

Moderator's Final Report to General Conference XXVI



Metropolitan Community Churches

TRANSFORMING OURSELVES AS WE TRANSFORM THE WORLD

At the Third General Conference, in 1972, Rev. Jim Sandmire preached an iconic sermon called “At the Crossroads.” He was challenging MCC to see beyond the short-term meaning of MCC, and to see the bigger mission, how we might be a deeper reformation of radically inclusive faith -- and urged us to make a choice to be something beyond a temporary refuge for gay Christians. In retrospect, it seems hard to believe that even at three years old, MCC was having an identity crisis!

And, his sermon continues to be prophetic, even in these radically different times.

In this tumultuous, economically, politically and religiously volatile 21st century, MCC is at another crossroads. Where else would we be?

Consider the context for our mission today:

- Christianity is growing in the Global South, but suffering a crisis of decline in the Global North, including the US – mainstream and conservative churches alike – and including MCC. This is a cultural issue, a spiritual issue, and because churches have often betrayed its members, become irrelevant, or have not adapted.
- A new generation of digital natives is re-inventing the nature of community and connection – is MCC investing in and innovating the shape and nature of “church?” How can we touch an increasing percentage of both DONES (left the church) and “NONES” (no religious affiliation)?
- MCC’s message and ministry is resonating in new places, new “markets” if you will, while our economic base (primarily US Churches) to support that expansion has eroded.
- We are struggling to keep up with the demand for support for new MCC churches
- How we recruit and afford to train and equip new leaders must change with the times
- Transgender inclusion and civil rights are front and center more and more in many countries – are they for MCC?
- Younger adults, with more fluid sexuality and gender identity do not segregate socially as much as older folks have – how can MCC reflect this, and how can the

message of “faith without hate” – a desperately needed message for our world – be embodied in an expanding MCC?

- Does our Founding Narrative hold up in a 21st Century context, and if so, how can we unleash its power with God’s help?

MCC local churches must re-imagine our relationships to each other as denomination and movement. What is a denomination anyway – is it an office, a structure, or a system of meaning, a vehicle for inspiration, vision and mission?

How, on a practical level, do we engage our churches all over the globe, to discover what we need from our denomination/movement? How can we have an honest “kitchen table,” grown-up conversation? What do we really expect from our elected and affirmed leaders – Governors, Moderator, Elders?

Are we really stronger together? And if so, what are we willing to do, to offer, to strengthen our global mission and vision?

I have always leaned on Rev. Troy Perry’s words, when he told us that he trusts the MCC General Conference -- the Holy Spirit works through us. As we consider the brilliant work of our Statement of Faith Commission, I support our collective wisdom. As we elect our leaders, I trust that same Spirit at work in us.

When I became Moderator in 2005, I preached about “An Unfinished Calling.”

I cannot say, 11 years later, that our calling has been fulfilled. We have learned more about it in our changing world.

People are still hungry for an authentic community of faith that calls them to integrate sexuality and spirituality, for a church that pushes the edges of inclusion. A community of faith that seeks justice, and sees the intersections between oppressions, that cares about the suicide rates of young people, especially LGBT is the community of the present and future. There is a yearning for a faith community that cares about new alarming rates of HIV infection in many communities, and the murder rate of transgender people, and the sanctioned discrimination being proposed in the US. The world awaits a church that cares about the increasing number of bisexuals and heterosexuals who feel disenchanting and disengaged from traditional religion.

Does God still need a church that opens Sunday worship with new, spiritual lyrics, led by a 22 year old African American transwoman activist, in Mississippi, of all places? Does God still need an MCC in Utah that holds up a banner in front of thousands of Mormons, resigning from their church, saying, “We Will Baptize Your Children”? Does God need a church in Kenya that creates space to talk about inclusion, while reaching out to sex workers whose lives and health are at risk every day? Does God need a church that stands

up for Muslim students in Wichita, Kansas? One that takes in homeless youth in Brazil, and creates space for conversation about LGBT people and Christian faith in Cuba? Does God still need a church in Canada that welcomes refugees from countries that oppress those whose gender identity and sexual orientation is outlawed? Does God still need a church in Houston or in North Carolina that thrives in diversity? Or a church in Jamaica where LGBT people and their allies are still “hated to death?”

My answer is yes.

And, as we negotiate our crossroads, in 2016, 44 years after Elder Sandmire’s sermon, will we be kind as well as passionate? Will we be vulnerable, forgiving, will we listen? Can we open our hearts to the cries of those of us around the world who need something like MCC, and not shrink from this great challenge? Can we accept blunt facts, while still remaining fearlessly optimistic and confident? Will we let fear or faith determine our future?

Can we hear the voices of those who are being called, right now, to re-shape MCC, and can we support them with all our hearts and resources?

My answer is: yes, we must.

The next time we gather, face to face, at our General Conference, in 2019, we will have the final celebration of our 50th Anniversary. I hope with all my heart to be there, with you, cheering on our next Moderator, Governing Board, our Elders and staff as we embrace the eternal crossroads, our call, stronger together.

Our Accounting for the Triennium

The Senior Leadership Team, under the direction of the Moderator, sought in these last three years, to collaborate and work with a Strategic Plan.

As the Governing Board has stated, as our resources declined, we have not had the capacity to fulfill the Strategic Plan as we imagined it three years ago.

Nevertheless, we have managed to do a lot in these last three years. And, sometimes, we confess, with less staff and resources, we have worked to try to shield the churches from feeling the impact of these reductions where possible. We want to be as open as possible about how we can best serve God and our mission together, as local church and denominational leadership

Highlights of Our Accomplishments by Denominational Office over the last three years:

Operations:

- Planning and executing a world-class General Conference

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- Good financial management during income fluctuations, facilitating staff reductions and re-assignments
- Preparing and planning for MCC Archives in anticipation of our 50th Anniversary

Emerging Ministries:

- Inaugurated a program to expand MCC's capacity to start healthy new churches by training 50 leaders for emerging churches in 13 countries, including 20 emerging church leaders in the US.
- Reversed a decade long trend of few new church starts in MCC, and supported the founding of 51 emerging churches in 18 countries, including 7 new churches in the United States. Successfully affiliated six of the 51 emerging churches Brazil, Puerto Rico (US), and the Philippines.
- Initiated the presence of MCC in Cuba, the largest country in the Caribbean
- Increased our leadership capacity by collaborating with OCLH and OFLD to implement workshops and resources, protocols in Spanish and Portuguese
- Built new relationships by participating in ILGA World Conference in Mexico City, 2014, and in first Queer Theology Conference in Latin America in Costa Rica in 2014
- Increased our capacity in Brazil and Mexico by attaining a legal MCC presence there.
- Focused on expanding MCC's capacity for diversity and inclusion by facilitating a conversation with the Governing Board and Senior Leadership Team and 75 volunteers. Young adults, heterosexuals, older adults, people with HIV/AIDS, women, people of African descent, transgender and gender-nonconforming people, and people with accessibility needs recommended key changes many of which were implemented.

Formation and Leadership Development

- Increased our capacity by ordaining 43 new MCC clergy
- Expanded clergy training through increased access to REVM's in the US, Eastern Europe, Brazil, globally, in English, Spanish and Portuguese
- Expanded global development and education for laity through LEAD retreats in the US, Brazil, Australia and the Philippines - 10 people completed the LEAD certificate
- Nurtured leadership through Nurturing Vocation Retreat and First Call Cohorts
- Expanded our denominational leadership capacity as 31 lay and clergy people completed the Leadership Mentoring Retreat; and offered Creating a Life that Matters train the trainer in the Philippines and in the US to laity and clergy.
- Expanded our capacity to train and nurture lay and clergy leaders virtually by launching SSOL, Sacred Space Online Learning
- Reinforced MCC's mission to "integrate sexuality and spirituality" through our first Online Conference, "Sex and Spirit;" and through the Garner Institute virtual, multi-lingual series on theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid

- Increased capacity to address the health of our clergy by launching the Well-Being Coach program and free clergy retreats on well-being
- Strengthened our faith and vocation by obtaining funding and beginning to design a unique Spiritual Directors Network and MCC Academy for Spiritual Formation
- Increased our resources for local churches through new “Holy Conversations” created by our global Theologies Team in support of the Statement of Faith Commission and the upcoming leadership transition

Church Life and Health

- Completed reorganization of office to focus and engage with our churches, globally, on healthy transitions, resources and revitalization
- Increased care, connection and collaboration among MCC churches by improving our Networks, training and supporting leaders
- Helped our churches assess and grow through several new “Learning Cohorts” based on size transition.
- Increased our capacity for meeting the needs for intervention and mediation in local churches by implementing a “Conflict Transformation Team.”
- Provided a more “open” and collaborative processes for pastoral search and interim placements. About 20 – 25% of our churches are in transition at any given time
- Increased our excellence and vitality in stewardship and worship on a local church level with new, consistent, timely MCC resources.
- Piloted a congregational program that enhances discernment about mission and vision.

Moderator:

- Provided leadership for MCC’s Senior Leadership Team and Governing Board in anticipation of changes at this General Conference
- Achieved more global visibility for MCC on the issues such as Climate Change, including participation in Pope Francis’ visit to the US; and in faith based climate events and efforts; continued to lead MCC’s public voice on justice issues
- Enhanced our capacity to provide spiritual and pastoral leadership for our churches and people by appointing seven new Elders, and re-visioned the Council of Elders.
- Amplified our MCC message of justice and hope by re-vamping MCC communication vehicles and strategies, focusing on denominational and local church communication needs.
- Created the Moderator’s Circle, which has raised \$ 709,000 in unrestricted funds for MCC since its inception in 2012
- Hired Development Director and supported new church starts through the generous gift from a major donor (see Governing Board Report)

- Built on our network of relationships at Creating Change conferences (US), World Council of Churches in South Korea; World Pride in Toronto, Ontario; The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries; other opportunities.
- Produced a new Statement of Faith for MCC, through our Commission: a global, multi-lingual effort with grassroots input.
- In order to Be Justice, continued to support and participate in the work of the Global Justice Institute, and the US Public Policy Team (link to annual report)

Our Most Pressing Challenges for the Future:

- Create a new Strategic Plan that takes into account financial challenges, the need for revitalizing, and opportunities for mission
- Face boldly the shifting cultural climate around faith, church in the US and other countries – decline in attendance across the board in most denominations. What is MCC’s unique calling in this climate?
- Continue to be a fearless champion of justice that comes from our faith journey
- Foster unity and momentum as we onboard a new Moderator and a new Governing Board
- Resource our mission and vision
- Be global without being colonial
- Strengthen our Networks and other means of staying connected
- Make General Conference more affordable and accessible
- Help our older churches face their issues, their “new normal,” innovate and revitalize without feeling like a failure
- Replicate success
- Welcome and include our emerging churches and ministries
- Recruit our next generations of leaders, called and equipped for this challenging century
- Foster healthy and holy conversations on local church assessments to the denomination, and clarifying expectations of our denomination and leadership

Thank you for your support as we have tried our best to serve you, our churches, members and leaders.

Thank you for the great privilege of having served as the second Moderator of our denomination.

Grace and Peace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rev. Dr. Nancy Wilson" followed by a stylized flourish.

Rev. Dr. Nancy Wilson