mennonite Brethren to grow from 45,000 to 65,000 members and to increase from 330 to

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550 churches by 2000. This means targeting 10 major cities, recruiting two percent of the membership into pastoral/mis-sionary roles, growing three percent annually and establishing a minimum of 50 multi-cultural churches. Second, a concern about how pastors, leaders and congregations work together in developing healthy, reproducing churches. Third, the realization that, while Mennonite Brethren have been heavily influenced by the Church Growth Movement in the past twenty-five years, leaders have never met to discern and discuss its specific application to our denomination.

The Consultation worked toward the implementation of the North American vision by aiming at five goals: focusing the vision for church renewal/growth and planting in obedience to Christ's mandate; bringing leaders together for prayer, teaching, discussion and understanding of biblical church growth principles; creating an open forum to discuss the impact of Church Growth theory on Mennonite Brethren leadership, polity and congregational size; building unity among leaders; and developing a workable growth strategy together with leaders, churches and district/provincial/national conferences.

The plenary papers dealt with five major issues: cultural context, tenets of the Church Growth Movement, leadership, church polity and models/strategies. In the midst of our common commitment to building healthy, growing churches, there was vigorous debate, especially on the issues of church leadership and polity. Participants highlighted the following as being most helpful at the Consultation: quality plenary papers and responses; a willingness to tackle important issues over which there was difference of opinion and understanding; the interaction, cross-fertilization and stimulation arising from the small group process; the affirmation of diversity in church models (i.e., "from house church to mega-church and everything in between"); and the "program mix" of worship, Bible study, small groups, and plenary sessions.

The Consultation did not fulfill all expectations. Multi-ethnics (5), U.S. Conference leaders (45) and women participants (32) were under represented. The academic format (major plenary papers and prepared responses) of the Consultation, which included confrontation, debate and analyses, may have fueled the "theoretician" vs "practioner" polarity. Some practioners, who came looking for motivation, inspiration and practical "hands-on" models, found the Consultation

to be “too academic, theoretical and critical.” There was also a perceived imbalance in the presenters of plenary papers: four conference leaders/teachers/executives and only one pastor. The Consultation schedule was over-crowded. Some of the participants also expressed disappointment that the goal of forging a strategy for implementing the Vision Statement had not been realized.

The Consultation was a good beginning, but not the end of conversation among Mennonite Brethren leaders concerned about healthy church expansion and greater diversity in church models. The Findings Committee Report accurately reflects the major agendas discussed at the Consultation and identifies ten items of on-going concern. Conference leadership will assume responsibility for addressing these issues, both biblically and practically, as an expression of our commitment to be biblical and missionizing people in Century 21.