

The US Mennonite Brethren Movement The Future Story

USMB is embracing a new vision – telling a new future story – to help empower each local MB church to reach its full, God-given ministry potential within the framework of their evangelical and Anabaptist distinctives.

After a long, strategic and prayerful process, we believe God has directed us to focus our collective spiritual and strategic efforts into three core commitments:

1. Local, national, and global church multiplication/church planting/evangelism
2. Intentional disciple-making
3. Developing leaders

To help give life to these three commitments USMB will support and encourage networks of MB churches to engage in collaborative efforts around one or more of these core commitments.

Rather than directing and promoting top-down programs, USMB will align its resources and structures to serve, equip and network local churches for ministry. Our evangelical and Anabaptist distinctives will be central to our identity and will shape how we express this new vision and embrace these core commitments. The measurement standard for everything USMB does will be whether or not it helps local churches reach their full ministry potential.

We believe each church has tremendous potential and there is no one right way to do things. Therefore, our focus needs to be broad enough to support a variety of efforts and expressions designed to empower the local church, while helping to cultivate deep spiritual formation within each church. We believe churches will thrive when partnering together in proactive and vibrant relationships with other churches, agencies and ministry partners. This synergy will produce greater Kingdom impact than is possible by churches acting alone.

We desire to be characterized by faithfulness, effectiveness and innovation in all aspects of the USMB's vision and ministry, empowering our member churches to joyfully and willingly partner in networking relationships, share resources and develop closer relationships within our family of churches. It is our prayer that a new enthusiastic commitment and strong loyalty to this common vision would characterize our networking relationships within the USMB family.

- Revised: April 27, 2016

Transition Phase 2016-2018

The transition to a new ministry approach began in 2016 following more than a year of prayer, dialogue, retreats, writing a Future Story of Ministry, and strategic and operational planning. In 2014 the Mennonite Brethren movement pulled together a group of more than 40 representative leaders for prayer and dialogue around a preferred future. This took place during the interim following the retirement of our Executive Director. This was seen as an appropriate and critical hinge point for the movement to rethink the vision and effectiveness of the Mennonite Brethren in a world of continuous change, both denominationally and in society.

Motivation for change also came from many who affirmed some of what was happening within the denomination, but felt there was a lack of collective buy-in, passion around a motivating vision, and too many initiatives for a denomination of our size. The churches and denomination seemed to lack a compelling vision and focused priorities to shape a clear identity and cohesive ministry. In short, there was much unrealized potential at every dimension, but especially within the local churches. Many local church leaders were calling for change and a clearer national identity that reflected a shared vision and values.

A key question for the preferred future was “what seems impossible today that if it could happen would transform the capacity of the Mennonite Brethren movement to serve in the midst of God’s Kingdom?” This called for a rethinking of current commitments to various organizations and institutions to align these commitments around the vision, core commitments, and measurement standard.

Vision Casting

Empowering Our Full Ministry Potential became the theme. ***Together empowering each local church to reach their full ministry potential*** served as the motivating vision for USMB.

This theme and vision spoke powerfully to a local church, grassroots approach for USMB that sought to encourage and support each local church to consider its God-given ministry potential. The community concept also spoke to an approach that did not involve churches functioning alone with a silo approach, but collaboratively through networks of churches who sought to develop a synergy of their efforts that produced greater Kingdom impacts than where possible by churches acting alone.

Early in 2016 this theme and vision began to be cast by all aspects of USMB. The districts, fellowships² of churches that expressed our cultural diversity, agencies, and various partners were invited to join in casting this theme and vision. Together they sponsored efforts to invite local churches into seasons of inspiration, information, and the forming of networks³ of churches to engage the three core commitments for living into the vision.

Of these sponsoring groups, a clear movement forward was the intentional inclusion of fellowships of churches that expressed our cultural diversity. This brought much richness to the relationships as full-partners in the dialogue and sponsorship of efforts to engage congregations in the three core commitments.

Launching the Core Commitments

At the beginning of 2016 the three core commitments of [1] local, national, and global church multiplication/church planting/evangelism, [2] intentional disciple-making, and [3] developing leaders became the principal focus. With the theme and the vision articulated, the emphasis became how to network and motivate action focused primarily from the base of local churches and networks of churches that is then supported by the national expression, districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partner organizations.

The US Conference, districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partner organizations focused their efforts on sponsoring gatherings to launch networks of churches committed to the fulfillment of the three core commitments. Their mantra became ***we are here to serve churches, primarily in the areas of church planting and multiplication, disciple-making, and leadership development.***

Four principles guiding this spiritual and strategic journey from day one were [1] the evangelical and Anabaptist distinctives, [2] a commitment to inclusion of the full diversity of congregations, [3] the alignment of resources and structures with new emerging networks of churches, and [4] the measurement standard of whether or not all actions help local churches reach their full ministry potential.

Networks of churches were encouraged to engage in collaborative efforts around one or more of these core commitments. Those forming networks were asked to gather at the biannual convention beginning in 2016 for celebration, communication, and sharing and brokering resources with one another.

The various resources of the national expression, districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners were re-conceptualized during the first three years of living into this Future Story of Ministry—2016-2018—to audit what they do so that as much as of their work and ministry as reasonably possible might focus around supporting networks of churches in living into the three core commitments.

Covenant agreements were developed between the national expression and the districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners as to how they, as part of or in addition to their own mission as organizations, resource and support the three core commitments. In approaching these covenant partnerships the MB Leadership Board rethought the relationships with some historic partners regarding their fit with the vision and core commitments.

The focus of the biennial conventions became a focus on the three core commitments and how the overall movement was, is, and will strengthen their efforts regarding the core commitments.

- **Local, National, and Global Church multiplication/church planting/evangelism**

Networks of churches of various demographics were encouraged to form with a commitment to significant involvement in church multiplication/church planting/evangelism. The national and district conferences encouraged and assisted, as needed, in the formation and development of these networks of churches, helping them develop the capacity and sustainability needed to function effectively over the long-term.

Districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners were encouraged to adopt and/or continue to focus on church multiplication/church planting/evangelism as a core commitment of their ministry and/or as a focus for appropriate resources. Their focus was on empowering the networks of churches that were developing.

New models of church multiplication/church planting/evangelism were developed by local churches, networks of churches, and districts.

- **Intentional Disciple-making**

Networks of churches of various demographics were encouraged to form with a commitment to significant involvement in intentional disciple-making that includes evangelism, spiritual formation, and missional engagement. The national and district expressions encouraged and assisted, as needed, in the formation and development of these networks of churches, helping them develop the capacity and sustainability needed to function effectively over the long-term.

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● Developing Leaders

Networks of churches of various demographics were encouraged to form with a commitment to significant involvement in developing leaders for church multiplication/church planting/evangelism and disciple-making that included ministers and laypersons. The national and district expressions encouraged and assisted, as needed, in the formation and development of these networks of churches, helping them develop the capacity and sustainability needed to function effectively over the long-term.

Districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners were encouraged to adopt and/or continue to focus on developing leaders as a core commitment of their ministry and/or as a focus for appropriate resources. Their focus was on empowering the network of churches that were developing. This was particularly seen as a place where MB Mission, Fresno Pacific University and Seminary and Tabor College, could play key roles in developing leaders that included ministers and laypersons.

Measurement Standards

The measurement standard of ***whether or not it helps local churches reach their full ministry potential*** presented a challenging standard for USMB. It was not about measuring organizational success for the US Conference, districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners, but the spiritual and strategic success of fulfilling the vision and core commitments in a manner that transformed the ability of local churches to reach their full ministry potential.

It did take several rounds of experimentation to figure out the right things to measure and how they could be measured. Storytelling of how local churches and networks of churches were impacted by their actions regarding the three core commitments was a primary way of illustrating this measurement standard.

The development of networks of churches seeking to effectively address the core commitments and the full ministry potential of churches was a key element to measure and celebrate. Inclusion of the culturally diverse fellowships of churches and their involvement in various networks of churches was another.

Evidence that the US Conference, districts, agencies, and various partners had modified their functioning to effectively support the core commitments and the network of churches was key indicator that a new, agile culture was developing.

An increase in the number of churches resulting from congregational multiplication efforts, the number of churches involved in intentional disciple-making efforts, and an increase in trained ministers and laypersons available for the fulfillment of the vision was a foundational measurement.

One example was that by the end of 2018 there was an increase of 10 percent in the number of churches formally affiliated with the US Conference.

Structural Framework

To empower each local church to reach its full ministry potential, it was agreed the US Conference would be a better servant by increasingly collaborating with districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners to create synergy and build effectiveness. A hoped for impact would be to eliminate organizational silos and to intentionally collaborate to serve the local church regarding our three core commitments. It also sought to eliminate unnecessary layers of structure.

To accomplish this, the US Conference moved in the direction of being highly supportive of districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners using a strategic framework approach that encouraged innovative processes and networks of churches. The expectation was that this would encourage these entities to be more strategic-driven in response to the needs of the local church.

The US Conference would seek ways to foster and encourage grassroots ministry through brokering resources to networks of churches in collaboration with districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners. A shift in thinking occurred as the US Conference was viewed as a networking resource rather than directing and promoting programs.

The US Conference Leadership Board and staff focused on five areas: [1] championing the vision of USMB, [2] telling the stories of the fulfillment of the core commitments, [3] networking churches around the core commitments, [4] brokering resources that enhance the core commitments, and [5] thinking broadly with districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners to help fulfill its vision.

A National Director led the focus on the five areas in the covenant relationship.

The MB Leadership Board continued to oversee various staff and management responsibilities for USMB, which was outlined in an operational plan they developed and approved. These included, but were not limited to, the function of the Board of Faith and Life, maintaining connection with the Bi-National Historic Commission, and approved any funding changes that would impact the US Conference. They also developed and approved covenants with the districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners. Ultimate accountable and legal management continued to rest with the MB Leadership Board.

A National Strategy Team [NST] was called together regularly by the National Director to focus on strategic leadership issues to fulfill the future story including the vision, core commitments, and providing empowering collaboration for the forward progress of vision. This NST included representatives from networks of churches, districts [typically the district minister], fellowships, agencies, and various partners. They would play a motivational and collaborative role in the fulfillment of the vision and core commitments. It was conceived from the beginning to not only be a group who simply shared information, but also a guiding coalition that sought to invest the passion of local churches initiating and generating action to fulfill the vision and advance the three core commitments while collaborating in every possible way.

Districts

A key part of the structural framework was seen at the various districts. In seeking to move the initiative toward the grassroots, the districts were called forth and challenged to a higher level of commitment to the vision and the core commitments. It was always seen that their partnership with local churches was a key element in the success of the future of USMB.

As part of the NST, the district ministers played a key role in calling together networks of churches along with the other sponsors. During the Transition Phase districts were asked to consider what it might look like if they could long-term reorganize as much of what they do as possible around the three core commitments. This was not something the MB Leadership Board could decide for them.

During the Transition Phase one district was asked to carry out a pilot project that would rethink its functioning around the vision and the three core commitments. This was evaluated at the end of this phase and the learnings carried forward into the Forward Movement Phase. Many of the learnings were adopted by the other districts and/or modified for the contextual differences of their settings.

Forward Movement Phase 2019-2022

Significant forward movement marked 2019 through 2022. As this phase began, USMB thrived as many local churches understood their role in the broader network, and felt ownership of and focused their efforts on the vision and core commitments of the movement. The model of a connected web or linked network reflected the formal and informal structures and relationships.

Benchmarks Achieved By the Beginning of This Phase

Many important things had happened by the beginning of 2019. First, commitment to the theme, vision, and core commitments clearly increased each year. While at the beginning of the previous phase only key leaders fully understood these aspects of the new journey, by the beginning of the current phase it was obvious lay leaders in local churches were understanding and embracing these aspects of the journey.

Second, a number of networks of churches were formed around one or more of the core commitments, and were working to increase their missional service in response to God's call upon them, and were making obvious progress in moving toward their full ministry potential.

Third, the inclusion of culturally diverse fellowships in a deeper, more primary way in the life and ministry of USMB had shown much progress. Continual progress was still needed during this phase.

Fourth, the work of the National Strategy Team [NST] was successful in supporting the launching and development of networks of churches around the three core commitments, and created productive collaboration efforts among the national expression, network of churches, districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners.

Fifth, some districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners had found it beneficial to restructure their organizations around their new vision. This was particularly true in their relationship to the three core commitments and the networks of churches.

Sixth, every church desiring so had access to information, resources, and networks to engage in local, national, and global church multiplication/church planting/evangelism, intentional disciple-making, and developing leaders. Many used this access as a resource to transform their church through their commitment to the three core commitments.

Seventh, church multiplication/church planting/evangelism and intentional disciple-making supported by the developing leaders were all making obvious and measurable progress. Measurement standards were developed that clearly illustrated progress. The storytelling of the progress sparked great excitement throughout the USMB family.

Eighth, Fresno Pacific University and Seminary and Tabor College became more intentionally engaged in developing Pastors and lay and community leaders with skills to help fulfill the three core commitments. They focused on discovering, developing, discipling, and tracking the progress of students and alumni.

Decisions to Accelerate the Journey

With this in mind, the movement from Transition to Forward Movement involved several important decisions about the leadership effectiveness of the US Conference. Of primary importance was an evaluation of the National Director.

Second, did the National Strategy Team function well in implementing the future story? Was there clarity of the management and operational role of the MB Leadership Board and the leadership role of the NST? Did the role and function of either the NST or the MB Leadership Board need to be changed?

Third, did the covenants with districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners need to be re-negotiated? With the amount of changes that occurred during the Transition Phase, and the changes these entities chose to make to adapt to the new realities, the existing covenants did need to be re-negotiated to keep them congruent with what was actually happening.

Fourth, was Mission USA effectively transitioning to a resourcing and networking agent and available to churches, networks of churches, and districts? Was this model successful, did it need to be modified, or was there the need for another model?

Fifth, is it time to change the funding model for the work of the US Conference? What happened to funding during the Transition Phase that would call for mild modification to major re-invention of the funding model? Decisions about improving the funding model need to be made during this phase.

Sixth, is it time to address a name change? A multiple year process to consider a name change, make a decision, and then implement it happened during this phase.

Each of these issues and more were ready to be addressed at the beginning of the Forward Movement Phase of 2019-2022.

Measurement Standards

Examples of where various measurement standards during this phase gave evidence of progress are the following.

1. A clear national identity had emerged, and networks of churches, districts, and fellowships connected churches in various existing and new geographical configurations.
2. The emergence of new churches and local church expressions during this period could annually be measured in the dozens, as could the number of existing churches who grew significantly in their disciple-making culture and the development of leaders.
3. Each year, significant progress was made in the calling out and development of emerging, diverse leaders. Significant increase in the effectiveness of existing leaders was also occurring through intentional leadership development. Peer learning clusters of pastors, staff, and various ministry personnel infused best practices into many ministry settings.
4. Leaders and local churches were clearly growing Gospel sensitivities that saw the demographic diversity of the mission field in America and around the world. The racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic patterns for local church expressions were growing in diversity and reflecting the neighborhoods in which churches found themselves. This was a movement of the Holy Spirit as well as a result of intentional effort and commitment.
5. Along the continuum of output, impact, capacity building, and sustainability, the forward movement of USMB clearly was addressing new capacities. The assistance of and partnership with districts, fellowships, agencies and various had been essential and vital on this journey. A simple and manageable funding model emerged that allowed churches to belong to and invest in the vision.
6. Networks of churches continued in a more significant way what started in the previous phase regarding churches with or without a Mennonite Brethren heritage. Churches with same or similar core commitments but not previously connected, began connecting with the network of churches related to USMB. This expanded the impact and capacity of USMB.

Sustainability Phase 2023-2025

In the past three years, 2023-2025, USMB matured in its movement to where it is sustaining the new gains and the new ways of engaging in innovative ministry reflected in a variety of expressions within and through local churches. The movement became a case study that others now look to for learning about transforming an existing traditional denomination into an innovative denominational movement.

Strong focus continues to be given to the Mennonite Brethren heritage and Anabaptist distinctives that birthed USMB. Its evangelical convictions also clearly shape life and ministry. Local church expressions that commit to be part of the core of USMB have the opportunity to learn this heritage before their formal connection. Many other local churches connect in one or more of the networks of churches without ever initiating a formal connection with the US Conference. Yet those local church expressions with a formal connection to USMB now number

more than 300. Those who are part of networks and not formally connected with USMB are another 100 or so churches.

Within USMB, local churches with shared passions, ministry interests, and ways of expressing the Gospel have formed networks of churches. The number of networks of churches is more than two dozen. Many forms of church multiplication/church planting/evangelism, intentional disciple-making, and leadership development are taking place.

Local churches continue to be the primary focus of USMB. The National Director and additional staff focus primarily on communication, networking churches in collaboration with districts, fellowships, agencies, and various partners, and leading the US Conference in its shared vision and three core commitments. The influence of USMB in the broader Christian world continues to grow.

Breaking the trend seen in many denominations, with USMB an increasing percentage of pastors, staff persons, and lay leaders have a learning connection with Fresno Pacific University and Seminary and Tabor College. This can be attributed to how intentionally these schools of higher education have worked to increase that connection and deepen it as a core part of their journey.

MB Foundation has continually increased its services to churches to help them increase the scope and scale of generosity of people connected with their church. They faithfully serve as a core entity of our national family.

The relationship between districts and their affiliated churches, plus the networks and fellowships in which these churches are involved, has actually increased as districts have been seen as the sponsors and champions of the networking, resource brokering, and services needed by churches.

Notes:

1. ²The word “fellowship” is used to refer to clusters of local churches organized according to their identity such as those who represent cultural diversity.
2. ³The word “network” is used to refer to clusters of local churches who intentionally come together to fulfill a role such as those clustered for church multiplication/church planting/evangelism.

USMB and USMB family are used to describe the totality of the Mennonite Brethren activity and work within the United States. US Conference specifically addresses the activities of the organization known as the US Conference of MB Churches.

Appendix

Evangelical/Anabaptist Distinctives and Core Convictions

- We are a believer's church: to deal with our human sinfulness, we teach conversion to new life through faith in Jesus Christ and practice baptism as a public sign of personal commitment to Jesus as Savior and Lord.
- We are Bible-centered: we accept the Bible as the inspired and authoritative word of God, seeking to obey its teaching, as illumined by the Holy Spirit and interpreted in the Christian community.
- We emphasize discipleship: we seek to live as authentic followers of Jesus in our daily lives, orienting our lives around Jesus' teaching and model.
- We value Christian fellowship: we believe the church is a biblical and mutually loyal community that expresses itself in worship, fellowship, accountability and witness.
- We are mission-minded: we share our faith by telling others about the Good News of Jesus and serving others in our neighborhoods and around the world, in obedience to Jesus' Great Commandment and to the Great Commission.
- We seek peace: we believe the Bible invites us to be at peace with God and with others, even our enemies.
- We cultivate healthy relationships: we are committed to choices that produce wholeness, healing, joy and peace in all relationships.