

Hope and Courage: Fall 2025 Report



Introduction

In July 2024, the board of Mennonite Church Manitoba approved a visioning plan for MCM, to evaluate the current MCM Vision and Mission Statement (1998) as to its continued relevance, and to form the basis for future strategic planning for MCM. The stated rationale for this visioning process was as follows:

Mennonite Church Manitoba is at a turning point. Our congregations are at a turning point. Changes that congregations and denominations have been experiencing slowly for decades are now happening much more rapidly (decline in membership numbers, aging congregations, increasingly secular society, generational shifts in theology/values, etc.). While we can be confident that Christ will continue to build his church (Matthew 16:18), the precise shape of the church (either as congregations or as denominations) is far from certain.

Put another way, if the church is more of an “organism,” like a vine (see John 15:1-17), it still requires some “organization” or structure, like the trellis for the vine. The “vine” is expanding in some ways, contracting in others, growing, and being trimmed. How do we see the church experiencing this? What exactly are these changes? And how does the “trellis” of our structure need to be modified to allow the Spirit to move us through these current changes into God’s new thing for us?

The goal of this process is to develop a fresh vision for MCM which would draw us together as congregations with a renewed enthusiasm for a shared identity and mission. This could form the basis for a series of 3-year strategic plans, providing sustainability for MCM for the next 15-20 years. A supplemental goal is to spark these kinds of conversations within our congregations, for congregations themselves to experience renewal in their identity and mission.

The Listening Process

Surveys were made available for MCM constituents between September 2024 and April 2025. Long-form surveys were for focus group participants; short-form surveys, including all the quick-response questions from the long-form survey, were available for anyone from within MCM to do. Survey questions focused on the participants’ perception of:

- their church/our regional church as it currently is;
- their church/our regional church as they would like it to become;
- what they most appreciate about their church/our regional church;
- what the nature and purpose of the church is; and
- specific examples of vision statements and descriptions of Anabaptism.

A total of 103 surveys were completed. These represented 31 of our 40 MCM congregations. The gender distribution was as follows:

- 53.4% female
- 43.7% male
- 1% transgender or non-binary

The age distribution was as follows:

- 3.9% were 15-25 years old
- 10.7% were 25-40
- 31.1% were 40-55
- 35.9% were 55-70
- 17.5% were 70 or older

Eight focus groups met between September 2024 and April 2025: a board group, a staff group, a pastors group, a church moderator/treasurer group, and four mixed groups (mostly lay people). Participants each completed a long-form survey, then met together to discuss three sets of questions:

- What do you like most about your church/our regional church, and why?
- What are some of the most significant challenges facing your church/our regional church?
- What would you like to see your church/our regional church become in the next 5-10 years?

These meetings were moderated by Michael Pahl with notes taken by Cheryl Braun.

MCM's 2025 Gathering also contributed to our visioning process, largely by helping delegates and guests reflect on what it means to be a "Jesus-centred church." Table discussion at the Gathering was focused on three questions:

- What programs or initiatives of your church are generating enthusiasm and energy?
- In what ways do those programs or initiatives grow out of a commitment to follow Jesus in his teachings and way of life?
- In what ways is a connection to Jesus less clear or direct? How can it be made clearer for people?

The notes from these table discussions were collected for analysis.

Finally, the MCM office collected congregational chair/moderator and pastor annual reports from 2024 for 20 of our 40 congregations.

The documents from these four streams—surveys, focus groups, Gathering table discussion, church annual reports—were then analyzed by an ad hoc MCM board committee made up of Moderator Cheryl Braun, Brian Dyck, and Ed Neufeld, along with Executive Minister Michael Pahl. They noted recurring words/phrases/themes in these documents related to the following topics:

- The nature/purpose/mission of the church
- The current state of the church
- Challenges facing the church
- Hopes/desires/dreams for the future of the church

This analysis has led to the following conclusions.

Conclusions

The Nature, Purpose, and Mission of the Church

In some ways, we have a strong sense of what the church is called to be and to do.

We recognize the church as a community of Jesus-followers, both locally situated and as a broader body of believers. The church is the community gathered around Jesus, centred on Jesus, grounded in his life, teaching, death, and resurrection. The church is called to be the body of Christ, united yet diverse, continuing Jesus' mission in the world, sharing God's love with the world.

There is a strong sense among us of the importance of our Anabaptist identity. While our Mennonite identity is sometimes seen as problematic, with different understandings of "Mennonite" around us, there is no push to drop the language of "Mennonite" from our name. We do have a deep desire to remain rooted in Anabaptist theology and practice, and we feel that this provides us with gifts we can offer to the wider church and world.

There is an especially strong sense among us of the importance of the local community of believers. People love their local church. We love our vibrant worship. We love learning together through preaching and other means. We love the hospitality and mutual care we share. Many people experience church as an intergenerational and otherwise diverse community, particularly as compared to other spaces in their lives. Many see the church as providing an important safe place to ask difficult questions and to be who we are and who God is shaping us to be.

We recognize the traditional core tasks of the church, including worship, teaching and preaching, faith formation, fellowship, congregational care, hospitality, and serving others outside the church as we bear witness to Jesus beyond our congregation.

There has been a growing sense among us of the importance of mission within the local community, the neighbourhoods within which our churches are located. Churches are active in addressing food insecurity, partnering with local organizations, sharing space with community groups, contributing to local social justice initiatives, and relating to Indigenous neighbours. Several congregations have a strong sense of mission beyond the local community, participating in regional mission efforts, sponsoring refugees, or partnering with International Witness companions.

We appreciate the things we do as a regional and nationwide church to support our community life. The leadership development and faith formation and hospitality ministry of Camps with Meaning. The support for pastoral leadership, and helping congregations find pastors. The resourcing and congregational connections which strengthen our inward community life. The hands-on guidance in helping us develop our sense of mission both across the street and around the world.

Challenges Facing the Church

However, despite this robust general understanding of the nature, purpose, and mission of the church and the way this understanding is embodied among us, there are questions surrounding the specific identity and calling of individual churches. Who are we as a congregation now, in this moment? Who is God calling us to become and what God is calling us to do at this time?

Many challenges have been identified.

Aging and largely shrinking congregations, with the impact of these on giving of time and money. Aging and often too-empty buildings. Missing demographics, such as older youth or young adults, or Generation X or older Millennials. Difficult discernment, even in some cases division, around polarizing issues. A sense of being too tied to the past, to the “glory days” of the church and past structures which no longer work well for us.

At times an exclusiveness which makes it hard for newcomers to feel welcome—the “shadow side” of that strong sense of community noted above. A lack of connection for some congregations with their immediate neighbourhood. Differences of perspective on mission, often seen as a binary of either evangelism or social justice. A sense of an “urban-rural divide” among our congregations regionally. Polarization in society. Finding our place between growing fundamentalism on the one hand and increasing secularism on the other.

Many of these challenges bear upon the question of congregational identity and calling. Since we are not the church we used to be, what is God calling us to be and to do now? In the midst of polarization, fundamentalism, and secularism in society, what is God calling us to be and to do now? These questions of congregational identity and calling in many ways extend to questions around our identity and calling as a regional and nationwide church.

The Envisioned Future of the Church

There is a strong recognition among us that society and the church are changing—and indeed, that we must change as a church. However, it is unclear to us what that change could or should look like. Things are simply too volatile and precarious in our world to have a clear sense of vision for the future.

Nevertheless, there are many hopes we have for the future of the church. We want our congregations—and our regional and nationwide church—to be united and flourishing. We want a church that is characterized by both dynamic spirituality—individually and communally—and a concern for social justice. We want to be decidedly Anabaptist, even as we work toward greater ecumenical understanding and partnerships.

We want our vibrant worship, our curious learning, our strong leadership, our mutual care and hospitality, and our strong sense of community to carry on. We want to be increasingly diverse, reflecting the diversity of our society. We want increased connection among us as congregations. We want to continue to grow in our witness to Jesus, locally, regionally, nationally, and globally. We want to be Jesus-centred, seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus.

Many of these conclusions have implications for our local congregations. Several have implications for us as a regional church. All of these need to shape our vision and planning for the church—both locally and regionally—in the years to come.

The Process Going Forward

This report is being made available for feedback from within the MCM constituency during the fall of 2025. In particular, the MCM board is interested in whether congregations feel the conclusions offered

above accurately reflect what congregations themselves see as the nature and purpose of the church, the challenges facing the church, and the envisioned future of the church.

Following discussion and approval at its September working retreat, the MCM board has also prepared a new draft Vision and Mission Statement for Mennonite Church Manitoba. This will be tested within the MCM constituency between September and December 2025. The board will approve a final draft in January or February 2026, which will then be presented for final discussion and possible approval by congregational delegates at the 2026 MCM Gathering March 6-7, 2026.

At the same time, during the fall of 2025, the MCM board will begin doing some strategic planning based on the draft Vision and Mission Statement and the conclusions drawn from the visioning process so far. An initial three-year strategic plan is scheduled to be presented to congregational delegates at the 2026 MCM Gathering.

Mennonite Church Manitoba Board
September 2025