



MCC®
METROPOLITAN
COMMUNITY CHURCHES

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Listening Tour Observation - Part 2 - Discern

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Listening Tour

LISTENING TOUR OBSERVATION – PART 2 – DISCERN

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview	2
Listening Tour Process	3
Four (4) Questions.....	3
Discern	3
Need: Addressing Spiritual Needs.....	4
Need: 21 st Century MCC Identity	5
Need: Shift from Transactions to Relationships.....	6
Need: Healthy Ways to Deal with Conflict	6
Need: New Conversations about Diversity and Inclusion.....	7
Path Forward	8

OVERVIEW

On 26 January 2017, Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) Governing Board, Council of Elders, and Senior Leadership Team affirmed the need to listen deeply and act boldly. A 10-month global Listening Tour, February through November 2017, focused on local churches, ministries, and leaders of MCC. Through the Listening Tour, MCC clergy, leaders, and members shared their experiences, perceptions, and recommendations in person and virtually.

The Listening Tour included

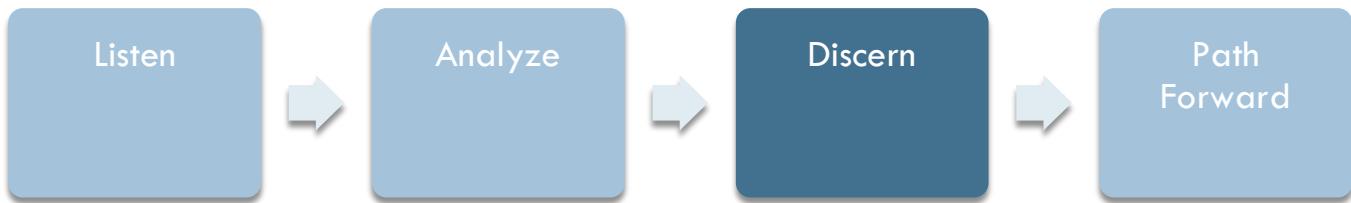
- public conversations in a town hall style forum (mostly in churches during Network Gatherings),
- conferences,
- a series of webinars,
- an anonymous online survey,
- and one-on-one conversations with the Interim Moderator.

Listeners included the Interim Moderator and MCC Elders and Governing Board members where possible. Participants answered the same four (4) questions throughout the Listening Tour. The responses generated thousands of comments.

This report highlights primary themes, topics, and concerns expressed for the four questions. This report also contains other topics raised during the Listening Tour.

LISTENING TOUR PROCESS

The four-step process below shows the Listening Tour process. In this document, we discuss the “Discern” step to identify the challenges brought to MCC through this effort.



Four (4) Questions

Four (4) questions started the conversation:

- What does being MCC mean to you today?
- What is one of the best features of your local MCC church?
- What is one of the greatest challenges of your local MCC church?
- What would you need from MCC in the next 3 years to follow God's call to “be” and “do” ministry?

Discernment includes the rich narratives from listening. Listening to what is not being said, noticing the silence, identifying repetition, honoring a multitude of voices, leads to naming specific concerns.

DISCERN

The active discovery through conversations, surveys, and town hall style forums brought together a multitude of comments from around the world. The comments and stories represent the Body of Christ as experienced through MCC's presence in the lives of thousands.

Below are five (5) specific areas representing urgent and significant needs within MCC communities. Needs are presented in a specific order to represent building blocks to design future generations of MCC.

Needs:

- Address Spiritual Needs
- 21st Century MCC Identity
- Shift from Transactions to Relationships
- Healthy Ways to Deal with Conflict
- New Conversations about Diversity and Inclusion

Need: Addressing Spiritual Needs

MCC's presence is unique among most faith communities. Across the decades and around the world, MCC people have gathered for reasons other than historical or creedal loyalty to a certain faith tradition. In a diversity of faith and spiritual origins, MCC has become the spiritual home and place for reconciliation and healing. What holds MCC together is a deep desire for belonging, healing, and living out faith commitments. Often participants named the uniqueness of the MCC experience in language that described worship and social justice. The poles of worship as church and social justice as movement create a space between where spiritual needs are met.



Spirituality includes honoring what each of us holds as significant or sacred or even holy. This understanding of spirituality has three parts.¹

It includes ways we express ancient practices and teachings in our lives and communities through activities such as prayer, worship, the open table, and communal sharing.

We embrace modern thought, which values all of creation and remains open to new ways of understanding God, Jesus, and sacred texts to the inclusion of scientific discoveries and technology in our lives and communities.

The spirituality expressed within MCC is one that critiques power and privilege, to the point of deconstructing commonly held understandings of human sexuality, gender identity and expression, race, and national identities, among a few.

This final understanding of spirituality includes affirming the liberation of LGBTQ persons, and the ongoing queer theological and social movement of the late 20th century through the present time. MCC is unique because it intentionally meets spiritual needs for persons seeking church and faith-based activism towards social justice.

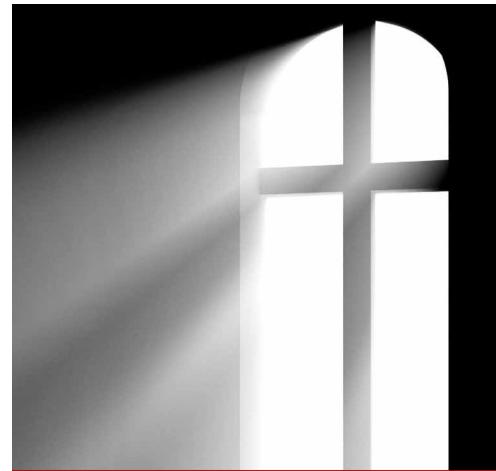
MCC's historical role in the formation of the spiritual movement for LGBTQ liberation and theology is without question. The spiritual needs and language for this present generation is less obvious. Very few Network Gatherings offered conversations about spirituality, though many had opening prayer or worship within the gathering. There is a serious need to discuss spirituality and translate what it means to be spiritual within MCC and the current culture.

¹ For more on this description of spirituality as a tri-focal lens of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern views, see the work of Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, 2006.

This is especially vital in the current conversation about persons who consider themselves "Spiritual but not religious." Church attendance continues to decline and volumes of books have been written to explain why and offer answers. The underlying issue is common in the gospel accounts of Jesus interacting with religious leaders: Religion fails to meet spiritual needs. Jesus demonstrated acceptance of religious practices, but was not bound to the letter of the law. What if the entire message of Jesus was about being spiritual? What if he did not want to be religious? These questions are not new. Yet, if we go back to the teaching of Jesus with these two questions at this time, it is likely we will discover that Jesus said in many ways, "I'm spiritual, not religious."

MCC is filled with deeply spiritual people. Many discovered their spirituality through struggle against religious rhetoric and abuse. Many in MCC have experienced transformation that is nothing short of miraculous. Many people within MCC churches draw from different spiritual traditions and practices that reflect intersections of identities and experiences. MCC already blends forms of faith, adapting and creating language that expresses various forms of spirituality.

We are able to be intentional and lead in the conversation on spirituality. MCC leads a spiritually fluid revolution. The denomination needs to equip MCC leaders and members to share their own spirituality more openly and in a way that is relevant to the current conversation about spirituality.



Need: 21st Century MCC Identity

The foundation of MCC is the local churches, ministries, and leaders. Their voices and actions in the local community gradually formed the global movement and church. A testimony to the impact of MCC upon the world is the ever-growing acceptance of LGBTQ persons by governmental bodies and religious organizations. The clear majority of the world's population has yet to reach this status.

Generally, in the majority of Western societies, there is an increase in acceptance of gender and orientation paralleled with a decline in church attendance and religious adherence. Some portions of Western societies are more socially conservative and MCC is thriving, while in more liberal areas, MCC is facing identity challenges. In more socially and theologically conservative areas of the world, liberation of body and spirit as demonstrated through MCC's presence is challenged. The diverse religious contexts of Ibero-America, Africa, and parts of Asia reflect fundamentalism, conservatism, and orthodoxy. MCC's presence in these places relies upon local entrepreneurial leaders and strategic partnerships.

In the United States, Europe, and Australia Network Gatherings, questions about relevance and viability arose. Useful recommendations were also offered. These comments include, but are not limited to, "open and affirming churches are not celebrating who we are," or "MCC is on the edge of [a] progressive agenda and it is spiritually diverse." Many responses focused on social justice as a core identity and ministry, including the global mission, in responses such as "I'm part of something much bigger than myself."

The overwhelming consensus is a call for MCC to establish an identity that meets the needs of the many generations and responds to the call of this current age. This includes a clear and simple message packaged in a branding campaign easily implemented by local churches and ministries using relevant technology. Another need focuses on an external marketing effort to tell the story of MCC to a much wider and diverse audience.

Need: Shift from Transactions to Relationships

Some comments discussed the culture and function of MCC. Especially in the United States, comparisons across previous decades to the current structure were mentioned. One participant and longtime member of MCC noted how, at the beginning of the 21st century, MCC was a "Fellowship" and transitioned to a "Denomination." The observation, described in more detail at the time, specified changes in both language and relationship. Others expressed the need for a relationship that reflects a congregation's ability to govern itself because MCC "is not a hierarchy." This sentiment was expressed at multiple stops on the Listening Tour.

Many described a lack of relationship and connection between churches and global leaders. The current experience of relationship between local churches, leaders, and denominational leaders and staff feels like a transaction. Many note the only contact with MCC includes paying assessments, completing forms, and following processes. When processes present challenges, or even lead to broken relationships between churches and the denomination, the transactional nature of the relationship appears more clearly.

The need for trust and mutuality in relationships through all levels of local, network, and denominational leaders is vital. While points of contact, such as an annual call to clergy from a member of the Council of Elders, is welcomed, a deeper relationship is desired. Transitional work includes developing and nurturing healthy relationships between MCC churches, ministries, leaders and MCC leadership and staff. Local churches and leaders want a different type of relationship with MCC that includes relevant resources, meaningful and caring contact, more information, and an increased sense of mutual concern. Moving into relationship that is mutual, emotionally healthy, with appropriate boundaries allows leaders and churches to thrive and remain focused on the mission, vision, and core values within their own cultural contexts.

Need: Healthy Ways to Deal with Conflict

Conflict occurs at times in any community. There are various levels of conflict, some of which can be healthy and lead to growth. Skills needed to address and resolve conflict in a healthy way exist in every level of society and MCC. In a Network Gathering, one person described their experience of MCC as "Holding together an amazing breadth not only of theological ideas, but also political and social, in a general agreement on fighting '-isms' (but disagreeing in how to)." The spirit of this statement points to ways in which we agree in principle on many things, and disagree on how to effectively address differences.

Conflict is common among people in general society and nations. Every level of MCC experiences conflict, even high levels of destructive conflict. Participants in some of the Network Gatherings noted conflicts in local churches and the need for earlier intervention with denominational leaders. Some described the need to try different methods, while some openly talked about splits in churches. There were moments when clergy and

lay leaders expressed concern and recommended resources on how to deal with "bullies" and "antagonists" in the church, while others offered their experiences of dealing with many different types of conflict.

The inability to elect a Moderator at the 2016 General Conference left many people concerned and questioning how to move forward. Also noted are conflicts of varying types and degrees prior to the 2016 General Conference: Within the Governing Board, directed toward denominational leaders, Moderator candidates, and the Moderator Nominating Committee. For many in leadership and local church members, the conflict became intense. Concerns and even confusion over process, lack of election, recent changes in staffing and offices, along with other Governing Board conflicts continue to illuminate the need for shifting patterns of behavior and tools to assist in engaging in healthy conflict resolution.

In multiple comments and conversations, many described how the last few years of conflict within the denomination is discouraging. Others took a historical view and noted seasons of conflict in the history of MCC as an organization.

As MCC matures, leaders recognize ways in which healthy conflict will transform, even in this era. Current policies and procedures may need in-depth review alongside the Bylaws. Also needed are new pathways to healthy dialogue. What has become clear is that healthy conflict requires a renewal in relationships, forming new covenants, and expanding the number of voices included in the dialogue. This time of learning, and even unlearning, occurs in stages and continues beyond the Interim time.

Need: New Conversations about Diversity and Inclusion

Over the last few years, the global community has experienced an increase in harmful legislation, political leaders and religious rhetoric targeting LGBTQ persons, persons of African descent, immigrants, the poor, and women. Specifically, in 2017 many events increased the urgency for new conversations about oppression and the need for diversity and inclusion. Examples include: Inauguration of United States President Donald Trump; increase in neo-Nazi activity; new laws and executive orders that disenfranchise the most vulnerable citizens; global populist nationalism; exposure of the prevalence of sexual abuse and harassment within every corner of society; restrictions on and removal of immigrants; and laws challenging LGBTQ rights. These examples, among other events, ignited debates and started new conversations around the world. Recently, in the United States, a government agency is actively censoring words like "diversity" and "transgender."

Local church and denominational led conversations over previous decades created significant change within many congregations. The previous work is important, yet it is obvious in this new era. MCC answers a call to a prophetic mission, and in this era, that means a season of learning to expand our understanding, language, and practice. Our local churches and ministries represent intersections of class, race, gender, orientation, ability, language, nationality, citizenship, and health status. Yet, some are less diverse than others.

In this urgent time, we must stretch ourselves into new conversations with different people. An example of expanding includes evaluating the idea of a "table" for dialogue becoming more like communion, rather than a board room with a limited number of seats. To expand and start a new conversation means we disrupt the old system and ways of speaking about diversity and inclusion. There is a new vocabulary forming, new words evolving, and new concepts and creativity rising into the social consciousness. This listening experience exposed portions of the new words and asked for all of MCC to become more aware and intentional. Our actions stretch and expand us to better reflect the kin-dom of God.

Today, this awareness, conversation, and intentionality in our global churches and ministries needs to begin with:

- Naming racism as a sin.
- In the United States, discussing and affirming the phrase “Black Lives Matter.”
- Starting or continuing discussions to show the impact of class, privilege, economics, along with LGBTQ realities in the community.
- Educating and confronting ways in which white supremacy appears in society, including recognizing colonialism in this current era.
- Ensuring every public restroom in our churches has gender-neutral options for transgender and non-binary persons.
- Honoring a person’s pronoun and/or name.
- Expanding language beyond pronouns, old formulas of good and bad based on skin color, and move beyond only one language in worship when communities are multi-lingual.
- Ensuring inclusive language is expanded to acknowledge gender difference, physical abilities, and diversity in bodies.
- Moving beyond adult-only spaces to include children and youth in every aspect of the church or ministry.
- Including intentional and organic changes in worship, leadership training, mentoring, and ministries to reflect the wider cultures of our communities.

PATH FORWARD

Part 3, which is the final part of the Listening Tour Report, begins the journey of a Path Forward. The purpose of Part 3 is to recommend action items at every level of MCC globally. As churches, ministries, leaders, networks and denominational leaders consider Part 2, it is with the understanding that the path forward may have immediate, short-term, and long view recommendations.