

Recommendations of the CMCL Retreat Visioning Committee

January 2008

Background

Since the early 1990s, Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster has set aside an entire weekend in October for a congregation-wide retreat at Black Rock Retreat Center in Kirkwood. The event takes place in a motel-style facility with access to meeting rooms, a gym, athletic fields, hiking paths and a lake. It extends from Friday night to Sunday afternoon and includes five buffet-style meals. The retreat experience is not inexpensive. Does the value of retreat justify the cost?

For some years, those who attended were not asked to pay, and all retreat expenses were instead drawn from the church budget. Because of rising attendance and costs, CMCL in 2005 instituted a new policy requesting \$75 from each adult attending full-time. No payment was requested for children.

In 2007, the charge for adults increased to \$100. Also in 2007 those able to pay more than \$100 per adult were encouraged to do so.

It should be pointed out that despite the charge to adults, the CMCL budget continued to subsidize much of the cost. For example, Black Rock in 2007 charged \$215 for an adult staying two nights; for a family of two adults and two teens, it charged \$580.

In June 2007, Program Commission appointed a four-member ad hoc Retreat Visioning Committee. The committee was asked to evaluate how well a weekend-long retreat serves the congregation in building community and to offer recommendations if it concludes change may be beneficial. The committee gathered information in two phases.

First, the committee in July conducted two listening sessions, which took place between worship services. Anyone wishing to offer input in a group setting was encouraged to attend and speak. Twenty-one attended on July 8; 17 on July 15. A strong consensus emerged in favor of continuing the weekend-long retreat, but many also expressed an openness to a less costly alternative.

The second phase of information gathering involved an anonymous 16-question survey that all CMCL adults and senior youth were encouraged to complete. Surveys could be completed on paper or online. Completed surveys were accepted for nearly two months. Surveys were returned by 70 adults and 10 senior youth.

The three questions that received the greatest amount of agreement were:

- 84.8 percent agreed that the mix of structured time and time without structure at retreat is just right. Sixteen skipped the question.
- 77.5 percent said building community and getting to know people at CMCL is very important. Two skipped the question.
- 70.4 percent chose the answer “would be filled with happy anticipation” if they should find themselves on the way to church retreat. Eleven skipped the question.

Retreat attendance
(includes part-time stays)
2004: 176 in attendance
2005: 159
2006: 200
2007: 179

Retreat impact on CMCL
budget
2004: \$20,004
2005: \$12,716
2006: \$14,641
2007: \$10,471

The survey provided an opportunity for respondents to offer additional written comments. Many did so. Both the survey and comments are addendums to this report. The survey results were compiled in three categories: all respondents, adults only, senior youth only.

Recommendations

The committee makes four primary recommendations.

1. We recommend **a weekend-long retreat continue at Black Rock** for the immediate future, but CMCL be open to considering an alternative, less costly location and arrangement. Our cursory search for an alternative to Black Rock that meets the congregation's needs suggests that finding an appropriate alternative may be difficult.

2. Assuming CMCL continues its traditional retreat at Black Rock for the immediate future, we recommend changes be made to **lessen the impact of a weekend-long retreat on the church budget.**

3. We recommend **improvements to the retreat program**, for both adults and children, to widen the appeal of retreat to more people at CMCL.

4. We recommend CMCL make a serious commitment to community building year-round, perhaps creating **a new standing committee with a mission of building community.** It might be logical to merge the existing Hospitality committee, Small Group committee and Retreat committee into a new Building Community committee.

Why do we make these recommendations?

RECOMMENDATION NO. 1

Continue a weekend-long retreat at Black Rock

Input from the listening sessions and the survey strongly suggests that the CMCL congregation values the Black Rock retreat for how it helps to build community. Of the 67 adults who answered the survey question asking how well do you think church retreat works in building community, only two answered not well at all.

There is less clarity on whether a two-night retreat is preferable to a one-night stay or a retreat with no sleepover.

Of the 68 adults who answered the question asking how much value is there in spending both Friday and Saturday nights at retreat, only 10 adults, or 14.7 percent, said there is no value at all. However, of the 67 adults who answered the question whether a one-night retreat would be preferable to a two-night stay, 43 adults, or 64.2 percent, agreed either somewhat or very much. As for the 10 senior youth respondents, 6 don't agree at all with a one-night stay, 4 agree somewhat.

Since a strong majority of all respondents (87.2 percent) agree there is at least some value in a two-night stay and a slight majority of all respondents (51.3 percent) are opposed to a retreat with no overnight stay, our recommendation is to continue a two-night retreat with the possibility of a one-night retreat in the future if a suitable facility is available. Black Rock does not offer us the option of a one-night stay.

RECOMMENDATION NO. 2

Reduce the impact of retreat on the church budget

According to the survey, about 74 percent of adults consider the \$14,600 the church budget paid for the 2006 retreat to reduce the cost to adults and to pay all costs for children somewhat excessive or very excessive. However, about 39 percent of adults said they could not attend retreat if they had to pay the full amount for their families.

One way to reduce costs would be to find a facility that offers camping or large-group sleeping facilities as well as motel-like accommodations and that allows a group to prepare some of its meals.

Camp Hebron in Halifax, Dauphin County, offers greater flexibility, however, it has the disadvantage of being a longer drive for most of the congregation. According to Mapquest, Camp Hebron is 56 miles from CMCL; Black Rock is 19 miles. The longer distance will likely reduce the number of people who can attend retreat, especially those who can only come for part of the time.

Refreshing Mountain Camp in Stevens, about 21 miles from CMCL, is a more promising alternative. It offers motel-like lodging, bunk houses and camping, and it provides five meals and options for groups to prepare meals. The cost per adult of a two-night stay in the motel, plus five meals, is \$133.25; for two adults and two teens, \$469. Children between the ages of 4 and 7 are half price. The cost of bunkhouse lodging is \$82.25 per adult. Refreshing Mountain requires a minimum group of 251 for discounted prices. One problem with Refreshing Mountain is desirable fall weekends are booked.

A potential drawback to having the congregation scattered in camping areas, cabins and the main retreat building is it may reduce opportunities for congregation-wide mingling. With people camping or scattered in various cabins, will some find it difficult to participate in the retreat in the event of poor weather?

A drawback to preparing meals is the planning, shopping and preparation time it involves. Will volunteers readily take on extra tasks to make such a retreat a success?

We considered another cost-reduction option: a church-wide retreat at Black Rock every other year. A drawback to this option is our preferred weekend would likely be booked during our "off year" by another group that would then hold claim to it. We could get around that problem by finding another church or group also wanting to attend Black Rock the year we take a hiatus. Could we find that church? Could we reasonably expect that church or group to make a long-term commitment to Black Rock every other year?

We conclude that finding a cheaper, more flexible retreat experience than what Black Rock offers may be possible, but it won't be easy. And there's no guarantee a change would result in a stronger community-building event. That's why we recommend that CMCL continue to attend Black Rock unless a viable alternative becomes available. It's beyond the scope of this committee's assignment to recommend a viable alternative.

There is, fortunately, an alternative to finding a cheaper venue for retreat. That alternative is to make a concerted effort to reduce the impact of attending Black Rock on the CMCL budget. The survey found that about 36 percent of adults would be willing to pay more than their share to help others attend retreat. Some families in 2007 did, in fact, pay more than the suggested \$100 per adult. As a result, the impact on the CMCL budget fell to \$10,471.

To that end, we recommend the CMCL budget continue to cover the retreat costs for chil-

dren and college-aged adults only. We see providing a safe and structured retreat for children and youth as a cost justified by our church mission.

We further recommend adults pay the full cost of attending retreat, but those who are unable may pay what they can. We recommend creation of a “retreat subsidy” fund. Throughout the year CMCL members and attenders who believe in the value of an all-church retreat would be encouraged to contribute. Perhaps a fund-raiser could also be held. The fund would cover the costs of adults who cannot pay full-price to attend. The church budget would be tapped only after the subsidy fund was exhausted.

RECOMMENDATION NO. 3

Improvements to retreat programming for adults and children

We recommend that retreat planners strive to offer structured programming, particularly on Saturday morning, that fully engages the children and, in a separate forum, stirs enthusiasm among adults.

We recommend the Children and Youth committee be responsible for planning the children’s activities. We recommend the Adult Christian Education committee plan the Saturday morning program for adults.

We further recommend that the church budget provide adequate resources for retreat programming. Additional resources would allow retreat planners to investigate hiring outsiders to offer the children’s program. It would also allow retreat planners to engage an outside speaker for the adults. Would more adults attend if the program allowed them to learn, for instance, about Islam from an Islamic cleric or to learn about the historical Jesus from an archeologist?

RECOMMENDATION NO. 4

A year-round commitment to building community, perhaps by a Community Building Committee

CMCL needs to get serious about building community, not just at church retreat, but throughout the year.

We believe this is our most important recommendation.

Establishing a Community Building Committee might be one way to achieve this recommendation. Conceivably, it could take over the functions of the Hospitality, Retreat and Small Group committees and assume responsibility for seeing that community building doesn’t happen haphazardly but is systematically planned for throughout the year.

We live in an age of increasing isolation in which fewer people belong to civic clubs, know their neighbors or feel engaged with other people. One author summed up the phenomenon in the phrase “bowling alone.”

We at CMCL value community—the idea that we come together to learn how to be stronger disciples of Jesus—and we, therefore, should work actively to resist the tide of social isolation. We must be intentional in coming together, getting to know one another and developing meaningful relationships. We believe that community-building efforts be held in high esteem, on par with CMCL’s commitment to meaningful worship experiences, Christian education programming and efforts to promote peace and social justice.

A Community Building Committee—we're not wedded to the committee's name—would take seriously CMCL's commitment to community and work to integrate community-building activities, big and small, into the church calendar.

We would expect to have the existing mix of congregational meals and special events such as Church on the Farm, but we hope a committee in charge of community-building might come up with ideas that would work even better at drawing the congregation together.

At present, for example, people who enjoy hosting church-wide events at their homes or farms come forward on their own. But perhaps there are others who would be willing to do so if approached by the committee.

A possible advantage of having a Community Building Committee is it would not only plan events, it would evaluate which community-building activities are working, which ones could be improved and which ones could be abandoned. At present, brainstorming and evaluation are a hit-or-miss affair.

One consequence of having a Community Building Committee is church retreat, as presently conceived, would no longer be seen as sacrosanct but would be open to periodic evaluation by committee members who would judge how well it meets the goal of building community compared to other opportunities and whether it's giving us a big enough "bang for the buck."

Conclusion

As we see it, a weekend-long church retreat is a valuable tool for building community at CMCL, but it does not serve everyone's needs. It should be seen as part of a mix of community-building opportunities, some perhaps that we have yet to imagine or discover.

Our biggest hope is that over time CMCL gets better and better at building a community of Jesus followers who are not only known and loved by God but who all know and love each other.

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