

College Mennonite Church: Clarifying Our Identity
February 20, 2008 (revised February 21, 2008)
Visitation and Questionnaire Project December-January (339 responses)

[noteworthy details, observations or cross-tabulation stats]

1. Age distribution: 18-34 (4%); 35-49 (4%); 50-64 (28%); 65-79 (39%); 80+ (24%)
 - 91% are 50+
 - of those starting to attend in last 14 years: the under 35 group has more than their share (14); 65+ has less than their share (66)
2. Length of years attending: <4 (10%); 5-14 (26%); 15-24 (14%); 25+ years (50%);
 - The rate of new attendees has been constant since 1994; and higher than 1984-93
3. Formal Education: at least 1 year of college (95%); at least 1 year of graduate school (57%)
 - the majority of the 57% have completed at least a Masters degree
 - Too much of a good thing?
4. Residence: An estimate--70% live within 1.5 miles of the campus.
 - A record among 500+ worship attendance congregations in North America?
 - Salt works better when it's spread out.

Note: The content in #5-10 summarizes what CMC participants reported.

5. Why I started attending: family (30%); GC staff/student (18%); friends (17%); general programming (7%); children/youth programming (6%)
 - The 25+ year attendance group (50% of congregation) has 83% of the "I came because of GC"
 - I came for children/youth programming is twice as strong in 15-24 term, and half as strong in 14 and less years.
 - Friends and music are markedly higher among 5-14 years.
 - Came because of GC is highest in 65+
 - Came because of programming is markedly higher among 35-64
 - Only 3% came because of a pastor/pastoral team.
6. Why I continue to attend: worship service (16%); friends (13%); music (8%); family (7%); comfortable/like it (7%); nurturing/meets spiritual needs (5%); adult S.S. (5%); Christian community/common values (5%)
 - Caring is markedly stronger among 25+ & markedly weaker among 5-24 years.
 - Adult S.S. is 3x stronger among 15-24 years, and 2x stronger among 4 and less.
 - Children and youth programming is markedly stronger among 5-14.
 - 4% continue because of a pastor/pastoral team—that is strongest among 25+ group.
 - The 65+ group had 100% of the Mennonite beliefs and it's a place to serve
 - Mennonite beliefs/peace & justice combined for 3%.
 - Only 1.5% referenced a place to serve or live out calling.
7. CMC's greatest strength: people resources (21%); caring (14%); music (12%); children/youth programming (10%); welcome diverse people/ideas (7%); worship service (6%)
 - Music is strongest among 5-14 year attending group, and 65+ age group.
 - The worship service as a strength is over represented among 25+ years attending, and under represented among 14 and under.
 - Global perspective is twice as strong among 5-24 year attendees.

- *Mennonite beliefs as CMC's greatest strength is strongest in 25+ years, and under represented in all other tenure categories. .*
 - *Welcomes/accepts diverse people and ideas is strongest among 35-64 ages*
8. A biblical understanding of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12, Romans 12) is not strong at CMC.
- *Increasing priority for spiritual gift discernment markedly stronger among 18-64, and markedly weaker among 65+*
9. Am I using my gift in or through CMC? Yes (60%); Somewhat (20%); No (20%)
10. If I could change one thing? more under 40 folk (20%); nothing (11%); preaching (7%); worship service (4%); reduce elitism/arrogance (4%); welcome diverse people groups (4%) emphasize spiritual gift discernment (4%). Other categories with 2% or 3%: welcome gays; structure(decision making, commissions, pastoral team, elders, etc.); more attention to elderly.
- *Concerns regarding changing the worship service, reducing elitism, and "no need for change" are general twice as strong among 35-64 when compared with 65+.*
 - *Concerns regarding preaching are concentrated in 5-24 year attendees.*
 - *Welcoming gays is weighted among 25+ years attendees, is absent among 4 and less, and under represented among 5-14 years.*
 - *Gift discernment is weighted among 14 years and less.*
 - *Change in structure is weighted among 4 years and under, and 15-24.*
 - *Welcoming diverse peoples is twice its share among <4 attendees, above average among 5-14, and absent among 15-24*
11. Worship attendance has been in steady decline for 10 years. Some decline can be attributed to a general trend in most denominations, and some to our broadcast to Greencroft and web access.

A summary: (all six are descriptive—none are intended to be critical)

College Mennonite Church is:

[expected?] **gifted, professional, and globally connected;**
 [unexpected?] **caring, traditional, and getting old.**

Use of terms:

Professional: high formal education; upper middle/upper incomes; fewer business folk

Traditional:

- use of classical music, emphasis on four part a cappella singing, limited use of projection video or liturgical dance, and absence of "Contemporary Christian" music.
- tendency to repeat form and content for special services:
- change takes place slowly
- structure is traditional in philosophy
- traditional *on paper expectations* of pastors' *roles*: they are the experts; lay folk help [congregational behavior may vary from what is *on paper*]
- calling system (how all congregational roles are assigned) is traditional
- majority of adult classes are generally based on age
- one worship service
- at 50th percentile or lower with technology use
- age demographics indicative of a traditional congregation

Interpretation

1. Our demographics make turning around the decline difficult, but not because of single factors. It is the compounding of homogeneous factors. To fit in, it helps to be retired from a professional vocation, highly educated, live nearby, have a good income, prefer a rather specific worship style and music, and have a lot of friends and or family here. There's a lot of such folk here already. How many more are there out there?
2. The overall responses to questions 5-10 indicate a relatively high satisfaction with CMC as it is. The single most change desired says in essence: we want more young people to like it.
3. It is noteworthy that many of the items on the second line of #10 are the changes that will make a difference in attracting young people specifically, and new attendees of all ages: worship service, reduce elitism/arrogance, welcome diverse people groups, emphasize spiritual gift discernment, welcome gays, structure, and give more attention to the elderly. Collectively, many are identifying individual areas that need to change; can we agree on enough of them?
4. Under the description of "traditional," I believe the first one (music/worship) does not have to change (much) if many of the rest of the factors are changed. I wonder if "slippery slope" thinking is operational: if nothing changes, we can be assured that worship/music won't change.
5. In reading between the lines, valuing Mennonite beliefs does not come through strong. Are we accommodating? Can we be unapologetically Mennonite? Do we understand what it means to be Mennonite in the 21st Century? Have distinctively Mennonite positions (e.g. peacemaking) been taught in a way that has surgically excised them from their *holistic biblical contexts in the life and teaching examples of Jesus and the Apostles*.

Identity Arena Recommendations

1. Unpack the traditional thing. What are we afraid of?
2. A biblical framework for understanding church: Sermons (Mar. 30-April 20; Combined Adult S.S. Classes, April 6-20)
3. Life Plus Plus Discernment teaching: March 26 (Passion); April 2 (Spiritual Gifts); April 23 (Personal Style and Calling).
4. What does it mean to be a Mennonite church in the 21st Century. Clarify our relationship with IMMC. Resource: Walfred Fahrner, Building on the Rock. A Biblical Vision of Being Church Together from an Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective. (Herald Press, 1995 edition out of print) Reprint: Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR.
5. Head spirituality predominates. Let's work at balancing and integrating head (cognitive) and heart (emotional) process in congregational life. Movement in this direction will involve feeling freer to speak more openly about faith and spiritual life in the congregation.
6. Diversity is not only good, it is the ideal as long as we are unified behind a common purpose. We don't need to all think alike. Is Jesus the glue that holds us together, or is it something else?
7. We need to clarify how the change in our relationship with Goshen College since the 1960s impacts our identity today.

Cautions

1. Let's resist the temptation to focus now on vision--what to do to attract younger/new people. Let's stay focused in the short term on who we are, before we tackle what we're going to do.
 2. Another temptation to avoid: focus on structure, before identity and vision are clear.
- Conclusion: To paraphrase Garrison Keillor: we're *all* smart, good looking, and above average. The hardware and software are fine; but we have connectivity issues, i.e. how it all fits together.

