Final Report of the International Task Force
19 July 2012

Construyendo una Comunidad que Rodea el Mundo

Building a Community that Encircles the World
Eine Gemeinschaft bauen, die die Welt umspannt

Respectfully submitted
by the
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I. Preamble

By Rev. Dr. Nancy Wilson
Moderator, Metropolitan Community Churches
July 2012

As we prepare for our 25th General Conference, MCC wrestles with two impulses: to ground ourselves in our founding narrative and to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit reinventing us! This requires of us a deep trust in the God who called us in the first place and in Whom we not only “believe” but “live, move and have our being!” It requires a new connection to the Jesus who taught and embodied amazing grace, as well as to the people of the world who need us.

The International Task Force (ITF) came into being two years ago as a part of a structure change the General Conference embraced in 2010. As the Strategic Review Team proposed changes in our structure (electing a new Governing Board, establishing Networks, etc), it also pointed to future work: really grappling with the emerging, global nature of MCC, effectively and faithfully.

After General Conference in 2010, the Governing Board sent out applications and went through an exhaustive search for members of the ITF. We also set out a plan and parameters, which are described in this document. We were looking for people, mostly from outside the U.S., who had demonstrated leadership in their local church or area, who had expertise but not pre-conceptions. While the Structure Review Team had been composed mostly of people with a long denominational history, most of the people on the ITF had little denominational level experience or baggage, though they have a devotion to the mission and vision of MCC. We were so thrilled at the number and quality of the applicants and gave them a huge task, as described in this document.

Challenges and opportunities related to being an international denomination/movement are not new. I remember visiting Rev. Elder Jean White in London in the early 1980s. Through her eyes, I experienced what it was like to be in a relatively small MCC with a few other small churches and thousands of miles away from the U.S., where MCC was clearly centered. I felt
the isolation and the frustration. Jean, herself, using only mail -- and on occasion, precious, costly phone calls -- ran what we called “World Church Extension” out of her home, corresponding with those seeking hope in so many places -- in Africa, Indonesia, and Latin America. She was a voice in the wilderness and a lifeline of one to many who were just emerging from the shadows.

What has changed is not the need, nor the impulse to be global, but the world itself is new. We live in a world of instant, global, fast-paced communication, where people travel (though it is still so expensive) at the drop of a hat. We are aware of, and in touch with, a global LGBT human rights movement, and with people of faith in so many places struggling with lethal homophobia and transphobia. Since my trip 30 years ago, the global village has gotten smaller and the problems more complex. We have more opportunities to fulfill our Destiny. And, yet, the world economy means that all of us who do this work struggle for resources.

As people of faith, we are also so aware of the ways in which churches and missionary movements were a “project” of colonialism for so many centuries. We, in MCC, want to shed the negativity of that past -- shed the racism and oppressive practices -- while finding healthy and holy ways to connect to brothers and sisters around the world. This is not as easy as it sounds. Assumptions, and ways of thinking and doing, persevere. Money and inequality of access re-create old patterns.

People in emerging areas in MCC want what we want: justice, hope, the freedom to be ourselves, to practice our faith, and to have community, safely. How can we do that while not imposing our U.S. -- our Northern/Western culture -- and allowing MCC to emerge in indigenous ways? And can we allow ourselves, MCC, to be changed in the process?

Transformation is a key value of MCC. We say we are “transformed by grace,” and, in turn, we have transformed lives, the world, the church, and history. As we change and grow, we find new ways to change the world.

What the ITF surely discovered is that people all over the world are hungry for authentic community and connection. Our question is always, “How?” How do we make room in our hearts, in our movement, for what is coming towards us from the future God is calling us to co-create?
As we explore what inclusion really means, we are learning, in this virtual world, that one thing it means is “access.” How do we access more people and more communities? How do people access our message, our ministry, and our denomination? How do we relinquish control and allow MCC to take shape in new ways? What are the barriers to access, in our structures and ministries, and how can we overcome them? How do we empower people to connect with MCC?

More than anything, the ITF engaged in a ministry of listening and learning. They struggled with the fact that they embodied the very challenges we face as MCC globally: the challenges of language, cultures, time zones, theological differences, and resources. Though we allocated significant resources by MCC terms, the ITF largely worked by phone, Skype, and email. A face-to-face meeting of the whole task force proved to be beyond our resources. There were people who struggled, for reasons of their own situations, to even be able to meet by phone or respond to email. Members of the ITF and MCC staff learned so much about each other's situations and circumstances. The realities of being MCC, or an MCC pastor, in very different contexts, became so apparent.

The frustrations that the ITF experienced are the frustrations of being MCC today, in our emerging global context. And, there were corresponding moments of wonder, awe, and amazement, which blessed them and will bless us.

The Steering Committee had a lot of steering to do. They spent many hundreds of hours listening, learning, interviewing, asking questions, seeking more information, and raising more questions. They sought expert, outside help from Dr. Christopher Duraisingh, a professor of cross-cultural “missions” at The Episcopal Divinity School, who asked them to more deeply listen for the “Missio Dei” of MCC: what God is doing, and how we can be part of it.

This listening and learning has to become a deeper part of MCC’s ongoing vocation. The ITF has started something that must find new ways to continue. What they are sharing with us is not only a product but a process that can be transformational. We have to find ways that our leadership and our people can be encouraged to listen and learn together about our present and our future.
My deepest thanks to the members of the ITF, the very hard-working Steering Committee: Mark, Jochen, and Carol; to Raquel for your vision, and for connecting the ITF and me and the Governing Board; to Marina and Héctor who provided unending staff support; and to Linda, for jumping in as project manager to help us all get to this point. Thank you for your time, patience, creativity, inspiration and investment of yourselves in this work. May God bless and use this effort as we open up to God’s future for us.
II. Introduction

*Miqueas 6:8b* "¿Y qué es lo que demanda el SEÑOR de ti, sino sólo practicar la justicia, amar la misericordia, y andar humildemente con tu Dios?"

*La Biblia de las Américas (LBLA) Espanol/Spanish*

*Micah 6:8b* “And what does God require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

*New International Version (NIV)*

Following General Conference (GC) 2010 in Acapulco, Mexico, the UFMCC Governing Board promised that an International Task Force would be installed to identify and propose changes to strengthen MCC’s global ministry, as well as to deal constructively with key ecclesiastical, organizational and cultural barriers to growth, with authenticity and sustainability.

The goal of this International Task Force (ITF) would be to bring substantive structural, ecclesial and programmatic recommendations to the Governing Board for review prior to those proposals being brought to the 2013 General Conference in Chicago for decision and action. It was believed essential that this task force be truly representative of the diversity across the world of MCC; and further, that it would be composed of both laity and clergy alike, and be international in both composition and outlook. The ITF would be encouraged to do their work freely and responsibly, to ask questions and challenge assumptions.

Raquel Benítez-Rojas was appointed to be the Governing Board liaison to the ITF, and four staff members were assigned to support the ITF in its work: Marina Laws, USA/UK; Rev. Elder Héctor Gutiérrez, Mexico; Florin Buhuceanu, Romania; and Connie Meadows, USA. Leah Sloan, USA, provided valuable editing input in the final stages of the document’s completion. From 49 applicants, 21 individuals were selected and interviewed by committees of the Governing Board in late January 2011. Twelve of the interviewees were then appointed to the ITF, and these were initially:
Rev. Ceejay Agbayani (Philippines)
Dr. Mark Dalgleish (UK/Australia)
Rev. Tom Decker (Canada)
Rev. Araceli Ezzatti (Uruguay)
Mr. Jochen Gewecke (Germany)
Rev. Paul Mokgethi-Heath (South Africa)
Dr. Roger Nasciemento (Brazil/UK)
Mr. Henry Onzem (Australia)
Ms. Sarah-Jane Ramage (UK)
Dr. Carol Scherfenberg M.D. (USA)
Rev. Dr. Neil Thomas (USA/UK)

One of the appointed members from a non-western continent found it necessary to reduce employment-related harassment and asked for anonymity during the ITF process.

Gewecke, Onzem, and Scherfenberg were appointed to be the Steering Committee. They would lead sub-teams of four members each that were designated Groups Faith, Grace, and Hope, respectively.

Mokgethi-Heath and Nasciemento resigned from the task force in April 2011. Subsequently, Dominic Kessell, South Africa, and Rev. Boon Lin Ngeo, USA/Malaysia, were appointed to the ITF.
III. Mission and Objectives

It is hoped that the work of the ITF will lead to a stronger sense of global connection and universal ownership and belonging within MCC, as well as improvement in the resourcing and sharing of ministry from and between local churches. Further, it is hoped that MCC will find ways of strengthening and encouraging both the development of local and indigenous leadership and the diversity of involvement at both local and denominational levels of the worldwide MCC community. It is hoped that members of MCC churches worldwide will feel that they are part of a global movement, not just members of a local church.

It is expected that the ITF will address theological, cultural, ecclesiastical, political, and legal barriers to MCC’s being a truly international and inclusive Christian denomination in the world today, and that they, much like the Structural Review Team (SRT) which functioned in the lead-up to General Conference 2010, will explore alternative church models and organizational structures in relation to MCC’s current structure.

The Governing Board posed a set of nine broad questions to the ITF, which became part of the core focus and calling of the task force:

1. How do MCC churches and ministries outside the USA and Canada have an appropriate measure of autonomy, while also having access to denominational resources and connection to other local MCC churches and ministries?

2. How can we enhance and improve our global ministry and support structure?

3. How can we use the flexibility in our system to support different expressions of MCC in different places in the world?

4. How can we improve the uses of technology to enhance our ministry globally to communicate, connect, and resource?

5. What are our greatest opportunities for growth, and how can we prioritize and support those opportunities?
6. How can we embrace our cultural, geographic, religious, and theological diversity as a gift and not just a problem to be solved?

7. What is the funding strategy for ministries in places where the economy is different from the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Australia/NZ?

8. What are our global goals; what is our strategy for achieving them?

9. Which organizations are our best actual or potential allies in this global ministry, and how can that partnership be fostered?
IV. Process and Working Structure

A. ITF Group Process

The first conference calls of the entire ITF and Steering Committee were held in March 2011 and were facilitated by Wilson and Benítez-Rojas. Calls were made using the ATT phone conference call process.

The three groups began meeting in early April 2011 via Skype. Initially the group calls were scheduled every two weeks. Discussions were held regarding the nine basic questions proposed by the Governing Board.

The members of the groups became acquainted with the challenges in all the geographic areas of the world. A number of documents were made available including church membership statistics, UFMCC Bylaws, documents related to the European proposal, reports and survey by the SRT, and answers by Wilson to some basic questions.

Beginning in July 2011, the Steering Committee filed monthly reports chronicling process and progress to the Governing Board on behalf of the ITF. Solutions to problems of the global church gradually evolved.

B. Steering Committee Face-to-Face Meetings

1. Glenn Mills, Pennsylvania, USA, ITF Steering Committee Face-to-Face Meeting

The ITF Steering Committee met at Imago Dei MCC in Glenn Mills, Pennsylvania, USA, 6-8 May 2011, along with Benítez-Rojas and Laws. Conference calls were held with Rev. Tony Freeman, Governing Board; Rev. Elder Mona West, PhD., Office of Formation and Leadership Development (OFLD); Rev. Pat Bumgardner, Chair of the Global Justice Team; outside consultant Juan Battle, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Public Health, & Urban Education at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and Wilson. Freeman had served on the Structural Review Team that reported to General Conference 2010. He gave background on that process and the SRT’s realization that further global evaluation was needed. Freeman explained the nine basic questions with which the ITF was charged.
The Steering Committee spent about four hours in a brainstorming session facilitated by Benítez-Rojas regarding the nine basic questions. Questions, problems, words, and issues were listed and then categorized into sets. The titles of the sets were: Communication, Growth, Planting, Leadership, Branding & Visibility, Cultural Identity, and Denominational Structures. Laws was present to provide administrative support.

Based on the brainstorming exercise, Groups Faith, Grace, and Hope began to work on sets of issues via Skype and email. When a problem was clarified, solutions were sought. Proposals were drafted and discussed during the phone conferences.

In June, Onzem, leader of Group Grace, became aware that he was unable to meet the demands of both his studies and the ITF and resigned his position. Dalgleish agreed to become the leader of Group Grace and a member of the Steering Committee in his stead. Phone conferences were limited in productivity at times due to vacations of team members and staff. A detailed report was expected for the Governing Board’s August Face-to-Face meeting. The report was compiled, edited and submitted to the Governing Board (GB) for consideration at their meeting. The GB accepted several concrete proposals about communications issues. The remainder of the report was referred to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) for consideration and reflection.

2. Toronto, Ontario, Canada, ITF Steering Committee Face-to-Face Meeting

A second face-to-face meeting of the ITF Steering Committee was held 22-25 September 2011, at MCC Toronto in Ontario, Canada, for consultation that would give the ITF a more focused sense of direction. This meeting, facilitated by Benítez-Rojas, also gave Dalgleish an opportunity to get to know the rest of the Steering Committee better, and vice-versa. Phone conferences were held with members of the SLT and external consultant, Dr. Christopher Duraisingh, from the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. Wilson, Rev. Elder Don Eastman, and Gutiérrez met with the Steering Committee in person. Decker, a member of the ITF, was also able to join the team for a few hours. Laws was present for administrative support.
The Steering Committee had conversations about what it means to be a Human Rights Church. They referred to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 and also to the MCC Human Rights Protocol. Additionally, team leaders had the opportunity to discuss each group’s proposals.

The conference call with Duraisingh challenged the Steering Committee to think more deeply about what it means to “be church” and also how to go about “being church” in posture, and not just in process, as a global denomination serving God whilst still being culturally relevant and powerful at a local level. The Steering Committee explored the differences between being within a Bounded Set or a Centered Set as a church model. The theological insights that were shared by Duraisingh were crucial in grounding the focus of the ITF within the fundamental missiology and values of MCC.

During the retreat, Wilson and Benítez-Rojas determined that a project manager would be valuable to guide the Steering Committee to a finished report. Benítez-Rojas had been involved in supervision of the reports and group meetings on a day-to-day basis and needed to step back to a liaison role to focus more on Governing Board duties. Wilson committed her new assistant to be a project coordinator for the ITF beginning 3 January 2012.

Having opportunity to spend a long time in conversation with Wilson, the Steering Committee was able to review the SRT’s process and reports, as well as the governance of MCC. The occasion to reflect along with Wilson on the meetings with Duraisingh and the other members of the SLT helped the group glean the wisdom and experience that had been shared.

At the urging of Wilson, the decision was made to perform a survey of needs of LGBT Christians worldwide, both within and outside UFMCC. Scherfenberg accepted responsibility for the survey on behalf of her group. It was agreed that in addition to helping to organize the ITF’s communications and reports, the new project coordinator would assist in creating the survey. The group recognized that the survey would not be ready to distribute until late February 2012.

After the Toronto Face-to-Face meeting, the three groups continued to focus on the proposals that were being developed and, in some cases, moved in slightly different directions based on information received. Meetings continued through June 2012 via Skype, with monthly group
calls, biweekly Steering Committee calls, and the entire ITF meeting monthly with calls at two different times to accommodate the wide range of time zones.

Wilson’s newly appointed assistant, Linda Brenner-Beckstead, became the project manager of the ITF on 3 January 2012. She studied the proposals the teams had compiled. Because consultants were not available to assist in the formation of a denomination-wide survey and with agreement of Wilson, the plan for a survey was discontinued. It was also concluded that insufficient funds had been collected to support a face-to-face meeting of all the members of the ITF, so a third meeting of the Steering Committee including Brenner-Beckstead would be held in Florida in February.

3. St. Petersburg, Florida, USA, ITF Steering Committee Face-to-Face Meeting

The ITF Steering Committee met at King of Peace MCC in St. Petersburg, Florida, USA, 30 January – 1 February 2012. Wilson was present with the team for parts of two days. Barbara Crabtree, MCC Director of Operations, presented information and documentation about MCC structure and finances that was useful in appropriate proposal design. Eastman was available as a consultant. Benítez-Rojas, Brenner-Beckstead, and Laws were present to facilitate the meetings.

Four members of the Governing Board who reside in Florida gathered to analyze the proposals and pose questions to the Steering Committee. A challenging evaluation took place that helped to point out areas that may cause concerns to members of the denomination. Governing Board members Rev. Dr. Candace Shultis, Rev. Dr. Robert Griffin, Liz Bisordi, Bryan Parker, Benítez-Rojas, and Wilson were all very supportive of the work the ITF had produced and were encouraging for the presentation to General Conference.

The final day of the retreat focused on creating a structure for the final report, dividing duties for composition of the various sections, and setting deadlines. It was decided that Gewecke would compose in German with translation into English later.

4. Parrish, Florida, USA, ITF Steering Committee Face-to-Face Meeting
A final gathering of the ITF Steering Committee was held at Dayspring Episcopal Conference Center, Parrish, Florida, USA, 19-20 June 2012, to complete the report. In attendance were Benítez-Rojas, Brenner-Beckstead, Dalgleish, Gewecke, and Scherfenberg. Wilson joined to open and close the meeting.

The advance plan was to finish writing the document, but instead the group found it important to discuss every page of the report in detail for content and word choice. They also reviewed the text for cultural meaning of words that could offend or exclude some groups or individuals. All of this resulted in extensive editing. Since some parts of the report had been composed several months earlier, updating was required. Inspiration occurred regarding the incorporation of scriptural quotations in several languages to highlight the multi-lingual aspect of the task force. The team parted with some writing assignments to complete, but they were satisfied that a very inclusive report was to be realized. An evening communion service led by Wilson was the spiritual high point of the two-day encounter.

C. Interviews

1. Rev. Dr. Nancy Wilson was a consultant and spiritual advisor throughout the ITF process. She gave many days of her time for task force conference calls and at face-to-face meetings of the Steering Committee. Wilson guided the ITF through the process, focused them, and helped them clarify goals and solutions. She prayed for the ITF and with them and helped them navigate some interpersonal relationship issues as well.

2. In Toronto, Rev. Elder Don Eastman explained national church models in denominations around the world and how those churches and their structures are maintained in relation to local autonomy and global unity. He discussed the ways in which MCC explored a national model roughly 20 years ago and identified problems associated with such a model. This discussion was particularly useful in relation to the developing proposal for a structure based on local protocols within a global covenanted model. The Steering Committee also had a productive discussion with Eastman about Christian and church identity and how societies’ and peoples’ identities have changed over the years. He talked about the changing face of church culture and the changing patterns of church
attendance and spiritual expression. Eastman also met with the Steering Committee in St. Petersburg, Florida, USA, and offered clarifying critiques of the drafted proposals.

3. Dr. Juan Battle, professor of sociology in New York City, met with the Steering Committee by phone 7 May 2011, while the group met in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania, USA. He analyzed UFMCC in terms of phases during the life of the church. Battle stated that the first phase of MCC was the “LGBT Church.” During this time, MCC brought the message that God’s inclusive love extended to all persons, that God made LGBT people and loved them the way they were. The second phase of MCC’s development was “The AIDS Church.” MCC had a full-time pastor of HIV Ministries. MCC congregations around the globe provided pastoral care at hospices and hospitals and helped families come to terms with HIV and AIDS. The third phase of MCC was the “Human Rights Church.” He reminded them that MCC is well-known throughout the world for its work in Eastern Europe, Jamaica, Africa, Latin America, and North America as a leader in demanding the human rights of religious freedom, freedom of association, and freedom to marry of all persons.

4. Rev. Pat Bumgardner spoke to the Steering Committee in a phone interview 7 May 2011, while the group met in Glenn Mills, Pennsylvania, USA. Bumgardner reviewed the work of the Global Justice Team and explained the 2010 formation of the Global Justice Institute (GJI) and its 501(c)(3) status in the USA. She stated her belief that everyone involved in church planting should have a firm grounding in the Gospel as an instrument of social change. She explained that financial support for the ministries GJI is undertaking and any newly planted ministries is one of the most crucial issues for MCC and the ITF.

5. Conference calls with Rev. Elder Darlene Garner during both the Glen Mills and Toronto retreats were important for deepening and expanding the Steering Committee’s understanding of the Emerging Ministries process and the work of the Global Justice Institute. Garner also spoke about her experience with all the changes within MCC over the years. The ITF was able to use the wisdom Garner shared in this conference call meeting to inform, revise, and consolidate their ideas and proposals.
6. Rev. Elder Mona West, PhD participated in conference calls with the Steering Committee when they met in Glen Mills and Toronto. Topics included current clergy training pathways, the various problems encountered with respect to being a worldwide denomination, and also some strategies that are being developed to tackle these problems. The Steering Committee and West also talked about problems and strategies affecting and related to MCC’s judicial processes and lay leadership development.

7. Rev. Elder Héctor Gutiérrez was an MCC staff member of the ITF and an advisor. In Toronto, he shared his experiences coming from the Roman Catholic Church into MCC. He explored similarities and differences between the RCC and MCC, as well as the challenges facing MCC congregations in Ibero-America within this context. Gutiérrez shared the challenges of introducing a local protocol model into Ibero-America. He and the Steering Committee discussed similarities between a local protocol model and what is already existent and presently working well for MCC in Ibero-America. They also discussed the problems of expectations, both financial and social, held by some Ibero-American churches and the realities impacting what the denomination can actually provide, denominational unity, and consistency.

8. Rev. Dr. Robert Griffin spoke to the Steering Committee by conference call when the group was in Toronto and shared some of his experiences with developing MCC in Kingston, Jamaica, and the Caribbean. Griffin talked about the legal and social challenges and physical threats facing the LGBT community in the Caribbean. He also talked about denominational unity and solidarity within the context of cultural sensitivity and the Global Justice ministry.

9. Barbara Crabtree graciously submitted answers to prepared questions regarding the governance and budgeting of MCC and then met with the Steering Committee in St. Petersburg, Florida, USA. Crabtree’s input was important and allowed the ITF to consider the potential financial impacts of any mechanisms already in place or proposals yet to be submitted in order to address the open questions comprising the task force’s commission.

10. Rev. Elder Diane Fisher participated in a conference call with the Steering Committee at the Glen Mills meeting. Fisher talked about the difficulties of maintaining churches in
Canada and reported that several congregations had closed. Later, she communicated with the ITF by letter because she wanted to give her input on the issue of consolidating all of MCC in Europe into a single European Network. She suggested that it would be better not to combine the two networks due to cultural and linguistic differences, and also because of potential visa problems and economic concerns.

11. Rev. Stedney Phillips, Director of the MCC Asian-Pacific Initiative, shared her comments and answers to the ITF’s prepared questions in writing. Her responses helped the ITF to a more informed understanding not only of the work of MCC in Asia, but also the challenges currently faced there by both MCC and local LGBT communities in general.

D. ITF Webinar

The ITF held a webinar 3 May 2012 using Adobe Connect software to discuss details of the report with the entire team. MCC Staff Carlos Chavez facilitated the seminar, and Brenner-Beckstead moderated. The Steering Committee prepared a PowerPoint presentation that summarized the Conversation Topics and New Proposals of the report. Scherfenberg, Gewecke, Dalgleish presented and ITF members in attendance were able to participate by “chatting.” “Chats” were visible to all. Participants were enthusiastic about the content of the report and stated they felt the session was successful. Following the webinar, the Steering Committee returned answers to the ITF in response to questions that had been raised.

E. Time and Effort Expended

The ITF met in phone conferences for 15 months from April 2011 through June 2012. There were approximately 63 one-hour meetings of the groups, 21 one-hour meetings of the Steering Committee, and 30 one-hour meetings of the entire ITF. The three steering committee members and three resource/staff members spent 8 days in travel, with trips ranging from six to thirty hours in length, and both they and resource/staff people spent 8 ten-hour days in the face-to-face meetings. It is difficult to state accurately the time spent on email communications, research, scheduling meetings, and writing of minutes and reports; a total of 800 hours is offered as a reasonable estimate.
V. Challenges and Changes

The work of the International Task Force was marked by challenges and change. The working conditions, challenges, and circumstances of the task force itself bear witness to, and make evident, the necessity of having an International Task Force.

Though fluency in English was a prerequisite for participation in the ITF, subsequent to the task force beginning its work, a realization arose that the individual English language skills of the twelve ITF members and staff members were distinctly different. Linguistic variations including, but not limited to, different working lexicons, dissimilar understandings of connotations, various dialects, and a multitude of accents had significant impact on the ITF’s work. Distinctly variant cultural and idiomatic usages, even between native English speakers, were sometimes problematic.

Further, non-native English speakers often found themselves vulnerable to the additional challenges of communicating with each other via a language non-native to either party. For example, a German speaker might say “Diskussion”—“discussion” in English—with the intention of describing a potentially contentious, though peacefully discharged, debate. A Spanish speaker might then readily understand the German speaker to have meant “discussion,” which in Spanish typically describes a more aggressive discourse, instead of “conversación,” which is a more generally congenial discursive exchange.

Different communication styles and different mindsets have not always contributed positively to the improvement and clarity of the exchange of ideas. Sometimes the ITF interacted by writing and sending messages via email rather than by engaging in phone or Skype calls. The author of this text sometimes struggled to understand the verbal exchanges of other colleagues and, therefore, had to read the minutes of meetings in order to gain complete comprehension of everything that had been said.

Skype conversations could sometimes be quite frustrating. Sound quality often was poor and it was difficult to hear, much less understand, other participants. Some calls and some participants were affected by very loud background noises, which gave ITF members another reason to access minutes of the meetings. Due to the cost of ATT conference calls, they were
reserved for meetings of the entire ITF.

Since ITF members are scattered all over the world, it was important to consider the widely variant time zones when scheduling conference calls. For some people a meeting occurred at the crack of dawn, others were caught in the middle of the day maybe just in between an appointment at the dentist and their workplace, and still others had to stay awake into the middle of the night. The meetings designated for the entire ITF were scheduled two times in one day to accommodate the multiple time zones for the 15 attendees distributed on all continents, with the exception of Antarctica. Benitez-Rojas and the Steering Committee attempted to attend both meetings which was very demanding of their personal schedules. For staff members, appointments during the week were more favorable, while members of the ITF often preferred appointments on the weekends.

It was discovered that among the ITF members, there existed quite different cultural attitudes towards time keeping and punctuality, and what it meant to meet at a specified date and/or time. Individuals of different cultural backgrounds may have various perceptions of the binding nature of an event. As it was necessary for all participants to meet simultaneously to conduct true conversations, the ITF was not always able to accommodate cultural distinctions. The effect was that in spite of carefully made appointments, it was not always possible to have all members present in the calls. Some of those absences were, of course, considered "excused" due to travel and other obligations.

The three groups, Faith, Grace, and Hope, did not all have the same opportunities and advantages as regards to keeping records of their conversations. Some had full-time support; others had to maintain minutes of their meetings on their own.

The fact that ITF meetings were transcribed was met with mixed reactions. A member of the ITF did not want his conversations logged. Since the majority of the ITF believed that the taking of minutes was essential for the work, this impacted one person’s decision to resign from the task force. Another member resigned for personal reasons. Additionally, a member of the Steering Committee resigned because the requirements of the task force couldn’t be balanced with his daily responsibilities.
As the ITF continued to meet, individual members gained understanding of and appreciation for the differences in their various ways of life. Furthermore, they became aware that these differences are fundamental in effect and have relevance beyond mundane matters such as punctuality and agreements. Access to the Internet was difficult for some; being able to have a phone call in silent surroundings was impossible at times. The span of economic resources ranged from a financially comfortable life to one in which the challenge existed to earn enough money to pay daily living costs, to the struggle to secure a personal living place and a bed of one’s own. ITF members realized that their own perspectives about standards of living were simply not applicable in the lives and circumstances existing elsewhere in the world.

Again, the ITF affirmed the necessity of its own existence—had the task force not been established, its invention would have been imperative. The collective learning based in the ITF experience leads to the conclusion: take nothing for granted.
VI. Conversation Topics

A. Identity

*Matthew 5:48* “Soyez donc parfaits, comme votre Père céleste est parfait.”
*Nouvelle Edition de Genève – NEG1979 (NEG1979)/Francaise/French

*Matthew 5:48* “In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”
*The Message*

Who are we?
Who is “MCC”?
What is “MCC Identity”?

Again and again, questions around identity arise which might beg the question:

“Does MCC know itself?”

The possibility exists that those outside the denomination may have a clearer idea of MCC identity than those who are part of it. (See Appendix A)

MCC identity affects many aspects of its operations and ministries including communications, the Moderator’s Global Justice Team, ecumenism and inter-religious ministry. Communications play an integral part in branding and visibility; consequently, many of the proposals and conversations regarding communications have significant impact on identity.

The fundamental questions around identity bring up many other questions for MCC.

*What hope does MCC inspire in the world?*
To whom do we bring that hope?
Does MCC inspire this hope in people all over the world?
   In the Middle East?
   In Africa?
   In Eastern Europe?

Do we know how many lives MCC has saved due to the mere fact that we exist?
Do we know how many people MCC encourages to continue the campaign for justice on behalf of minorities, human dignity and human rights?
   By the mere fact that MCC exists?

In what ways is growth most important to us?
Do we want more members?
Do we want more communities?
   In regions of the world where we are already present?
   In regions of the world where we are not?

In order to identify itself as a truly global denomination, MCC must be able to move away from being characterized as a distinctly USA-centered institution. MCC will need to broaden the ongoing narrative and branding of the denomination and its mission without losing the original focus, vision, and purpose. It is important, though, for MCC to hold onto its roots and founding history, even as the denomination adapts to embrace more global understandings and perspectives within ever-changing social and cultural contexts and situations. Regularly recounted collective history is an important reminder of shared narrative and original purpose and vision. Additionally, purpose and vision can often be overshadowed or drowned by politics or by the humdrum of everyday administration and governance.

MCC’s logo—The Eternal Flame—is combined with the globe to represent the denomination’s global mission. Though the logo is widely used across the denomination, it is not yet used everywhere. If every MCC congregation and mission group used this logo, MCC’s visibility would likely improve.
In most Ibero-American countries, MCC is known as ICM. It is reasonable to translate “Metropolitan Community Churches” into Spanish or Portuguese, and then subsequently to abbreviate this as ICM. The ITF recommends the use of ICM in combination with the original abbreviation “MCC,” as in this fictional church: ICM (MCC) Costa del Sol. This, along with a visible use of the MCC logo, would create consistency for MCC branding and visibility.

MCC has undergone several shifts in how it is seen by the wider community over the decades. Originally seen as a “gay church,” MCC originated from the LGBT community with a primary ministry to the same community. Over the years, the focus began to shift to being seen as the “inclusive church” for ALL people. In recent years, MCC has been defined as a “human rights church,” notably being referred to as such by a Romanian newspaper in 2006. Rev. Elder Diane Fisher wrote a Human Rights Protocol for MCC, which was adopted by the MCC Council of Elders at the time in August 2008. It reflected MCC’s acknowledgement of the Christian mission to bring God’s transformative love through Jesus Christ into reality by supporting the right for all people to be fully human as God intended.

“We are called as Christians to

• stand in solidarity with those who are marginalized and oppressed
• be partners in working for change
• be witnesses who call attention to Human Rights abuses
• be a voice in the international community for justice
• lift up new generations of remarkable, far-reaching spiritual activities
• build on hope and create our future.”

MCC Human Rights Protocol, 2008

MCC is now both an inclusive church for all people and a church that respects and embraces human rights, whilst still ministering effectively and powerfully to the LGBT community that gave birth to MCC. This is often challenging but is also central to MCC’s missiology as Christians working out what they believe to be God’s Will in the margins of society.

The struggle to defend minorities, preserve human dignity, and support human rights will be a long and enduring one. It is also worth considering that there will always be the possibility that more conservative, successive governments can sometimes reverse many advances in progressive liberalization and civil rights.
The hope of many rests on us. This is certain.

B. Growth

2 Mga Taga-Corinto 6:3-7 “Sa anumang bagay ay hindi kami nagbigay ng katitisan upang hindi mapulaan ang gawain ng paglilingkod. 4 Sa halip, sa lahat ng bagay ay ipinakilala namin ang aming sarili bilang tagapaglingkod ng Diyos. Ito ay maging sa maraming pagbabata, kabalisahan, pangangailangan at kagipitan. 5 Maging sa paghagupit sa amin, pagkabilanggo, kaguluhan, pagpapagal, pagpupuyat, at pag-aayuno. 6 Maging sa kalinisang, kaalaman, pagtitiis, kabutihan, at maging sa pamamagitan ng Banal na Espiritu at walaang pakunwaring pag-ibig, ipinakilala naming kami ay mga tagapaglingkod. 7 Ipinakilala namin ito sa salita ng katotohanan, sa kapangyarihan ng Diyos, sa pamamagitan ng sandata ng katuwiran sa kanan at kaliwang kamay. Ang Salita ng Diyos.”

(SND) Tagalog

2 Corinthians 6:3-7a 3 “We don’t want anyone to find fault with our work, and so we try hard not to cause problems. 4 But in everything and in every way we show that we truly are God’s servants. We have always been patient, though we have had a lot of trouble, suffering, and hard times. 5 We have been beaten, put in jail, and hurt in riots. We have worked hard and have gone without sleep or food. 6 But we have kept ourselves pure and have been understanding, patient, and kind. The Holy Spirit has been with us, and our love has been real. 7 We have spoken the truth, and God’s power has worked in us.”

Contemporary English Version

If MCC is to grow in the future, it will need to thoughtfully expand its areas of impact in the world. Church attendance across a range of denominations has been steadily declining in the USA, UK, Western Europe, and Australia. According to a 2012 report produced by the National Council of Churches (USA), there has been a gradual decline in church attendance and donations in the developed world since the peak in the 1950s. This decline has been seen most obviously in the USA among the mainline Protestant denominations. From 1960 to 1988,
mainline church membership declined from 31 million to 25 million, and then fell to 21 million in 2005 (“Mainline Protestant Denominations,” 2012). In Australia, overall church attendance declined by seven percent from 1996 to 2005. Research has attributed this attendance decline to lack of motivation, negative media coverage, and boredom during the services (“Church Attendance,” 2012).

A Wikipedia article on mainline denominations in the USA and Canada included UFMCC as a mainline Protestant denomination and also shows decline in its membership as well. MCC membership reached a peak in 1996 with 46,000 members and 285 congregations in the USA and Canada, and then fell to 23,440 members and 206 churches in 2000, and fell again to 15,666 members and 115 churches in those nations in 2006 (“Mainline,” 2012).

MCC membership data from 2011 provided by denomination staff listed 173 churches worldwide with approximately 15,000 members; 132 churches were in the USA (2010). It should be noted that the withdrawal of one church, Cathedral of Hope, Dallas, Texas, USA, resulted in the loss of 2500 members in 2006. Twenty-four percent of churches and ten percent of members resided outside the USA (2010). Data provided by denomination staff in May 2012, indicated that a 30 percent drop in membership worldwide and 28 percent drop in the number of churches occurred between 2000 and 2010. (See Appendix B for an additional listing of churches by continent and a list of missions and groups.)

Churches that have increased membership include Pentecostal and “New Paradigm” churches. (See Appendix C for characteristics of New Paradigm churches: Calvary Chapel, Hope Chapel, and The Vineyard which originated in California, USA, in the 1960s.) The National Council of Churches (2011) reported that Seventh Day Adventists and Assemblies of God have also increased in membership over the last decade around the world. These “spirit-filled” and family-oriented churches offer exciting worship and intense community involvement (Miller, 1997, p. 151). However, they teach very conservative social values. They are not welcoming to the LGBT community. The Apostolic Faith Church has experienced astounding growth in Western and Central Africa and now has over 1000 churches, 700 in Nigeria alone. Their worship style includes holding annual camp meetings in tents with the music of popular performers being broadcast loudly to the surrounding neighborhoods to draw in crowds (“Apostolic Faith,” 2012). Persons in MCC who wish to grow their church or plant a new church may look to analysis of these church movements for ideas of how to make their church more exciting and relevant.
When MCC has devoted resources and excellent leadership to regions formerly underserved, the program has grown rapidly. Under Gutiérrez’s leadership, the network of churches and ministries in Ibero-America has grown from 20 in 2005 to 40 in 2011. This trend has also been witnessed in the Philippines. Rev. Elder Ken Martin brought the Readiness to Enter Vocational Ministry (REVM) course to the Philippines in 2010 to help provide clergy to the growing number of LGBT Christians seeking an inclusive community. Two churches and five new church starts now exist in Asia. (See Appendix B: MCC Churches and New Church Starts by Continent.) This ITF report will propose practical approaches to enhancing the success of churches throughout the world but especially those outside the USA, Europe, and Australia, where the greatest potential and need currently exist.

C. Planting

Matthew 13:31-32 31 Ein anderes Gleichnis legte er ihnen vor und sprach:
Das Reich der Himmel gleicht einem Senfkorn, das ein Mensch nahm und auf seinen Acker säte. 32 Dieses ist zwar von allen Samenkörnern das kleinste; wenn es aber wächst, so wird es größer als die Gartengewächse und wird ein Baum, sodass die Vögel des Himmels kommen und in seinen Zweigen nisten.”
Schlachter 2000 (SCH2000) German/Deutsch

Matthew 13:31-32 “The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a farmer plants a mustard seed in a field. Although it is the smallest of all seeds, it grows larger than any garden plant and becomes a tree. Birds even come and nest on its branches.”
Contemporary English Version

What are the mechanisms for the formation of groups? What are the mechanisms for instituting congregations? Is MCC sometimes even not a church but a human rights organization? What must MCC do to ensure sustainability of new groups? How different will the answers to all these questions need to be in different parts of the world?
Although church planting will be easier in some areas of the world than others, the ITF as a whole does not feel the denomination should invest its energy and resources in an overly-broad focus on growth everywhere but should continue to let the “Missio Dei,” the *sending by God*, inspire the growth of the church (Duraisingh, 2010). Where MCC is needed and called, it should go. The growth may be slow due to political and financial barriers; still, MCC should not avoid challenges because they might be thought too difficult.

Methods of church planting vary depending on circumstances, inspiration, personal connections, and resource availability. MCC’s Human Rights doctrine and Church Planting policies state that MCC will respond to an expression of interest from international groups; they do not maintain that MCC will target areas of the world for church planting. The church planting approach establishes the new group as an independent entity, not an offspring of another congregation. This is exemplified in the support that Salz der Erde MCC in Stuttgart, Germany, has provided in Bucharest, Romania. Individuals from the church have visited regularly for five years, met with interested Christians, and have been available as resources for church planting. On the other hand, churches in Kingston, Jamaica, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, have arisen as alternate sites of large churches in Fort Lauderdale, USA, and New York City, USA, respectively. In both cases, those involved have reported experiencing difficulties related to the new groups assuming financial responsibility after a period of initial sponsorship. It may be easier to achieve the goal of local cultural expression in worship and vision if the church plant feels independent from the beginning of its development. Small congregations in any nation may be limited in facilities but strong in spirituality and creativity. They need not model a larger church in order to find ways of meeting their own needs.

It appears that in many areas of the world, MCC will need to make an investment of resources in order to build a new community. It may be difficult to establish churches in some areas of the world that are not primarily Christian or that have been proselytized by socially conservative Christian missionaries. A pastor may be trained and licensed by the denomination and have a desire to build an MCC church, but in the cultural context, it may be many years before the group will have sufficient members to rent a space or pay a pastor’s salary. China, Southeast Asia, Ibero-America, and Africa are areas for which this observation is particularly apt. The MCC Asia-Pacific Initiative (API) is currently determining how to use funds donated to API to achieve the initiative’s mission of bringing the message of God’s all-inclusive love to Asia. Throughout
the world, financial assistance from a sponsoring foundation or large church can be very helpful in supporting a church plant or assisting it to carry on in times of fiscal or monetary crisis.

The ITF will propose later in this document that MCC optimize the use of technology in order to create a “net” of individuals connected throughout the world in a Virtual Church, utilizing MCC resources to enrich their lives through Christian spirituality. This may be a way of planting new churches as members of the Virtual Church reach out to their communities and form groups.

The Office of Emerging Ministries (OEM) currently directs all new groups and church starts. Garner is the director for this office and has been in the process of forming an Emerging Ministries team. The ITF had begun discussing a similar idea when they learned the team was in formation and now offers the following suggestions: 1) The team should incorporate expertise from different regions of the world. 2) The team’s members should be representative of different backgrounds and origins. 3) The team might include members of MCC who are retired yet rich in experience and wisdom.

D. Leadership

_Ordsprogene 21:1_ “En Konges hjerte er Bække i HERRENs hånd, han leder det hen, hvor han vil.”

_Dette derBiblen på dansk Danish (DN1933)_

_Proverbs 21:1_ “Good leadership is a channel of water controlled by God; God directs it to whatever ends God chooses.”

_The Message_

The ITF looked at leadership development for pastors, the roles of lay delegates, leadership development in geographical areas, clergy and laity training, the Code of Conduct and Judiciary, and leadership in general within the church and the denomination.
Churches often appoint individuals to perform selected tasks that are pre-defined or characterized as functions of leadership, rather than accepting all people as leaders and supporting them as they live into their individual callings. It is the case, though, that no human can lead others effectively without first being led—servanthood is a part of Christian leadership.

Paradoxically then, emphasis for developing leadership in the Church lies in developing servanthood. There is often a perception that the laity lack not only for opportunities to become involved in ministry but also for training in support of that involvement. MCC strives to ensure that all its members have opportunities to fulfill their individual callings and to serve and minister in whatever way God has commissioned them to work. The OFLD’s development of L.E.A.D., Laity Empowered for Active Discipleship Program, is an important instrument in MCC’s strategy to empower and equip a priesthood of all believers.

MCC pastors often come from clergy training in other denominations. Training and education on MCC-specific areas like MCC polity and history, sexuality studies, and LGBT leadership issues are necessary. For authentic and indigenous leadership and clergy training, local access to these “core modules” needs to be ensured, including for those who live outside of North America and Europe. The OFLD does provide sexuality studies and MCC polity courses online via distance learning.

MCC leadership serving in parts of the world outside the traditional, established base of the denomination, i.e., in North America, Europe and Australia, should be able to appreciate and understand the culture, mindsets, languages and geopolitical context of those particular localities. Encouraging MCC to be enculturated to the local context, culture, mindsets, and understandings, rather than expecting the localities to become acculturated to “the MCC way of doing things” can help this.

Conversely, persons in local leadership roles can feel disenfranchised or disconnected from central MCC leadership and governance in the USA. This is a particular concern for individuals who do not live or never have lived in the U.S. It is going to be important to ensure the ongoing integrity, consistency, and sense of ownership by making sure clergy and student-clergy feel included in the church spiritually, denominationally, and organizationally, and feel part of the overall leadership structures. The Ibero-American Institute works hard to provide and strengthen that inclusiveness and leadership development for the Spanish-speaking MCC community.
Limited resources constrain Elders’ and church leaders’ ability to provide the support and wherewithal for training to MCC’s congregations. Current economic austerity puts even more pressure on already stretched resources and exacerbates the difficulty. Resourcing and supporting needs to be maximized, while at the same time, resources themselves need to be allocated and used judiciously and efficiently. Leadership training is important, and it should be provided equitably and fairly, strengthening the churches in the denomination where there is greatest need.

MCC is experiencing a shortage of pastors eligible to lead its congregations throughout the world. Along with the empowerment of lay leadership, strategies to maximize ordained ministry through the sharing of pastors and improving access to ordination training helps mitigate these gaps in leadership.

Many pastors who are working find themselves significantly overstretched. They struggle, often alone, to meet the demands of providing leadership and pastoral support; and in some cases they receive little or no reciprocal support from their congregations. Ideas to help pastors minister to their churches more effectively and safely would strengthen not just local churches but also the denomination as a whole. MCC would, therefore, better serve the community MCC is ordained to serve. Implementing ideas to expand the scope of ordained pastors through the sharing of human and material resources and the development of networks and communication would help this.

MCC congregations need theologically sound leadership if the core principle beliefs of the Christian faith, as set out in the UFMCC core values and beliefs, are to be protected. In fact, some people would argue that such a safeguarding role is the primary function of ordained clergy. This is not to say that pastors are the only source(s) of approved truth, accepted doctrine, or received wisdom, but instead that pastors do serve to provide the local church with guidance and to act as one of the many links between the local congregation and the larger denomination. A pastor’s input is not always necessary, however, for matters such as appointing people into ministries or making decisions about local church administration. These determinations can be made—and in some instances perhaps even better made—by the church as a whole or by their elected representatives/board of directors. Local churches need to be culturally sensitive in the administration of leadership roles, and to do this, they require spiritually and theologically consistent and Christ-centered guidance.
It could be useful to regard ministry training as being a shared path for both laity and ordained clergy, only with different vocational accreditation requirements. Making the study and application of theology and practical leadership open to everyone could help break down divisions between laity and clergy. Already, many of the modules within the L.E.A.D. program are common to clergy training requirements.

There is also some concern that differences between the educational and economic structures/cultures/systems in the USA and other countries are not fully appreciated by all individuals who have oversight responsibility for student clergy training.

E. Cultural Diversity

**Jesaja 55:1-5** Is er iemand die dorst heeft? Kom dan maar hier en drink, ook al hebt u geen geld! Kom hier en kies uit wat u wilt drinken, wijn of melk. Alles is gratis! Waarom zou u uw geld uitgeven aan voedsel, dat u geen kracht geeft? Waarom zou u betalen voor etenswaren, die niets waard zijn?

Luister, dan zal Ik vertellen waar u voedsel kunt krijgen dat goed is voor uw ziel! Kom hier bij Mij en zet uw oren goed open. Luister, want het gaat om het welzijn van uw ziel. Ik sta klaar om een eeuwig verbond met u te sluiten en u alle gunsten en liefde te geven die Ik ook aan koning David gaf.

_Het Boek (HTB) Dutch_

**Isaiah 55:1, 3-5** "Hey there! All who are thirsty come to the water! Are you penniless? Come anyway—buy and eat! …Come close now, listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words. I'm making a lasting covenant commitment with you, the same I made with David, sure solid enduring love. I set him up as a witness to the nations, made him a prince and leader of the nations. And now I'm doing it to you: You'll summon nations you've never heard of, and nations who've never heard of you will come running to you. Because of me, your God, because The Holy of Israel has honored you."

_The Message_
The ITF explored issues of cultural diversity within churches and the acculturation of MCC in the communities that become a part of the denomination. The task force encourages all churches to be open to the rich varieties of cultures in communities, providing accessibility for speakers of other languages and for those persons with hearing and visual impairments. Radical inclusion of persons of all genders, gender expressions, sexual orientations, races, nationalities, abilities, and economic status should be a priority. This approach should be encouraged by all levels of MCC organization, from the network leaders to the Moderator. The ITF encourages increased incorporation of non-English workshops and presentations at General Conference so participants can all contribute and learn from each other.

The importance of adapting the MCC experience to local cultures has been a major topic of exploration for the ITF. As groups approach the denomination for information about worship, theology, and structure, they should be encouraged to apply their cultural ethics, music, art, organizational style, etc. in their group development. However, the internalization of historical and current oppression by outside churches and governments can lead to lack of pride in one’s own culture, particularly if that culture has been maligned as inferior for centuries. For example, some members of the ITF were not comfortable when conversations involved the word “indigenous” as the context of their language defined the word as “primitive.”

As MCC makes more connections in Asia, the religions of origin of the new Christians must be respected. Dr. Julie Ma discussed the ability of Christianity to develop in Asia in her article, “The Growth of Christianity in Asia and Its Impact on Mission” (2007).

To most Asians, Christianity was a foreign religion very different from their traditional religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism and animism. It is a contrast between monotheism (except Islam) and polytheism. The latter believes in more than one god or spirit, thus allowing room to incorporate a new religious belief into the existing ones. This makes most traditional religions incredibly flexible and versatile. On the other hand, Christianity, with its absolute claims, has no such flexibility. As a result, when a conversion takes place in a family, it immediately causes friction and disharmony between the new Christian and the rest of the family who find it difficult that he or she now follows a “western” religion, and one that is stubbornly inflexible (p. 1).

Certain practices of current culture may need to be reconsidered, such as the policy of a Kenyan church, related by Brian McLaren in his book, *A New Kind of Christianity* (2010).
“Francis had never received Holy Communion in his homeland Kenya, although he was a church member. The Anglican Church had made a policy for polygamous converts. Only the children of the first wife could participate in the Eucharist. Francis was the child of the third wife” (pp. 185-186). The Open Communion Table is an aspect of MCC theology and practice that liberates people from any culture that has kept them away in the past. Millions around the world, heterosexual as well as LGBT people, live on the margins believing they are unworthy and unlovable.

Administrative training and resource issues related to culture and language were also discussed. The structures and availability of higher education must be considered in establishing guidelines for pastoral and lay education. The ITF proposes that continued efforts be made in providing resources in the various world languages used by churches in the denomination. The Theologies Team has added a statement about the importance of language translations in the dissemination of their work products. (See Appendix D)

F. Communication

1 Coríntios 14:4-5 “Quem fala em língua a si mesmo se edifica, mas quem profetiza edifica a igreja. Gostaria que todos vocês falassem em línguas, mas prefiro que profetizem. Quem profetiza é maior do que aquele que fala em línguas, a não ser que as interprete, para que a igreja seja edificada.”

Nova Versão Internacional (NVI-PT) Portuguese

歌林多前書 14:4-5 说不同语言的人只是在加强自己 而宣讲上帝信息的人是在加强整个教会。我希望你们都有讲不同语言的才能 但我更希望你们能宣讲上帝的信息。除非讲不同语言的人能翻译自己的话 从而使整个教会得到加强 否则 宣讲上帝信息的人比能讲不同语言的人更了不起。

Chinese New Testament: Easy-to-Read Version (ERV-ZH)

1 Corinthians 14:4-5 The one who prays using a private "prayer language" certainly gets a lot out of it, but proclaiming God's truth to the church in its common language brings the whole church into growth and strength.

The Message
Communication from the denomination is important whether it is directed outward to the secular or ecclesial community or inward to those with ties to MCC.

The ITF focused on questions regarding communication within the denomination.

Is it too much?
Too little?
The wrong issues?
Who makes these decisions?

One of the conclusions was that important developments or changes within the denomination were not consistently well communicated. Understandably, some developments could not be shared because they were only at the early stages of planning. There were times when the ITF began to formulate ideas and suggestions, but received the response: “Yes, but we’re already doing that;” or, “People are already working on that and looking for solutions;” or, “People are already working on that, and solutions are nearly complete.”

The ITF found that often ideas were being developed simultaneously by different people in different places. Whether those concepts were proposals of the International Task Force or other groups or leaders in MCC, this was the best way ideas emerged.

Communication is an obligation to deliver and an obligation to collect. In other words: it is not sufficient for the denomination simply to supply accurate and valuable information. It is also important that the information be noted by its intended recipients. Additionally, people should ask questions of denomination staff if they do not know where to find the right answer or solution. The churches have the responsibility to report membership and attendance regularly and to participate in surveys that come from the denomination. Within the denomination, communication needs to be multi-dimensional.

Parallel to the work of the ITF, a Communications Team was tasked with improving MCC’s communication. There may well prove to be some conceptual intersections between the ideas produced by the Communications Team and those of the ITF; further, such a crossover could be synergistically productive.
G. Membership

Different congregations have different rules and procedures regarding membership in the church. Membership gives individuals a sense of belonging to larger bodies and organizations and can increase feelings of ownership and community.

Membership, however, by its very nature, can be an exclusive institution as it identifies two groups: one with privileged status within the organization and one without. Additionally, membership allows churches to create mutually understood expectations and commitments between the corporate body and the individual people comprising it. Ideally, membership standards should be inclusive, welcoming, and open to all who respectfully seek it, and set forth meaningful and realistic expectations with regard to commitment and obligation.

Similar to many other Protestant Christian denominations, MCC has two sacraments: communion and baptism. MCC opens both sacraments to all people who desire a closer relationship with God through Jesus Christ. According to UFMCC Bylaws, membership in MCC requires baptism as a prerequisite. This retains the centrality of baptism within the Christian faith basis of the denomination. Relationship with MCC is currently defined primarily in membership. Some MCC congregations have alternative options of relationship for which baptism is not necessarily required. For example, MCC Toronto offers relationship in the form of “Friends of MCCT” as a distinct form of membership. This idea could be encouraged throughout the denomination as a way of broadening the inclusivity of relationship with MCC without compromising the centrality of baptism within MCC’s core Christian belief and faith.

The MCC Theologies Team has been looking at baptism as part of their work in “Holy Conversations.” It is evident that many people in MCC are thinking about and reflecting on the issue of baptism in relation to the inclusivity of membership.

While MCC By-Laws state that any baptized Christian can become a member of an MCC congregation, approximately 21% of churches report that they do not require Baptism for membership. Baptism has historically been the key not only to membership in a congregation but to participation in the Church at large. But MCC congregations with practices at variance with the By-Laws suggest that their understanding of radical inclusivity leads them to extend membership even to those who do not seek baptism.
We are clearly seeing a tension between allowing all people full participation in the life of the local church and the understanding of the local church’s relationship to the Body of Christ: the "one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church" of the Nicene Creed . . . .

“Holy Conversations from our Common Life”
MCC Theologies Team

Additionally, transferring membership from one MCC congregation to another can sometimes be complicated or difficult because different constituent churches do indeed hold differing standards, expectations, procedures, and rules with regard to membership. It is useful to have clearly defined processes or pathways for church members to move their membership between MCC congregations.

There were many conversations involving the topic of membership, especially in regard to virtual churches, and becoming “virtual members” to churches that have well developed online facilities and presence.

H. Alliances

In discussions amongst the teams, the allies that have been repeatedly mentioned have fallen into four main categories.

1. Interfaith alliances with LGBT groups of other faiths such as Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Unitarian.

2. Alliances with open and affirming congregations of Christian denominations. For example, in the United States: United Church of Christ, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, etc. In Canada: United Church of Canada. In Australia: Uniting Church of Australia. In South Africa, Good Hope MCC has been working with JL Zwane Memorial Presbyterian Church, in the township of Guguletu, Cape Town, South Africa.

3. Coordination with LGBT organizations and non-profits like Pride committees, LGBT centers, TransNation, International Lesbian and Gay Alliance (ILGA), HIV service and education groups, etc.
VII. Themes

During conversations of the ITF – Individually, in the groups, within the Steering Committee, and as a whole group – several themes and core ideas began to emerge. Five of these central ideas resonated to reflect the primary focus, process, and projected results of the ITF within the context of MCC as a global church.

A. Believe, Trust, Have Faith

*John 3:16* “Naki Nyasae anyiachete ense, goika akarwa omwana oye omomaima eriende monto onde bwose omogerire tasira anyore obogima bwakare na kare.”

Ekegusii, a Bantu language in Kenya

*John 3:16* “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

King James Version

It can be so easy to lose focus and passion in a ministry and service, no matter how vital and life-changing that mission may be. This is especially true when a person encounters the challenges of the world. Expanding and consolidating the global ministry of MCC is not going to be met without opposition. MCC must remain faithful to the God who makes the ministry of MCC authentic, as well as trust that God will empower the denomination to bear the witness they believe God desires them to bring.

B. Transformation

*Romani 12:2* “Nu vă lăsați formați în comportament după modelul acestei lumi, ci lăsați-vă transformați prin reinnoirea gândirii voastre, ca să puteți discerne voia lui Dumnezeu, care este bună, plăcută și perfectă!”

Romanian (TLCR)
Romans 12:2  Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—God’s good, pleasing and perfect will.

New International Version (NIV)

MCC has a transformative ministry to bring to the global community. “Tearing down walls and building up hope” throughout the world would positively change lives, societies, churches, communities, and families.

States of being and ways of doing that are not yet realized must be imagined. If the denomination and the ITF want constructive solutions to current and future challenges, then everyone must think and pray creatively and imaginatively to foresee and explore these challenges and envision ways around them.

MCC should be open to new ways of being church and of being God’s witness. Church is being reinvented all the time, all over the world, and has been reinvented continually since its beginnings around 2000 years ago. What others are doing can be learned, and new futures for MCC can be imagined.

C. Authentic Community

Whatever changes or evolutions happen within an organization, it should not lose the authentic voice of the community it serves. In order to retain its authenticity as a globally inclusive community church, MCC must be responsive to the indigenous roots of the local churches and be adaptive to accommodate the diversity of that indigeneity.

MCC is Metropolitan Community Churches: Community is the middle name. This, by definition, should be a group of people, brought together in community to share common ground and relationship with one another. It is the people and the fellowship that defines what kind of a group and community MCC is. The conversations of the ITF centered around the premise that it is the people, the members of MCC and the wider community, that should be driving any exploration of who and what MCC is as a church.
D. Inclusivity

MCC identifies first and foremost as an inclusive church. Any expansion or consolidation of its global ministry must embrace inclusivity at its heart. It was important for the ITF to talk about what it means to be inclusive in today’s age, and how inclusivity might be seen differently in different times, cultures and contexts.

E. Accessibility

In order for church to be inclusive, MCC must be accessible. Much of the ITF’s conversations centered on maintaining or improving accessibility for all members of the worldwide community to the transformative gospel and ministry that MCC believes it is called to share.

MCC now exists in a technological age. Failing to use technology eventually leaves organizations or individuals on a back-foot, as they struggle to keep up with society’s expectations. On the same note, an ability and willingness to embrace new technology at the outset can maximize efficiency and efficacy in ways that were not possible previously. ITF members became aware quickly in both their discussions, and also through the very process of existing and meeting as the ITF, that being able to maximize technology safely not only saves money but improves global access and engages people more effectively. Like all tools, however, technology should still be considered in its equity of accessibility, particularly in areas of the world that are quite different culturally, economically, and in infrastructure from the West.

The ideas expressed regarding technology are particularly relevant to including MCC’s young people. Many MCC congregations around the world are maintaining an increasingly older demographic, and although that group’s wisdom, experience, and value should never be, and is not intended to be, diminished or underestimated, MCC congregations should also be encouraged and responsive to the engagement and contribution of young people in their communities. It is important to remember that the contribution of young people is not just as “Leaders of Tomorrow” but also as “Leaders and Contributors of today.” It is because of their contribution that the ITF want to echo the anthem of the Young Adult Retreat across the global fellowship of MCC in saying:

“We Want to Know You.”
VIII. Ongoing Proposals

“Ongoing Proposals” are ideas put forth by the ITF which have already yielded some decision or action by the Governing Board or MCC leaders. The proposals listed in Sections A and B were accepted by the Governing Board at its August 2011 meeting. The third proposal reviews an existing structure created at General Conference 2010 that is undergoing continuous adjustment and development. The fourth proposal offers an additional method of supporting student clergy.

A. MCC on Facebook

When the ITF started its work, MCC had two Facebook pages—one page titled “Metropolitan Community Church” with nearly 3,000 fans, and another, “MCC Churches” with nearly 5,000 fans. An obvious problem was that it didn’t make sense to have more than one page since it split the fans. The page titled “MCC Churches” is difficult to find because the full name of the denomination is not spelled out. Rather than “MCC Churches,” the name should be “MCC Metropolitan Community Churches.” Furthermore, the wall of that page was visible only to registered users. These two factors made it difficult for people to learn about MCC and limited MCC’s ability to reach people with a message of inclusion. In addition, the pages have not been used as a channel for MCC-related news.

Relatively straightforward Internet searches and comparisons of MCC’s Facebook presence to that of other denominations and several local churches make up the research on this topic. In both the U.S. and worldwide, other denominations’ walls are visible to non-registered users and the Facebook page names are directly related to the most common (correct) spelling of the organizations’ names. For specific examples, see:

http://www.facebook.com/UnitedChurchofChrist

http://www.facebook.com/edk.de?ref=ts

http://www.facebook.com/katholische.kirche?sk=wall
The ITF suggested solutions to the problems previously identified as follows:

- Merge the two pages.
- Make the wall visible to non-registered and registered users alike.
- Change the name to “MCC Metropolitan Community Churches.”
- Use the page as a powerful and effective news channel.

The ITF argued for these solutions as follows: Changing the Facebook page’s name will result in it being easier to find. Making the wall visible to all users will enhance the page’s appeal and encourage more people to become fans. These changes will engage the synergies inherent to social networking, and the further connections will potentiate the page’s enhanced information/news content. Consequently, MCC’s Facebook page will become a significantly more useful and effective tool for delivering MCC’s message worldwide.

Today, changes on Facebook can already be seen:

- The page “Metropolitan Community Church” has been closed.
- The page “MCC churches” is now open to the public.
- The page “MCC churches” is used more widely as a news channel.
- The name for the page has been updated to “Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) Denomination.”

B. Newsletters

1. Overview and Access

When the ITF started its work, there was not much transparency regarding either the number of newsletters MCC published or who received which newsletter and why. Additionally, it seemed to be the case that pastors, by virtue of their position as nodes through which denominational communications are typically channeled, sometimes—and without intention—became bottlenecks in the information delivery process.

To address this, the ITF suggested promoting all MCC newsletters for the general denomination on the MCC homepage. Additionally, a link near the newsletters will connect readers to an online subscription process.
MCC will benefit from the increased transparency in newsletter publication functions, and people interested in denominational information will experience greater satisfaction about the availability of that information.

2. Information Flow System

In that the people creating MCC’s newsletters often do not have information from and about the global MCC world, there is a need to create a system to provide staff with stories and relevant ideas for newsletters and social media such as Facebook or Twitter.

An information flow system can be established by having a volunteer in each church deliver congregational news to the denomination. The delivery and integration of international news will further MCC’s visibility as an international denomination. Additionally, access to information from across the denomination will enhance the constituency’s sense of connectedness and foster greater cohesion and stronger bonds within the denomination.

3. Newsletter in Brief

When the ITF started its work, feedback received from Network Leaders and pastors across the denomination revealed that pastors, lay delegates and other people obligated with significant duties and responsibilities often felt overloaded with and/or overwhelmed by the sheer volume of incoming information.

The ITF proposed that MCC address the problem by creating a new newsletter in which information is presented in a summarized or condensed form. The newsletter being recommended would be “In Brief” and would not contain full articles, only headlines followed by short explanations. Links to complete news items or additional information can be included as desired.
Today, this proposal appears to be resolved as “MCC Headline News” has been developed since the ITF’s initial idea for “In Brief.” “Headline News” offers current information in a new format and includes links to some stories for readers who wish to know more.

C. Rethinking Networks: An Ongoing Process

In the ITF’s first report to the Governing Board in August 2011, the recommendation was made to continually re-examine and revise networks with attention to cultural appropriateness, legal ramifications and limitations, and practicability.

Like any relevant and vision-led church, MCC is a dynamic organization, both denominationally and locally. There are ongoing changes occurring both internally within local churches and the denomination, and externally within the communities engaged by MCC ministries.

Changes in the cultural, political, and economic context of MCC in many parts of the world will affect the lines of community identification and relationship between local churches. To address the fact that neither the number of MCC congregations in a network, nor the political and cultural identities of various churches in any one given network are constant, the composition of the networks should be considered on an ongoing basis. As a point of example, the Canadian Network merged with the Michigan Network within the last two years. In 2012, the United Kingdom and Western Europe Network merged with the Eastern Europe Network.

D. International Panel of Supervisors for Clergy Students

Conversations about the supervision of clergy students suggested that panels of supervisors and mentors, rather than a single supervisor per student, might be useful in increasing the availability and diversity of support for the students. If supervisors from many countries are impaneled, students will benefit enormously from the exposure to multiple cultures. Such an arrangement might considerably reduce the possibility and incidence of students being isolated from support or feeling abandoned in the event an individual supervisor becomes unavailable for whatever reason(s) and/or time period(s).
Conversations with West revealed that features of this idea are already being developed and implemented by the Office of Formation and Leadership Development.
IX. New Proposals

A. Global Covenant/Local Protocol Model

Global ministry must be relevant and culturally appropriate. Within that framework, “one size fits all” does not celebrate the diversity of MCC, the international intention, or the denomination’s commitment to indigenous leadership within global ministry.

There is currently a model for Laity Development and Clergy Training and Ordination in Ibero-America that works very powerfully and successfully.

The Institute for Ibero-American Leadership Development [is developing] new experiences that are responsive to the multi-faceted challenges that are faced in the formation of leaders for pastoral work and the development of congregations in Ibero-America . . . . The geographic dispersion of the peoples, varied economic situations, and systems of discrimination against LGBT people makes it imperative that the denomination develop its own strategy of leadership development. The Office of Formation and Leadership Development needs to take whatever steps are necessary to facilitate the processes that will be studied, reflected upon, give power to, and prepare competent leaders; these steps, as much for clergy as for laity, will include strong education and formation that will help MCC to gain a new understanding of itself and of its mission in the Ibero-American world.

Translated from the “Instituto de Formación del Liderazgo Iberoamericano”

Because language, geography, economy, and social context can be distinctly different between the USA and parts of Ibero-America—Spain, Portugal, and countries in the Americas that are former colonies—unique regional protocols, processes for formation and leadership development and training, have been established. There are also significant differences between a number of descriptive parameters as they are applied to the USA and many parts of Africa and Asia, including geography, economy, societal norms, and structures. It could be considered appropriately fair for MCC to recognize that culturally, economically, and geographically appropriate protocols may be developed and established in those other places as well.
Because it is sometimes assumed that much of Europe and Australasia is considered “Westernized,” some people may say there are few, if any, differences between these countries and North America. However, this is not an accurate assessment. Not only are there differences between the continents, but there are vast differences across more physically close borders, such as the dissimilarities between the USA and Canada, or Germany and the UK, not to mention differences between various states in Australia or between different constituent countries within the United Kingdom.

There are many reasons to encourage the development of locally-appropriate protocols, as has occurred in Ibero-America, throughout the global community. Such opportunities could benefit the denomination as a whole and also positively impact local churches.

Points for consideration during the protocol development process include, but are not limited to:

- Lack of unity in parts of the global denomination
- New MCC churches far removed politically, culturally, theologically, and historically from 1968 California where MCC was born
- Increasing postmodernism in “The West”
- Increasing economic and resource pressures for
  - Training opportunities and supervision
  - Clergy support and supervision
  - Fellowship gathering
  - Response to local governance issues or problems
- Perception of MCC as an “American-centered” denomination
- Sensitivity to cultural differences
- Disenfranchisement or disillusionment experienced by some churches within the global denomination
- Lack of indigenous leadership
- Lack of indigenous community involvement/action
- Fairness and equity of opportunity across the entirety of the denomination
- Structures similar to those already in place within other denominations, e.g. Uniting Church in Australia
This idea could be expanded to developing local protocols, not just for clergy training and the OFLD, but also for other areas of church life, growth, and administration, and exporting this as a model all over the world. In order to retain unity within the denomination, however, a global covenant could be developed, based on the current Core Values, Vision, and Mission of MCC.

If MCC General Conference were to develop a unifying central covenant which reaffirms MCC’s Aims and Values, and Statement of Faith, then groups of churches could develop, within the support and guidance of the denomination, local protocols that would be more culturally appropriate or contextually practicable than a “one size fits all” set of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and protocols as currently exists.

In order to be known as an affiliated church of Metropolitan Community Churches, use its name, logo, and access its resources, each member congregation, regardless of where it is located geographically, would agree to such a covenant that would include:

- Aims and Values of MCC
- Statement of Faith
- Vision and Mission of MCC

This covenant would not change the Statement of Faith, Core Values, or Strategic Statements that have already been adopted by General Conference. This said, however, consideration could be given as to whether to incorporate some of the MCC Human Rights Protocol that was adopted by the UFMCC Council of Elders in 2008 into this covenant.

Separate existing teams, e.g. Bylaws Team, are already examining ways in which the Bylaws/SOP/Aims and Values might be revised to reflect a changing denomination in a changing world.

Groups of churches, bracketed together based on the most culturally, or otherwise appropriate, geographical lines, would form a “transition team” or “local protocols team” in order to develop local protocols and SOPs regarding:

- Local Organization
- Local Covenants
• Clergy Credentialing/Discipline/Accountability
• Leadership Development
• Lay Leadership
• Local Church Governance
• Growth and Expansion strategies
• Legal Recognitions (where appropriate)
• Local Gatherings

Parts of the world, like Ibero-America, that already have successful local protocols in place would be encouraged to continue the development of their protocols along these same lines of relationship.

These local protocols would relate more to the organizational and operational processes of the local churches, rather than the fellowship and community focus. This means that although there would likely be some overlap between the two, these protocols wouldn’t necessarily align with existing networks.

Local protocols would be for that locality only. A church wouldn’t necessarily be able to select which protocols the congregation wished to follow but would be expected to follow the protocols for its locality, unless there was good reason why another set of protocols would be more appropriate. In such a case, the church would need to present its justifications to the denomination for approval.

Areas or churches not yet ready to develop local protocols, either due to size, conflict or other problems, would follow default Global Standardized Protocols (GSP); such would be similar to current practice.

When an area and group of churches are ready to develop local protocols and SOPs, then they should engage the processes described above.

Flexibility would be retained so that a revision of local protocols, or even the lines of relationship that define the borders of a locality, can be pursued. The congregation(s) would work with the denomination and provide justification for approval for such changes.
Since all new protocols, e.g. clergy training, would still need to be approved by the denomination before being accepted into practice, consistent and appropriate standards would still be met above the expected threshold; therefore, fluidity and movement of pastors between churches could happen globally.

**Proposed Order of Actions**

1. **General Conference 2013**: Examine the UFMCC Bylaws and confirm which bylaws constitute the Core and Universal Beliefs, Aims and Values, Vision and Mission of MCC. Retain the current bylaws in order to govern MCC as a denominational organization (UFMCC) and when MCC churches come together, e.g. at General Conference. This would also maintain UFMCC’s status as a 501(c)(3) incorporated organization under state law in California, USA—the legal jurisdiction under which MCC operates—since bylaws at the denominational level would still apply.

2. **General Conference**: Constitute the Core Beliefs, Aims and Values of MCC into a “Global Covenant” to be endorsed by all the congregations of the denomination.

3. **Senior Leadership Team**: Examine the SOPs of the denomination (e.g. for the OFLD or the OEM) and recognize these as the default Global Standardized Protocols.

4. **Senior Leadership Team**: Identify and invite local churches to propose localities for development of their own local protocols using the previously identified SOPs. It would be imperative that the lines of relationship defining these localities not be divisive, and that localities reflect genuine cultural, social, economic, structural, and/or geographical realities affecting the operations and governance of the church. The Senior Leadership Team reviews and makes determinations for requests to be identified as a locality.

5. **Local Protocols**: After approval as a locality, groups or areas of churches that are ready may start to develop, or for locations like Ibero-America continue to develop, their own local protocols.
5. **Governing Board:** After endorsement by the Senior Leadership Team, the Governing Board reviews and makes determinations for approval of local protocols before a locality can proceed with implementation. Until this time, churches continue to operate under the Global Standardized Protocol.

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**LOCAL PROTOCOL MODEL**

*In the Local Protocol Model, the denomination functions with a Global Covenant which is approved at General Conference.*

Affiliated churches share common missiology, goals, and beliefs.

- **Global Standardized Protocols**
  - The large brown box illustrates the global standardized protocols that guide MCC churches.

- **Local Protocols**
  - The denomination’s logo represents an MCC Church.
  - The small green boxes illustrate communities of churches that operate using local protocols approved by the Governing Board.

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**Financial Impact**

Financially, this change would likely involve human resources and administrative costs in order to create the revised GSP and the Global Covenant, although since these already exist in other formats, these costs would not be onerous. The administrative and human resource costs of developing local protocols would, in most cases, be met by groups of local churches. Costs would extend to the denomination only when the Senior Leadership Team is examining the protocols.

Since some costs in governance, support, and administration currently borne by the denomination would be “outsourced” to more local groups of MCC congregations operating
under local protocols, in the long-term there might be cost savings to the denomination, although this would be difficult to predict.

**Strengths of the Global Covenant/Local Protocol Model**

- Shared missiology, identity, and purpose
- Encourages and strengthens unity within the denomination
- Local enculturation
- Allows local frameworks for training and education
- Facilitates local branding adaptations
- Legitimacy of the church in the eyes of the local public, the authorities (for legal purposes), and other churches
- Facilitates flexibility
- Platform for local churches to resolve conflict between churches
- Platform for locally sensitive ecumenical dialogue
- Endorses and reaffirms diversity across the denomination
- Helps address deep-rooted fears of churches being “overlooked”
- Helps mitigate perceptions that MCC equals American Church
- Frees the denomination to work more on truly global issues and less on local issues
- Facilitates flexibility with legal and cultural appropriateness without losing legal and governance accountability within SOPs and denominational protocols
- Gives power, ownership and freedom to locality without removing or reducing global support and connection

**Local Accountability within an International Denomination: Summary**

The ITF believes that a structure like this would improve the indigeneity and authenticity of the church, as well as MCC’s ability to stay connected at a deep and intimate level with churches in the denomination. The intention with this proposal is to increase the localization of church life and processes without losing the shared missiology and vision that is at the core of MCC and its congregations.
B. Increasing Global General Conference Access

As the denomination expands around the globe, it becomes more difficult to meet in one place to worship together and be inspired for the work of this movement. Nearly all of the General Conferences have been held in North America with the exception of the 1997 General Conference in Sydney, Australia. Only the 2010 conference in Mexico was in a non-English speaking country. The ITF recommends that the conference planning team consider venues outside the USA in the future in order to acknowledge the global nature of UFMCC.

As the denomination becomes more global, it is important to evaluate the structure and operation of General Conference. Pastors and lay delegates should have voices at General Conference, but there are many barriers to attendance, specifically finances and visas. Conference planners had hoped that Mexican immigration law would be less rigid than that of the USA so that more people could obtain visas. However, just weeks before General Conference 2010, the Mexican government agreed to observe the same restrictions that the USA follows and denied several visas to enter Mexico. Three pastors, from El Salvador, Brazil, and the Philippines, were unable to attend GC 2010. There has been a well-organized UFMCC scholarship program to support pastors and lay delegates from churches with small attendance or low to no funds to attend GC, but there are always people who would like to attend who cannot be sponsored.

In order to allow more participation in General Conference from around the world, the ITF recommends an increased transmission of GC 2013 events on the Internet. Some ITF members think that the worship services are most important to transmit because the worship encourages spiritual growth and inspires MCC members to attend a General Conference in the future. Other members feel that it is most important to allow participation in business meetings so that input from all sectors can be received and remote voting allowed. Other members agree with both opinions and hope that some of the important plenary sessions, such as Rev. Pat Bumgardner’s Global Justice Report, the ITF report, and guest speakers would also be televised.

The Young Adult Retreat gave MCC an experience with Internet participation from planned locations, which inspired all the participants. Youth in Cape Town, South Africa; Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA; Budapest, Hungary; and Toronto, Ontario, Canada were able to greet each other by video transmission, jointly plan worship, and worship together. The themes they
developed during their time together included radical hospitality, compelling community, and inherent humanity. “We Want to Know You” became the phrase that originated from the retreat and has since remained symbolic of their work.

One of the activities of the Young Adult Retreat was filmed and uploaded to YouTube. The video “Connect, Empower, Serve” remains available (http://tinyurl.com/MCC-YA-Retreat) and illustrates the possibilities of expanding the use of multimedia and technology. Individuals with technological knowledge can be instrumental in helping the same type of sharing occur at General Conference. Although some older people may feel skeptical or intimidated by new digital technology, youth are very comfortable with it and utilize technology routinely in their daily lives. In order to attract youth to the denomination and churches, MCC needs to acknowledge that which is important in youth culture and to respect them for their skills and creativity. MCC needs to involve youth in the leadership of the denomination now and not treat them paternalistically by saying they are “Our Future.”

If geographic gatherings are planned during General Conference, validated electronic remote voting could occur so that more pastors and lay delegates could participate in MCC style democracy. As the denomination becomes globally dispersed, MCC must be creative to allow for participation of the majority of members in the business meeting at General Conference. In 2016, the denomination will be voting for a new Moderator and the full participation of delegates will be very important. The ITF proposes that MCC moves to allow for distant voting by electronic digital media or by webinar. In order to pilot a remote electronic voting technique, the ITF proposes a pilot voting from several sites in conjunction with the 2013 General Conference business meeting. The pilot would involve only a mock vote. After experiencing the process of remote electronic voting, the 2013 General Conference delegates will be asked to consider a bylaw change that would allow for remote electronic voting in 2016.

The ITF envisions that there will be several satellite gathering of delegates who are unable to travel to GC 2013, held in one to two locations on other continents. For the purpose of discussion, this could be theoretically Cape Town, South Africa, and Sao Paolo, Brazil. With the assistance of conference planners and Network Leaders, the satellite General Conference gatherings will be planned to coincide with General Conference 2013. Venues will be sought, digital equipment assembled, and workshops arranged. Allies may be invited to participate in workshops to increase the impact of the gatherings. If local pastors and lay delegates are able
to travel to Chicago, they will do so in order to participate in the official voting. Others will be selected by congregations to participate in the mock voting. Those participating will need to prepare for decision-making by studying the General Conference business meeting materials.

At the satellite gatherings in Cape Town and Sao Paolo, the video and audio connections will be tested prior to the beginning of the business meeting. Communication must be two-way so that members of the distant meetings can address the moderator, raise questions, and propose amendments. A method of voting will be chosen and tested in advance, such as SurveyMonkey.com or a webinar medium. Interpreters will be available on site and will have studied the conference materials in advance. If SurveyMonkey.com is chosen, ballots will be prepared in advance and worded in a fashion that will allow for amendment of proposals, i.e. do you approve of bylaw change XY as amended on the conference floor? Yes/No. Volunteers or staff at General Conference who produce the multimedia would make adjustments as needed to increase the success of participation by those at approved satellite locations.

Regarding a bylaw change that would allow remote electronic voting, the ITF recommends that permission would be limited to those delegates who could document inability to travel to General Conference due to financial or visa restrictions. The bylaw might be written in general terms in order to allow for multiple methods of remote electronic voting that may arise in the future.

A registration fee would be charged for delegates, possibly on a sliding scale. Participants in Cape Town and Sao Paolo would be able to attend General Conference worship and plenary sessions and any other part of General Conference that could be streamed or recorded for later broadcast.

After evaluating the pilot voting experience, the Governing Board could form a new task force to plan the details of remote electronic voting and how it could be managed at future General Conferences.
Proposed Schedule

In order for these changes to be actualized for General Conference 2013, the Governing Board would need to advise the conference planners at the earliest possible date to prepare for the necessary implementation. The ITF proposes that an Internet technology committee of volunteers assemble by August 2012 to assist conference planners with the anticipated challenges of satellite venues and remote electronic voting.

Financial Impact

There are many technology teams at MCC churches that have both the skills and technology to provide services at General Conference. Volunteers in these areas will be a valuable resource. Scholarships to attend General Conference could be given in exchange for services. Conference planners would need to determine the best approach to acquire the necessary equipment. Budgeting for General Conference will need to include allocation for the expenditure necessary to accommodate this technology. Local groups at satellite gatherings can raise funds prior to General Conference or seek sponsors to cover the expenses of a venue and equipment for the General Conference satellite meeting location.
C. Language Accessibility at General Conference

Йоил 2:28 І буде потому, виплю І Духа Свого на кожне тіло, і пророкуватимуть ваші сини й ваші дочки, а вашим старим будуть снитися сни, юнаки ваші бачити будуть видіння.

Ukrainian Bible (UKR)

Joel 2:28 And that's just the beginning: After that— "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters. Your old men will dream, your young men will see visions.

The Message

Communication is a primary goal of General Conference. Interaction among members of churches from around the world can lead to spiritual and intellectual growth. Sharing experiences and gifts helps best practices to develop without mistakes being continuously repeated as new churches develop. Communication requires the ability to understand each other, despite diverse languages. Simultaneous interpretation has occurred during business meetings and workshops in previous General Conferences, from English to Spanish, Portuguese, and German. The ITF proposes that workshops be offered in other languages and simultaneously interpreted into English. Without this, participants are missing the gifts from areas of the world that could be shared with the English-speaking attendees. Now that the Ibero-American Institute has been established, there is a readily available, experienced group of teachers to lead workshops in Spanish and Portuguese. Pastors and lay leaders throughout the denomination may be eager to offer workshops in their own languages. Some topics that have been mentioned include 1) the work of Latin American educator and theologian, Brazilian Paulo Freire, author of The Pedagogy of the Oppressed who has written about the relationship between church and society, church and State, and the liberating role of education, and 2) the work of Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, author of Theology of Liberation and other books. Both authors have very good insights about inclusion and justice and the role of diverse communities as centers of a new power.
During the course of business meetings, delegates will be interpreting for other delegates. Following the progress of business meetings under Roberts’ Rules of Order can be challenging for the most experienced denomination member, as amendments are made, wording changed, votes proposed, friendly amendments accepted, etc. For those who are trying to understand through an interpreter, it can be a baffling experience, and extra time is needed to confirm understanding. The ITF proposes that extra time be allowed for clarification to occur and that an additional card be included in delegates’ voting packet—a light blue card that means more time requested. Keeping in mind the increasing international nature of the denomination, the scheduled duration of business meeting sessions may need to be extended so that time constraints alone do not limit full and well-informed participation.

Teams of multilingual people will be formed one year in advance of General Conference in order to propose workshops and recruit interpreters. The ITF proposes that language committees for each major language be formed so that interpreters can be sought and scheduled.

**Proposed Schedule**

Form language committees by August 2012.

Conference planning team will solicit workshop offerings from Ibero-American Institute teachers and other educators in non-English speaking countries.

**Financial Impact**

Interpreters will be offered free registration at General Conference. People who translate written materials for business meetings should be compensated or at least acknowledged in some way. Sign language and interpreter students may be sought at training institutions in Chicago. It is noted that hearing-impaired attendees may need interpretation in a method other than ASL if they are from a country other than the USA.
D. Virtual Church

The ITF believes that MCC has entered a period of time in which the citizens of the globe are eagerly adopting new technologies for communication. Youth are especially adept at digital device usage and communicate with their friends frequently by social media, sending text messages, photos, and videos. In order to optimize the use of digital technology and appeal to youth throughout the globe, the ITF proposes that MCC begin adapting its website to build a Virtual Church.

In many areas of the world, the absence of political and religious freedom can make formation of churches very difficult. Threat of arrest and violence may prohibit public gatherings. A virtual church will allow MCC to reach out to such communities and connect LGBT persons of faith to each other and to MCC resources. Communicating to oppressed LGBT Christians that they are loved and have no reason to be ashamed is the most important part of overcoming the fear that keeps them down.

The ITF proposes that MCC develop a Virtual Church. A virtual church within MCC would have pastors and lay leaders who provide pastoral care to individual members of MCC who do not have (or might not choose) access to a local church. Online worship and Bible study would be among activities of a Virtual MCC church. A worldwide network of committed, individual church members, using their creativity to advance the mission of the denomination, could result in the rapid dissemination of the inclusive love of God as practiced in MCC.

The members of the ITF have contributed rationale for the establishment of a Virtual Church and have suggested issues that must be addressed. The following are statements from various ITF members:

“The virtual world is as real as the physical world to many people, if not more important, in terms of encouraging them to be truthful to themselves and come out. In homophobic cultures in Asia, many LGBT people are connecting on-line and forming support groups.”

“MCC is highly committed to the theological and pastoral training of pastors and lay people. Due to the distances and the high cost of education, it is impossible for many people to attend distant
seminars or progressive theology schools that are not available in their countries. The programs online are a viable alternative.”

“In Africa one finds that many people have a mobile phone and yet there is limited or no access to Internet in some countries. How can MCC use the mobile phone to its advantage? The denomination could develop a mobile app similar to the widely popular social networking application in Africa called Mxit. This application can be downloaded on 3000 different brands of phone. There isn't anyone on the ITF who has those technical skills, but there may be someone in the denomination who could create a mobile phone application.”

In the first stage of building a Virtual Church, resources will be gathered from around the denomination to a section of the MCC website. Audio and video worship services and sermons, podcasts of Bible studies, webinars, and online classes will be collected. The website of The United Methodist Church (UMC.org) in the USA is a good example of a denominational website that is interactive and has an expansive amount of material available. It contains links to videos related to events and projects of the denomination. It has an area where one can view videos made by individual members and also upload one’s own video on the two current topics of conversation. It is important that audio and video resources be easily accessible in order to increase the excitement and appeal of the site. There will be links to church sites, such as Sunshine Cathedral MCC, Founders MCC Los Angeles, MCC Toronto, MCC Good Hope, and the Ibero-American Institute, which have those sorts of resources. Sunshine Cathedral MCC has worship services streaming live and has archived over two years of history, including an Internet talk show. Founders MCC LA has worship services in English and Spanish streaming live and archived using www.ustream.com. MCC Toronto streams their services using Adobe Flash Media Encoder v3.1 and has statistical data about the those who visit their website. LifeJourney MCC of Indianapolis, Indiana, USA, uses vimeo.com to stream and record their services and has a written daily meditation. MCC Good Hope has an excellent history of MCC on their website. These are just a few examples; many other excellent resources exist amongst MCC churches. The goal will be to gather resources in as many languages as possible and encourage development of materials in more languages.

In the second stage, as time passes and those involved assess the number of visits to the website, a decision will need to be made on a means to provide pastoral care to the participants. Initially, staff of the churches with virtual resources can be directed that way. If
there is a greater demand, MCC will need to recruit volunteers with various language skills in order to fulfill requests for spiritual counseling and information.

As interest grows, in the third stage, a staff person may be needed in order for the Virtual Church to continue to develop. That staff person, lay or clergy, would organize the volunteers, develop and recruit additional resources, and explore the possibility of developing an “affiliate/member” category in the Virtual Church. As communication is established with virtual church affiliates/participants, the coordinator may reach out to individuals, asking if they would be interested in hosting gatherings in their homes. The next steps include training for group leaders, Bible study leaders, and for the virtual delivery of sacraments such as Communion, Baptism, marriage, and memorials.

The Virtual Church could develop a series of “nets” that could draw people to the denomination and lead to church planting in new locations. The Virtual Church coordinator would report to the Office of Emerging Ministries and follow the protocols for planting in each area of the world.

Another approach to building a virtual church or churches may occur following the example of Rev. Dr. B.K. Hipsher, the current pastor of Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life. Since 2009, Rev. Hipsher has been pastoring an MCC church in the virtual universe, Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003).

In Hipsher’s text, Through the Looking Glass: Identity, Community, and Sacrament In Virtual Reality (2012), she says:

In the virtual world of Second Life, an avatar represents each real-life person. Each person has the power to control how that avatar appears giving people the opportunity to mask or enhance their physical attributes. Avatars communicate by means of text chat or actual voice audio of the person animating the avatar. They walk into the physical church, pick up a service leaflet notecard, as one might pick up a physical paper service leaflet upon entering a real-life church, and follow along with the ability to respond in real time.

Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life features a liturgy that closely mirrors the liturgy conducted in the real-life Sunshine Cathedral on any given Sunday in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. It is complete with music, readings of sacred texts, and a short reflection on the texts delivered by the pastor of the flock gathered there. Perhaps most importantly, the service affords an opportunity for each member to
share prayer requests and thanksgivings with all of the others gathered there. This happens in real time with real people typing into the text chat sharing their burdens, fears, hopes, and dreams. After service folks gather in the courtyard outside the church to chat and catch up with each other. We sometimes discuss the themes of the day and often continue to share our lives with each other in the form of encouragement and celebration of things that are happening in our real lives.

Some of the people who come to church at Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life have not been to a real-life church in decades. Some are still suffering from various forms of spiritual abuse visited upon them by face-to-face faith communities because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. The church has hurt these lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender real people. They need a place to heal and dip their toe into the water again before they can muster the courage to walk into a real-life church and risk the awful rejection and hatred that some have experienced (pp. 19-20).

Hipsher reported in a telephone interview (2012) that the average attendance at a weekend worship service at Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life was 12-15. This included regular participants from Italy, France, Germany, Romania, United Kingdom, Australia, and the USA. The “chat” program has a built in translator that facilitates multilingual communication. She has had over 100 different people visit the church. Sunshine Cathedral in Second Life is inclusive of people of other faiths and displays symbols of world religions on the interior in order to proclaim that statement of inclusion.

Some commentators fear that worshipping in a virtual universe will only serve to further isolate post-modern individuals who already spend more time writing to people online than talking to people face-to-face. However, Hipsher responded to this concern by saying:

…people who live in isolated locations or who have serious health or mobility constraints that preclude their ability to go outside their homes to form face-to-face community now have the option of interacting and being part of a community interacting over the Internet in various ways. From using Facebook and Twitter to communicate, to watching video online, to participating in text discussions, to interacting in virtual worlds like Second Life, the Internet and technological access to community make possible a whole new and wide array of possibility for forming a community of character. Even political and social movements for justice now exercise the power of community action using technology as was evidenced by the use of Twitter and Facebook in the recent uprisings in the “Occupy Movement” globally” (pp. 34-35, 2012).
After citing authorities who describe the ways that both the physical church and the virtual church can build or fail to build community and connection, Hipsher agrees and points to the ultimate goal of both church settings:

“It seems clear that both face-to-face and Second Life church have the potential to facilitate a community of character, i.e. a faith community that transmits the Christian story, provides an ethical compass for living one’s life, and serves as a call to action to work for justice in the world. Both of these contexts are able to provide a community where people feel known, affirmed, supported, and encouraged. Both virtual and face-to-face communities can serve as vehicles for the formation of the kind of community that has the capacity to bring us out of isolation. Both are capable of nurturing a community of character that we can call the ‘church’ that gives us the ability to know what is virtuous, what is right, how to act and respond” (p. 38, 2012).

In the same telephone interview, Hipsher mentioned that she had been considering expanding her virtual ministry outside of Second Life and to use ustream.com. The Second life platform allows a maximum of 50 persons to meet in a group and necessitates the use of proprietary software downloads to support the virtual world, so another platform would be needed to expand her ministry and increase access for those who use public computers in internet cafes or other public spaces. She would be a likely candidate to participate in the formation of the MCC Virtual Church.

Questions will arise regarding attendees of a Virtual Church. The first concerns the extent to which an attendee can participate in denominational decision-making. In a telephone interview, Griffin (2012) reported that, from the experiences of Sunshine Cathedral MCC, visitors to their worship website and virtual church on Second Life are more interested in connectedness than in church membership. Attendees are most often people who are looking for answers related to homosexuality and Christianity. They may also be persons with no church experience who are looking for information and trying out church. Once they have diminished their hurt and fear, they may be able to visit a local MCC or affirming denomination to acquire membership. In the developmental stage, during which a Virtual Church would offer a range of resources from local churches, it would not be expected to grant “voting church membership” to online participants. If participants were seeking that level of participation, they would be encouraged to seek membership in the MCC church with whom they had been worshipping online or another MCC that accepts distant members. For example, individuals with online access who live in Liberia
could be virtual members of one of the established African churches or another church anywhere in the world that they are able to attend online. Each church would determine the requirements of and benefits for distant membership in the local body.

At the stage where Hipsher or another pastor is leading a Virtual Church, the issue of representation in denominational legislation may become important and can be addressed. If the Virtual Church is chartered and affiliated as an MCC church, usual rules could be followed. Although one might imagine that a Virtual Church could have thousands of members, the fact that a worship service takes place at a specified time in order to allow for real-time participation will likely limit the numbers participating. In some ways, the same time constriction is also a barrier for regular attendance in a real life brick-and-mortar church.

A second question to address concerns access to the Sacraments for participants in the Virtual Church. People who are joining online worship services can consume elements at their home after the blessing of the elements in the service. Baptism and healing can be arranged with a member of the Virtual Church pastoral care team. The pastor can say the words and ask the questions and a friend can serve as a surrogate to sprinkle or submerge or lay on hands if the recipient wishes. Until now, Hipsher has not offered Sacraments in Second Life and she discusses this issue with some deep complexity in her thesis (pp. 64-87, 2012). She concludes:

Holy Communion remembers the life of the man Jesus who died on a cross 2000 years ago and acknowledges the presence of God here with us in real time in the presence of the risen Christ. We also call into our presence and celebrate the communion of saints that includes those who have already died and those who are not yet born. Surely then, we can include a person living with us at this time in history who happens to be separated by physical distance on the planet. If we can transcend 2000 years and welcome the dead into our midst, it does not seem a far stretch to also welcome someone who is with us via the Internet. The sacrament of Holy Communion is a moment out of time and space designed to break down those barriers. Perhaps it is time to include cyberspace in that breaking of barriers (p. 88, 2012).

A third question about a Virtual Church concerns the cost of maintenance. There would be possibilities of charging a registration fee for the use of some online resources, and participants would be encouraged to share their gifts of time, talents, and tithes with the denomination to maintain the Virtual Church. MCC is developing an online store, and the Virtual Church
participants are likely to be ideal customers for the store products, since they will be seekers of information. In the developmental stage of obtaining resources and connecting participants with the MCC website, the ITF recommends assembling a technical staff of volunteers from churches who could contribute materials and donate time. The ITF also recommends seeking associate pastors and pastors on staff of local churches to volunteer their time to provide pastoral counseling to virtual participants. As demonstrated by other international programs of the denomination, special offerings that are preceded by inspirational stories of individual needs around the world are a successful approach to growing a program. An initiative to build a network of monthly donors to support the Virtual Church could also be undertaken.

Several approaches for fundraising via social networking or mobile applications show promise. Donations can be received via Twitter RT2Give service or through Causes on Facebook. The company FirstGiving.com could provide the necessary tools to manage an event or organize a donor campaign and follow-up communication. That service also offers a data analysis feature to help an organization review and analyze its strategies. A fee of up to 7.5 percent is charged based on services engaged. FirstGiving.com could be used for newly planted churches or for the Virtual Church. The important factor in the FirstGiving technique is to have a compelling story and present it well with video and photos. The site claims to have helped raise $1 billion for 8,000 non-profits online.

Razoo.com is a similar online service that promotes generosity and helps nonprofits raise funds. Since the Virtual Church is likely to be serving people who spend a lot of time online, these online fund-raising approaches could be very useful.

In summary, the Virtual Church would be developed in stages. The goal would be that a combination of volunteer service and online or special offering donations would support the program. The Virtual Church can bring resources to those affected by oppressive regimes or to persons otherwise isolated; it can also spread the mission of MCC to a diverse population around the world who can eventually become leaders in MCC’s worldwide Christian Human Rights movement.

The words of César Chávez, uttered in his 1965 speech calling strikers in Delano, California, USA, to promote human rights, still resonate: “Once social change begins it cannot be
reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore."
E. Denominational Minute

Over the course of the past several months, members of the ITF have listened to stories of isolation and the lack of awareness or a sense of belonging to something bigger, i.e. the denomination. Often, congregants describe their understanding of MCC in terms of belonging to a particular local church but do not make the leap to identify with a larger movement or denomination.

The creation of a “Denominational Minute” will foster a sense of belonging and a greater awareness of MCC as a denomination and global movement. Over time, it is hoped that congregations will start reaching out to one another beyond the boundaries of their respective continents and countries. As MCC churches share news with congregations around the globe, one positive outcome may be a stronger sense of unity while celebrating diversity.

Description

The recommendation is for all MCC congregations to incorporate a Denominational Minute in their Sunday liturgies, announcements, and other forms of communication that reach the entire congregation. The DenominationalMinute should occur on a monthly basis or more frequently if desirable and/or feasible. The suggested format may contain the following elements:

1. A brief description of a major achievement, celebration, or challenge affecting a congregation or network that has been submitted to staff responsible for collecting Denominational Minute news. The primary focus should be on the sharing of first-hand testimonies from people or groups around the world with an emphasis on illustrating how God is visible for a moment in the world of this particular person or group in this particular location. The Denominational Minute is not intended as a vehicle to foster boasting or boost fundraising. It is important that all geographic regions are covered equally. This could be achieved by rotating through the geographical regions where MCC is represented.

2. A brief Biblical or theological reflection incorporated to further illustrate God’s presence in the lives of MCC individuals and congregations.
3. A brief prayer request added in conclusion.

Financial Impact

There will be moderate to no financial impact associated with this proposal at the congregational and denominational level. Minor to moderate time commitment will be required on the part of MCC staff and volunteers.

Human Resources

The primary responsibility for the collection of content should be placed with Network Leaders who will forward their content suggestions to the denominational Office of Communications. If appropriate or desirable, the Office of Communications will elicit input from the Global Justice Team and Theologies Team. The Office of Communications will be responsible for wording and for the dissemination of the Denominational Minute to MCC congregations.
F. Sharing of Pastors

Within MCC, it is common practice for a pastor to serve a single congregation exclusively, and large congregations usually employ several paid pastors in part-time and/or full time capacities. Small congregations often have poorly paid or volunteer pastors, who, in addition to their work in the church, must maintain secular employment to pay for their livelihood.

In MCC, it is not yet a widely used practice for congregations to share a pastor. The idea that several congregations share a pastor is a not new one, and in other denominations it is common practice. Historically in the USA, the clergy in the Methodist Episcopal Church rode horseback to two or more churches in a rural area, earning the name of clergy Circuit Rider. Currently in Germany, it is common for pastors to serve multiple parishes, especially in rural and regional areas. In MCCs in Europe, there are no examples of pastors who are employed full-time in their churches, although there are some pastors who do not seek secular employment to fill the resulting financial gap.

While it is generous for clergy to accept part-time pay for the full-time commitment to pastor a church, it is not a sustainable way to grow a denomination or a church. Equally, it is difficult to recruit new clergy who will undertake to earn the required degrees of higher education while having no hope of being paid proportionally for their work.

Other denominations, such as those in Europe, face similar problems in which falling attendance impacts the ability to hire a full-time pastor. The mainstream denominations resolved the problem by sharing clergy between churches. This resolution works well in stable, healthy churches where laity can manage church affairs and congregant needs between clergy visits. The sharing of clergy is often used in rural communities.

Team ministries, or circuits, are also utilized. Several churches work together with several clergy and authorized laity, all of whom circulate between the churches. In this plan, clergy are provided accommodations in exchange for their services. These posts carry no stipends; the expectation is that clergy will have secular employment.

It should be noted that in England, UK, the principle denomination, the Church of England, is challenged by the requirement that only ordained priests can consecrate for communion and
also by the fact that some male clergy refuse to work with female colleagues. As a result, services are often rotated around churches with laity leading mid-week activities.

In MCC the sharing of clergy between churches, or the team ministry option, could provide a viable way to increase the number of congregations properly supported by clergy who would, in turn, be receiving proper and sufficient financial support for their pastoral function. This would require specific training for the laity and clergy embarking on such a ministry path.

The ITF recommends that in areas where there are—or there is a desire for there to be—multiple MCC churches within a reasonable proximity, the option to share clergy and/or create a team ministries approach be considered as viable alternatives for churches where a full-time pastor is not financially viable or required. The ITF expects that this would not normally be suitable for a church in crisis, nor would it afford an appropriate replacement for a pastor who has vacated the office suddenly after long service, as these situations typically require additional time to resolve the challenges facing the church and congregation.

The sharing of pastors and team ministries is likely to be most suitable where a church has lost attendances or where a new church is required on the edge of the catchment area of an existing congregation.

Potential Benefits and Synergies

1. If several congregations finance a part-time job each, this can—in total—result in a full-time job for a pastor.

2. The pastor does not have to pursue a secular job and can concentrate fully on pastoral work.

3. The dependence of the parish pastor on a single congregation is reduced.

4. Shared pastors and team ministries may result in growth in the number of MCC congregations. In areas where MCC has few congregations, other congregations can emerge and be pastored by the same, shared clergy.
5. The churches involved may act as sibling congregations, encouraging and helping each other as parts of a larger community. It would be important that they have good relationships and a healthy outlook, or jealousy and competition for the pastor's time could result.

Requirements

1. The congregations must be located within a reasonable distance from each other.

2. The congregations must be prepared in principle to share their pastor.

3. The congregations have to agree with each clergy to be their employer.

4. The pastor must be willing to work for several municipalities.

5. The services of the participating congregations should take place in a way that is acceptable to the traveling pastor and yet beneficial to the congregation.

6. The pastor’s salaries and expense payments must be adequate to cover the cost of travel so the pastor is not left with inadequate salary for living.

Financial Impact

This proposal requires no financial commitment from the denomination.

Proposed Schedule

The implementation of sharing pastors and initiating team ministries can begin immediately.
G. Intercultural Partnerships: Twinned Congregations

The fewer the number of congregations in a country or a larger region, the greater the likelihood that those congregations may feel lost, isolated, or disconnected from the denomination as a whole. Often, because contacts, relationships, and friendships with congregations across borders or on other continents are superficial or weak, a sense of isolation can develop and magnify a seeming disconnect from the denomination.

In feedback from members of the ITF, Network Leaders, and pastors throughout the denomination, it was discovered that these church leaders may feel isolated and disconnected as well. They sometimes suffer from the lack of collegial relationships and stimulating intellectual dialogue about issues specific to pastoral leadership.

To deal with similar problems, villages and towns in Germany “twin,” or formed bilateral connections, with places all over the world. Partnerships between municipalities in Germany and France are successful examples of creating peaceful relationships, which foster mutual understanding and multi-dimensional exchanges. The relationships were initially motivated by political concerns in the later decades of the last century. After World War II, deep hate and isolation characterized the relationship between Germany and France. The neighboring countries spoke about each other as the hereditary enemy. Wise politicians in the 1950s and ‘60s invented a program of twinning German villages and towns with French ones. Young people and adults participated by traveling to their partner locations and spending time among the local people. Over the course of decades, this program nurtured healing. Twinning continues today as an instrument of concord and connection between the two nations.

The ITF proposes that MCC creates partnerships to twin MCC congregations with each other. The denomination will benefit when congregations experience greater feelings of connectedness. As a result, a more real, tangible global fellowship will result. Congregations will learn how different life is for people in other parts of the world, or perhaps even in other parts of the same country. Congregants will develop greater sensitivity and appreciation for cultural and international diversity.

Achieving pairs of partner-, twin- or sibling-congregations will require a pool of congregations willing to participate in this outreach. Some mechanism is needed to ensure that, whenever
possible, twin matches are made between congregations that are culturally distinct from each other. The use of communication technologies such as email, phone, Skype, etc., will be a vital part of these partnerships. It may happen that partnerships may arise from only virtual communication. However, it is worth noting that a richer bond and exchange of ideas and culture can be best achieved through face-to-face meetings. Although such travel would be encouraged between congregational pairs, a church would not be excluded from participation if members are unable or choose to not travel.

**Actions**

1. Create a pool of congregations willing to partner
2. Explore possibilities and settle on a method to organize the partnering process
3. Manners in which congregations could be matched include, but are not limited to:
   - Post self-descriptions, perhaps on the MCC website, for congregations to find each other directly without a mediator.
   - Establish a market place or exchange space in which potential partner churches can meet.
H. Translation Standards

The denomination’s continued growth and international interactions will require the use of multiple languages, as well as considerable efforts toward allowing the users of those languages to understand each others’ meanings completely. The denomination must, by providing translations from a diversity of original languages and into a diversity of recipient languages, allow for the consistently clear communication of ideas and information.

Currently, translations are requested without a process in place to secure the time of the translator. Additionally, translations are often needed quickly and the translator is required to rush. These issues combined can reduce the quality of a translation.

As a result, the ITF recommends setting standards for translation within MCC.

Part 1: Create a Denomination Dictionary

Create a dictionary to set a standard for MCC-related words that may need to be translated into different languages. The ultimate goal will be one dictionary per language that exists in the MCC community. This dictionary should be used as a reference for MCC translations. Such a dictionary will ensure that church terminology will be translated consistently. In Germany, the congregations are currently establishing a dictionary that includes 30 unique terms that are used frequently in MCC written materials.

Part 2: Proofread Translations

Install a two-person principle before publishing a translated text. Two people will see more than one person. And in most cases, the person who has written a text or a translation is not the appropriate person to oversee the result. Additionally, the translation should be proofread by a person whose first language is the one into which the material is being translated.
X. Summary

Lessons Learned Through the Eyes of the ITF

It was a great honor to be selected for the ITF project. Most members doubted that they would be chosen as they drafted their application. Getting the letter of invitation from the Moderator was exciting. Little did the new task force members know what a consuming project they were undertaking.

All the ITF members have been blessed by the process of sharing and learning, but we three members of the steering committee have benefitted the most. We have had the opportunity for many experiences as we traveled to four face-to-face meetings. The meetings were hosted by small, medium, and large churches, and all offered amazing hospitality and support with meals, transportation, entertainment, and worship. We would like to acknowledge and thank Imago Dei MCC and Pastor Janice Bowker; MCC Toronto and Pastor Brent Hawkes and staff; and King of Peace MCC and Pastor Candace Shultis and staff. Three members of King of Peace MCC warmly offered rooms in their homes during the meeting there. The Steering Committee can attest that the three host churches are offering the radically inclusive love of Jesus Christ to all who visit.

One experience shared by all was the difficulty of scheduling meetings across time zones and the International Date Line. Especially when traveling, we experienced a great deal of time and day confusion. While completing this document on a deadline, one member thought he had only 3 hours remaining to finish his work, while he had 27 hours. Meetings were often missed due to problems with Daylight Savings Time, misunderstandings about the schedule, or events that came up suddenly. The members of the ITF regularly sacrificed sleep to hold phone meetings with members widely spaced on the globe. We understand that this must occur on a regular basis for staff who are supporting our churches around the world.

The members of the ITF have had the amazing experience of communicating regularly with MCC members from every corner of the globe. Linguistic challenges have been faced, and we have dealt with technology with great patience. We have prayed together in many languages for guidance for the work, for the churches’ struggles, for the denomination, and for our own
members’ health and family situations. Strong bonds have been formed, which will continue to enrich our lives and benefit the denomination.

While studying the needs of marginalized peoples throughout the world, the ITF had the opportunity to watch MCC in action. The denomination’s staff has experienced increased workload as the budget was reduced by 25 percent in the past year. We have observed and appreciated that the staff is highly committed and work very long hours with great passion. Volunteers, both clergy and laity, run MCC churches around the world. It is rare for pastors in Ibero-America, Asia, Africa, and the UK to receive a full-time salary, or in some cases, any salary. The team has often had feelings of inadequacy relative to the scope of the issues being faced by sexual minorities and other marginalized people. When we compared MCC with the small staff and few congregations to the many large denominations that are promulgating conservative “family values,” we would sometimes feel disheartened, but we have been able to encourage each other with the stories of triumphs, lives saved, and people rejoicing.

The ITF has learned that adaptation, as in biologic evolution, is the key to the survival of MCC. The churches must adapt to changes in demographics in their locality, changes in technology, and changes in people’s desires for spirit-filled worship. Young people must be included in leadership positions in churches to keep the process fresh and in step with the times. All assumptions must be challenged, and the church should be continuously reinventing itself. The denominational structure may need to be adapted to meet the needs of a widely dispersed global church. The culture of MCC must be adapted as it arrives in culturally diverse locations so that a new story is written for new churches. The history of MCC is inspirational and must be shared with all new participants so they will be encouraged to persist in their efforts to achieve more civil and religious rights in the face of oppressive cultures and governments.

*Inspiration Combined With Faith Leads To Transformation*

The International Task Force Steering Committee and MCC Staff with Rev. Dr. Nancy Wilson. The group met in St. Petersburg, Florida, USA, in January 2012, to continue work on the document and proposals.
XI. Bibliography

References


http://www.ncccusa.org/NCCnews/


http://www.umc.org


XII. Appendix

Appendix A

The following quotes are provided by people who are not members of MCC and who were asked to state what they knew about the denomination. These statements offer an outside view of the denomination.

1. I sense in your community a fusion of gay rights and black liberation theology. A very strong mix indeed. The presence of liberation is palpable. The first time we attended, I was impressed with the use of gospel music. Religion needs a sense of the blues. "I once was lost but now I am found." I was also impressed by the mix of people. The congregation seemed to represent the city. Sunday worship is too often the most segregated time of our week [in the U.S.]. What struck me most was the enthusiasm of the membership. The enthusiasm made your church a very welcoming place. Your membership knows about the Good News.

2. Before going to MCC, I felt worried that I might not be welcomed as a straight person; I was concerned that I would be interfering with someone else's safe space. I couldn't have been more wrong. I felt more welcome than I have felt in any other church community. From the moment I walked in the door, I was greeted by many people with warm eyes and smiles. During the service I looked around and felt a part of this incredibly diverse group of people communing, singing, smiling, fully alive within this special community. I was right about one thing; it was a safe space—for everyone.

3. The MCC congregation is a dynamic and integral part of the gay and lesbian community. The MCC members show in an exciting way the diversity of gay life in the city, and far beyond. MCC is part of virtually all major events which take place in the LGBT community and it's a vital part. But MCC does much more: they attract people to take action, they connect people, they listen, they draw conclusions - yet always the right ones! They interfere. They care for dialogue and discourse. Across all boundaries and always open, and without prejudices. But above all, the MCC community and all its volunteers are available: for people in all walks of life, regardless of origin or in which situation. It's good to know. And calming!
4. The beautiful thing about MCC is that they have learned a way to deal with serious subjects in ways that are not burdened with “serious.” They have more fun doing good than almost any other Christians I know. I think learning how to enjoy being together is a great “preparation” for heaven. All the pseudoearnestness of those who concentrate on sins of the flesh is very tedious. Thank you MCC for reminding us that the gift of God is the spirit of joy!

5. I’m a 58-year-old partnered Lesbian, and consider myself "post Christian Pagan" with a fondness for all spiritual teachings rooted in compassion, including what I call “true Christians” or those who live out Jesus’ teachings on love and forgiveness (not the hate and judgment mainstream right-wing Fundamentalist orthodoxy is spewing). When I think of MCC, I think of courage, social justice, inclusion, support for the arts (Vox started in an MCC meeting room!) and working for peace.

6. To me, MCC is a very open community, welcoming to anyone of any orientation or life circumstance. MCC provides support to people who would otherwise have no spiritual home or community. If I were to go to a religious service, MCC would be on my top five list. Because I practice my spirituality independently, I prefer not go to any organized service, but I like to be a visitor once in a while. Any time I have visited MCC services, I am happy to be there. Because I do not have the best relationship with my parents, I can honestly say that my best Christmas was with MCC, being a guest singer with the Christmas Day services—the non-judgmental and acceptance of everyone was so loving that I will never forget it.

7. All-inclusive church. Accepting of all people regardless of sexual identity, race, and religion.

8. When I think of MCC, the first thing that comes to mind is a global safe space for LGBTQ Christians and their families.

9. MCC is . . . a safe, celebratory place for sexual minorities that allows us to maintain and develop our connection to the Divine.

10. I’ve heard about MCC and what comes to mind are gentle, positive, uplifting, and caring.
11. In 2009, my husband and I took six months to travel across the USA. As we traveled, we made a point of worshiping in a wide variety of churches, specifically seeking those that were “doing something interesting.” We made our choices based on websites and personal recommendations. Of all the congregations (of many denominations) that we visited, our worship experiences at [an] MCC were among our most positive. We visited the "celebration" service with our daughter and her boyfriend and were joined by members of his family, who are long-time members of the congregation. We were warmly welcomed by everyone we met.

As a lover of liturgy, I appreciated the form of the worship that also maintained a welcoming informality and warmth. I appreciated the high quality of preaching. And I was moved by the communion ritual of receiving the elements and being prayed for—as a family, if one chose—by those members of the congregation who administered communion. I was inspired by my experiences there. Though, because the life of the congregation is focused, understandably, on the experience of people who are gay, lesbian, trans, etc., I might not choose to make it my worship home. That being true, I’d be hard-pressed to find a worship experience I liked better.
### Appendix B

#### MCC Membership and Number of Churches: 2000 versus 2011

(Note: An updated list of 2012 Churches and Mission Groups will replace this list when that information becomes available.)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>CHURCHES</th>
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<th>%Change no. of Members</th>
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<td>The Rock MCC</td>
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<td>Tree of Life MCC</td>
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<td>198 CHURCHES</td>
<td>19,064</td>
<td>13,718</td>
<td>133 CHURCHES</td>
<td>-32.8%</td>
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### MCC Churches and New Church Starts by Continent as of 2012

(Note: Names of the new church and ministries starts and/or location details will be included as information becomes available.)

#### MCC'S GLOBAL PRESENCE (at 1 June 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MCC PRESENCE BY GLOBAL AREA</th>
<th>New Church Starts</th>
<th>Non-Church Ministries</th>
<th>Affiliated Churches</th>
<th>Total Ministry Sites</th>
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<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>LatAm/Carib</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>171</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total by Status</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
<td><strong>48</strong></td>
<td><strong>171</strong></td>
<td><strong>279</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Characteristics of New Paradigm Churches

1. They started after the mid-1960s.
2. The majority of congregation members were born after 1945.
3. Seminary training of clergy is optional.
4. Worship is contemporary.
5. Lay leadership is highly valued.
6. They have extensive small group ministries.
7. Clergy and congregants usually dress informally.
8. Tolerance of different personal styles is prized.
9. Pastors tend to be understated, humble, and self-revealing.
10. Bodily, rather than mere cognitive, participation in worship is the norm.
11. The “gifts of the Holy Spirit” are affirmed.
12. Bible-centered teaching predominates over topical sermonizing.

from Miller, Donald E., Reinventing American Protestantism, 20.
Appendix D

MCC Theologies Team

Date: January 9, 2012
Proposal: Creating & Prioritizing a Language Policy
Submitted to: MCC International Task Force
MCC Governing Board
MCC Senior Leadership Team

Background:
At our recent Team meeting, we had a chance to talk together about a very thoughtful proposal the International Task Force asked us to consider regarding a “denominational minute” intended to increase our awareness of MCC as a global movement. We have provided the ITF with our feedback about that proposal, which we hope will be helpful. In the course of compiling that feedback, we engaged in a much broader “Holy Conversation” about the global identity of MCC and how we might work together to live into that reality with purpose and integrity.

Currently, there are obstacles that prevent us from achieving this. Many of the written materials and resources from MCC are available only in English, admittedly including resources our own team has developed. Additionally, MCC meetings, gatherings, and conferences have inadequate translations available to fully include our non-English speaking siblings.

We are confident that we all share the same goal of allowing God to shape MCC into the truly global movement that we are. We share your excitement about the movement of MCC in Latin America, including a large number of groups becoming active in Brazil. We are heartened by the work of MCC in the Philippines, Malaysia, and China, as well as in Africa, the Caribbean, and many other places. We acknowledge that we are not alone in grieving the ways in which differences in language prevent us from more fully forging these relationships across the globe. We also know that there are reasons our progress in the area of providing adequate translations is slow, including limited resources of time, people power, and finances. However, we feel compelled to add our voices to this ongoing conversation and to amplify the cry being made for inclusion—specifically as it regards language translations—to become a priority in 2012.
Because of the specific nature of our team’s work, it is important to us to point out that we believe there are theological, and not only political or practical, reasons for this. We are reminded of several Biblical stories, including most notably the Pentecost experience of unity in the midst of a multiplicity of languages. Church tradition also includes relevant examples, including the Reformation principle of making texts available in the vernacular of every region. And, of course, MCC has its own theological and ideological examples articulated in such places as our core values, branding byline (e.g. “Tearing down walls...”), and the guiding principles of our team.

Therefore, in that Spirit, we make the following proposal to you, hoping that we can become partners and co-laborers in fulfilling our shared vision and deeply held values as we strengthen our global movement.

We propose that:

- MCC adopt an official Language Policy that identifies language translations that are strategically needed to include as many people as possible in every type of communication;
- The assessment of necessary language translations becomes a priority when allocating resources (e.g. time, human resources, finances, etc.) so that reasonable accommodations can be made to provide adequate access to non-English speaking people;
- An importance rating be implemented for documents so that translations can be prioritized to maximize vital communications (e.g. “absolutely essential,” “good,” “it would be nice,” etc.);
- Clear expectations about the availability—or non-availability—of translations will be made in advance, when translations cannot be reasonably made available in every language represented;
- Translations be attentive and sensitive not only to language, but to cultural context and relevancy as well, and that vetting translations with native speakers for cultural appropriateness be done to increase their effectiveness;
- The work of translation includes translating non-English source documents into English (and other languages), fostering multi-lateral collaboration and maximizing mutual enrichment.
We recognize that MCC is facing the challenges of limited resources and increasing multilingualism. These two realities may appear to be at odds, but we believe MCC is creative enough to meet this challenge. As those who have benefitted from being part of a team with a clear focus and mission, we suggest that the creation of a Translations Team may be one way to begin resolutely addressing this issue.

We are grateful for your dedicated leadership of Metropolitan Community Churches and praying with you for our future. We look forward to your response to this proposal and to the continued ways in which we will work together.

The MCC Theologies Team

Rev. Dr. Kharma Amos, Chair
Rev. Dr. Jim Burns
Skip Chasey
Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng
Bryce E. Rich
Rev. Margarita Sanchez De Leon
Rev. Dr. Axel Schwaigert
Rev. Dr. Mona West