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Witness

February, 2004, *Equipping*

Mennonite Voluntary Service

Robert J. Suderman
Executive Secretary, Mennonite Church Canada Witness

Dear pastors and congregations:

On behalf of Mennonite Church Canada Witness, I wish for all of you a great Leap-year. Someone told me that leap-years are meant to be good years. God's hand will continue to be present with you, and I pray that we will have a great sense of confidence and joy knowing that God's hand is indeed there.

I want to update you on the latest developments concerning the Mennonite Voluntary Service and Service Adventure.

Death...?

You will all be aware of the sequence of events during 2003:

- 1) The Christian Service Ministries department of Mennonite Church Canada Witness was cut in the March/03 program adjustments.
- 2) Transition funding was obtained to bring more orderly closure to these programs during the 2003 fiscal year.
- 3) Delegates at the MC Canada St. Catharines assembly requested that this decision be revisited, with the potential of keeping it going.
- 4) Mennonite Church Canada Witness requested constituency feedback and developed a proposal for the General Board that would have extended the time period of MVS/SA till July/04 to allow for further discernment in the Assembly, but with the assurance that provision for its continuation needed to be made for the entire fiscal year.
- 5) After a long process of discernment, this proposal was not approved, and the March/03 decision was re-affirmed.

All of this to say that January 31, 2004 will mark an important and historic transition in the life of our denomination.

First through the General Conference Mennonite Church, and more recently also through the Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church Canada, MVS has motivated our ethic of service. It has provided structural opportunities for service since its inception in 1946, a total of 58 years. As of January 31, 2004 we will no longer administer or budget for this program.

This is a significant transition. We celebrate the way in which this program has been one significant tool in expressing our faithfulness to God's faithfulness. We also celebrate the impact and contribution it has made, not only to the lives of the volunteers and their families, but also to the denomination, the congregations, and the many persons that have benefited from the dedicated service of so many persons.

... Or New Life?

Perhaps this is not death, but only a transition time to something different. Allow me to fill you in on some progress since our last communication.

- 1) A new group is hard at work attempting to visualize the continuation of our ethic of service by means of opportunities very similar to what Mennonite Voluntary Service and Service Adventure have been in the last years. At present this group is made up primarily of representatives of those congregations that have existing units (Winnipeg, Lethbridge, Toronto, Hamilton, Montreal). They are visualizing forming a **Cooperative Association** to take on the work of assuring central administration and funding so that these programs can continue.
- 2) This group wishes to have such an organization function, somehow, under the "umbrella" of MC Canada, and our staff is working hard with them to look at models that could make this possible.
- 3) All congregations with existing units are committed to this new model, and all are continuing the service units they presently have. **They also are actively recruiting and accepting volunteers for placement.** They hope that the units will find new life under a different administrative structure that honors the decisions made by the General Board, yet at the same time seeks to find ways to continue the programs that have been cut.
- 4) At the time of writing, it is still a bit unclear what the details of this proposal will be, but we trust this will be clarified in the very near future. This group is fully committed to make continuation possible, recognizing that the shape of central administration will need to change dramatically.

So are we talking about the **death** of a program or a transition to **new life**? Frankly, we don't yet know for sure.

What is certain is that:

- 1) As of January 31, 2004, the administration of MVS/SA programs as they have traditionally been administered in the denomination will change.
- 2) No central administration will be available via Mennonite Church Canada Witness structures as of this date. Brad Reimer, who has been providing dedicated leadership to these programs in Canada, and who has worked in this transition time organizing and aiding conversations such as the ones mentioned above to happen, will no longer be available via our program structures.
- 3) We want to thank Brad for the yeoman's work he has done to transition the Christian Service programs from a denominational program, through a denominational merger, to a two-country church structure, to implementation of the new structure, to finding alternatives and options to keep Christian service programs and options alive and a high priority within our church. We wish Brad and his family well as they too transition to new opportunities and, hopefully, to satisfying continued involvements with the church.

We would ask you as pastors and congregations to:

- 1) Pray for Brad and his family in this difficult time of job-loss and transition;
- 2) Pray for the existing MVS/SA units as they face a new and somewhat unknown future;
- 3) Pray for the group, the Cooperative Association, as it works to envision a new future for Christian service in the congregations and in the denomination;
- 4) Pray for MC Canada staff as we try to be faithful to decisions made and walk alongside new initiatives from our congregations;
- 5) Pray that the ethic of Christian service, so deeply engrained in our people, will continue strong even through these transitions and that new and innovative avenues will be found by each congregation, each member, each level of church, to encourage this value dear to the hearts of our people;
- 6) Share this letter with your youth ministers and sponsors so that they can continue to encourage the youth to consider these options;
- 7) Encourage potential volunteers to contact congregations directly or to call MC Canada for contact information.

Thank-you for taking time to become updated on what is happening. We look forward to a fuller report and conversation as things develop.