

State of MCC – Live Broadcast Transcript

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Greetings to all of you today! I am coming to you via a live broadcast because I love the people and the vision of MCC. In some places we are very strong and growing – in others, we seem to be declining and drifting, without adequate leadership, struggling with the resources to do what needs to be done. And, because I believe that God, through the Holy Spirit wants to use us to change lives and change history.

Our Governing Board has wrestled with these issues, and, among other things, encouraged me to come directly to you. We have a firm commitment to not spend more than we receive, and to work hard for a healthy financial future. We know that we can only grow stronger if we grow together; and we want to find the ways to renew our vows as a people, as churches and denomination/movement.

Metropolitan Community Churches started as a calling, a new revelation of the gospel of Jesus. this is a calling that has changed the world, saved lives, and transformed faith. . . MCC is still doing that; and still needed in so many places to offer that today.

Today I want to share my heart, using a principle of Jim Collin’s wonderful book, *Good to Great*: he says we are to try to balance facing of the brutal facts with relentless optimism. That will be my format today.

Let’s start with some brutal facts that MCC is facing:

- The difficult global economy has impacted MCC and our churches worldwide. This has caused stress, uncertainty, and has impacted our local churches and denomination. Some days, it really takes its toll on me and on our staff and leadership, as it does on so many denominations and non-profits all over the world.
- Our churches’ incomes took the biggest financial hit from 2008 to early 2010. Then their incomes leveled off in 2010 and 2011, for the most part. But, many were still reeling and recovering from the prior years.
- Even though income has been even, tithes to MCC have suffered a lot in the last two years. Churches owe nearly half a million dollars to our denomination over three years, much of which we have written off. Last year that amount was almost \$200,000. This resulted in severe staff cuts late last year, and will mean more cuts soon, as we have to

reduce this year's budget again. If all churches were caught up and prompt in their tithes, we would not have to do that.

- This has many complicated causes. Most MCC churches, thankfully, see tithing/assessments as a covenantal issue with MCC – part of their DNA, and how they understand their identity as MCC. A smaller percentage of churches don't understand that MCC's denominational economy is based mostly on church tithes. When our pastors embrace the commitment to give monthly to MCC's global program that sets the tone for the church. If board members and congregants do not hear this from their pastor, this connection can erode. I meet members, board members and lay delegates all the time who do not understand that MCC depends on their tithes, at 12.5%, to do our global ministry.
- We have tried to shift to other sources of income, to try to make up for the decline in tithes. While we have had some success with grants and donors, it is not enough. The Governing Board is working with me and our staff to shift to other sources to supplement, but, we will depend on tithes for a long time, to support our churches denominationally.
- We manage our funds very well, thank God, and are good stewards with every penny, but that also does not compensate for declining income.
- One of the biggest concerns we have is not about finances, though it affects finances: we have not invested enough in new church starts in the US for a long time, since the last years of HIV/AIDS, more than a decade ago. In many ways, the HIV/AIDS in the US caused us to pull inward, and we never re-emerged with a passion for new church starts. This is like shutting the front door of your church, and letting no one else in! **WE MUST HAVE THE SAME PASSION ABOUT NEW CHURCH STARTS IN MID-SIZED CITIES AND TOWNS IN THE US AND CANADA THAT WE HAVE GLOBALLY!** Everywhere I go, I ask MCCer's if they are aware of smaller cities and larger towns near them that need an MCC that do not have them – everyone says yes. Where is the next generation of MCCer's with a burning passion to meet the real spiritual hunger in these places, to risk building new communities of radically inclusive faith, to create new face to face and virtual models?
- We do not have trouble filling pulpits that offer a full time salary. What we have a desperate shortage of is clergy willing to go to churches that can only pay part time at the present; or to start a new church where it is really needed. We need a new generation of entrepreneurs, who will start churches, build up existing one, take risks . . . If I am speaking to you, I want to hear from you!
- We have underutilized our laity and lay leadership. We need lay people to be in denominational leadership as Network leaders and team members; in helping to start new churches; in providing the kind of expertise that clergy don't necessarily have, and to be “denominational advocates” in the local church, to make the connections.

- Some of our churches have not revised their mission or vision in 10, 20 or 30 years, and are still living in another decade: this is a recipe for decline. You cannot stay in the same place, theologically, or in terms of outreach, mission, and identity that you were in decades ago. Where there is no vision, or no new vision, the people perish.
- There are churches in MCC that have been planted recently, or grown dramatically, in recent years, that have a story to tell us – are we listening? All of them have revisit their vision and mission regularly, have re-engaged their purpose, have asked themselves how they can be on the cutting edge of ministry, today.
- It can be the hardest part of my job to hear churches, boards and even pastors say, “What do we get for our 12.5%?” I have several responses: first of all, quoting Governing Board member Rev. Tony Freeman, who when he was a pastor, taught his church that it is the wrong question. When the early founders and pastors and lay delegates put tithing to MCC in the bylaws, they didn’t do that so they would get anything – they did it because they believed in the mission of MCC, and they wanted to be blessed by giving to that; because there were so many who needed our message, our ministry, and because we can only grow stronger together. Then as now, we ask churches to give because that generosity helps us all live up to our Destiny as a movement!
- However, it is important to answer that questions because you do get a lot for what you give to the denomination. You get Elders and staff and volunteers, with fewer resource dollars in recent years, who develop summits, design webinars; provide training for clergy, REVM’s, training for lay leaders; mentoring retreats; who trouble-shoot, train interim pastors, help churches in transition; nurture Networks; visit churches for special occasions and training; recruit volunteers for denominational work; oversee Governance; plan General Conference; support those engaged in new church starts; develop MCC’s global justice ministry and public policy; support for marriage equality; do funerals when pastors die; help in disasters; reach out with support and presence for Human rights; did I mention travel even in dangerous places to connect with our brothers and sisters. WHAT YOU GET IS A SPIRITUAL BLESSING OF BLESSING SOMEONE ELSE . . .

Now, for the Relentless Optimism:

- Despite all the challenges, I know in the depth of my being, that MCC has an amazing present impact and a transformative future- that we are not finished yet!
- No church embodies the radically inclusive gospel better than we do at our best! A young man at our Young Adult Retreat in Ft. Lauderdale last July talked about being straight, and in MCC, because he if the “son of a ‘T’” – his father transitioned years ago, and this young man never felt at home in a church until MCC, where his difference, he said, “was just one difference among a church full of people with differences.” How can we expand our sense of being on the edge with so many kinds of people who have felt

unwelcome in churches, who see religion as the enemy, who have been disappointed or betrayed? Or who simply have had no connection whatsoever to faith or faith community, and who never imagined a church that is as real and engaged, saving lives and all kinds of “modern families.”

- Most of the world, most of the Christian world, is still hostile, inhospitable to the LGBT community, our families and allies. While LGBT people have made progress in small pockets of the more liberal, but declining progressive churches. They are only 7% of the US population! Most Americans are either Catholic, evangelical or Pentecostals, or, agnostics or atheists, all of whom, if they are LGBT or allies or family, need us.
- In addition, so many straight, open-hearted people, families, are de-churched and in many places, are finding hospitality and welcome in MCC. If your church, especially in the US, is still a “gay ghetto,” it is doomed to decline. The world is changing, and we have to open up, fearlessly to new needs. I think MCC, for instance, at our best, is an amazingly open place for people who are not sure they believe in God, the largest growing religious demographic. How many times have people asked us, “it is OK if I come to church here if I (don’t know; don’t believe; and not sure if there is) a God?” Imagine a Christian church that really opens up to those who have been so turned off by religion, but who are attracted to a new way of being together without judgment.
- I hear some people, in the US especially, ask if we are merging with the United Church of Christ, or if we are closing our doors. I want us to be friendly to our UCC friends, to collaborate, but not become them! I celebrate the handful of successful experiments in joint ministry. However, I think this is an MCC self-esteem issue, and an issue of anxiety over identity and vision, made worse by the economy. As if we have lost our nerve, or our faith in our calling to be who we are. We are not merging with anyone, and we are not closing our doors. Some MCC’s have closed their doors, and some have needed to. But, that only means that we have to open new doors!
- MCC has an amazing vocation, coming from our Pentecostal and Catholic and ecumenical roots of incredible, diverse worship that is not UCC, or anything else that has existed before! Our founding narrative and unique culture, our global calling and message, our position on the margins, is too important, too unfinished, to simply fade into a mainstream American church. I have always fought for the right of our people to be welcome in any church! But as for me, and my house, we are going to do what God called us to do, which is to grow MCC in our prophetic and still needed witness!
- We are not done yet! We have to wake up ourselves, and look around. There are cities, and towns, where LGBT people have few options for community, for belonging, for church community. We need to become a more virtual, and accessible church. When someone from India writes me and says, how can I join MCC, I have to have an answer for him!! When someone from a state, like Oklahoma, that has no MCC right now, what do we tell her? We need to be able to find ways to connect and include and empower people who are far from the nearest MCC, to be MCC right where they are.

- Seven years ago MCC in Latin America declined from an all time high of 13 churches, to only 7. . .today, there are at least 43 churches and groups; and 23 in Brazil, where I go in a few weeks to celebrate their 10th anniversary. They did this with few resources, and with your precious tithe dollars, supporting a very small staff with a very big vision. Latin Americans are helping us with our new Hispanic North American outreach. The Hispanic community in North America is the largest growing demographic, totally underserved by us, and the religious LGBT community. We are not finished yet!
- Diana Butler Bass's new book, *Christianity After Religion*, says that young people in the US and Canada believe, over 90% of them, that Christianity is fundamentally anti-gay, judgmental and boring. So, if you have a church that is open to the integration of sexuality and spirituality, not judgmental or boring, you have a prayer of being able to connect with young adults!
- We have a Young Adult MCC retreat this July in Dallas, Texas – Find out about it, and encourage and support young adults in your church, or in your community to attend!
- Very soon we will have a new MCC Website – If you like the new General Conference website, wait until you see this, which is a month or two away. It will be a truly International website, welcoming to newcomers, and easy to find everything you need for your local church.
- I had the privilege of meeting recently with the General Conference 2013 Worship Team: an amazing, mostly young team, preparing to lead the largest General Conference ever, our 25th! To see them in action is to see the future of MCC.
- Our International Task Force is working very diligently to propose a Global Covenant for MCC, to advance a virtual church, proposing ways to connect and empower MCC around the world. You will be inspired by their work, which we will have lots of opportunity to review before Conference in Chicago next year.
- We have a new MCC in Cuba!
- I will be meeting, in June, in Romania with pastors from Russia and the Ukraine, yearning to be credentialed in MCC and to affiliate their congregations; there will be an MCC REVM in the UK next month, and a training conference in Africa this year.
- To me, MCC is the best place to change lives and change history at the same time! Our new Global Justice Institute, which so many of you have responded to for our Easter Offering, is ushering in a new era of fighting religious homophobia and working for human rights on behalf of MCC and The Fellowship, led by Bishop Yvette Flunder.
- MCC started with 12 people and \$3.12. Today we are in 40 countries, and collectively own \$200 million in property. We are not going anywhere, not merging with another church, not selling out or giving up. I don't want to be Moderator of a church that does that! I am challenged by our finances, but I am not giving up. I know that the resources we need are there, we just have to trust, and do what we do best. MCCers are incredibly

resourceful and resilient! Look at you!! Look at what you have done in and through your local churches!

What you can do:

- Pray! For me, for our Governing Board, for MCC! That we will step up to our destiny, fearlessly, boldly. This is not about money, not at the core. It is about calling, passion, will, faith in the God who called Troy Perry, you and me. Do you have a calling you are ignoring? Stop, surrender, say yes, and you will never be sorry!
- If you are a clergy or Lay delegate, vote this week in the Special General Conference to affirm two new Elders who can help us as we grow MCC. Let's move into the 21st century, and test out our virtual skills together!
- Attend Network meetings, look beyond your own church, to your neighborhood, MCC neighbors, to MCC globally. If you do not have a functioning Network and successful Network gatherings that connect your churches, find volunteers, or volunteer yourself to be trained as a Network leader, and step up! We need you.
- Register for General Conference 2013 by the end of April, at the 50% discount! This will be the largest General Conference in our history, where we will make history together!
- Remind people in your church that what they get for their tithes this month is a new church in Cuba! And, opportunities for learning, training, connection, renewal through our denominational programs.
- If your church is not current with its tithes, and is not engaged in correcting that, ask why, and help your church understand that other churches are footing the bill for services your receive, and take for granted. We are always ready and willing to work with you to get back on track. Things happen, we know, this is not about shame or blame, it is about renewing our commitment to each other to change the world.
- On a more mundane level, we need people to use their frequent flier miles to buy tickets for Elder and staff travel this year – some things can't be done virtually. If you can help, contact me. Someone's life may depend on it, or a congregation's future may depend on it.
- It costs you nothing, when you book travel on American Airlines, to enter not only your own advantage number, but also MCC's – you still get yours and we get free tickets! If you don't know how to do this, contact us! We will help you sign up.
- After Easter, as we approach Pentecost, stay tuned for our monthly donor campaign, and consider making even a small monthly gift to MCC above your local church giving.
- Finally, pray! That we grow stronger together, even as our economy slowly heals. . .pray especially for everyone in the world who would be a part of MCC today, if they knew about us, or if they knew it was possible to access you, us, our ministry together.

Thank you for letting me rant and rave a little today, and share my heart with you. Most of all, thanks for your amazing ministries in your local churches which make MCC real to those who need it most! May the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit bless you all, as we move through Holy Week together. Amen.