

Review of Rationale for Closing Mission Central

With the hiring of John Hall as the Executive Director, the Board of Missions Fest Vancouver set a trajectory to shift from a conference to a year-round ministry. It has been a slow transition, but with the name change in 2019 to Mission Central, the path was open to take steps to grow. The start-up capital for the shift was gleaned from the already tight budget, and projects were supported by staff who were passionate about the vision and who contributed sacrificially. All along there was a sense that the shift to Mission Central was under a time-constraint, and now it seems that time is up.

The factors which have contributed to our decision to close are described below and were at work when the decision to shift the organization was made in 2013-14. COVID has brought issues to a breaking point.

At the Board meeting in February 2022, a conversation was started to explore the future of Mission Central. In the March 2022 Board meeting it was decided

- i. that SERVE 2023 would proceed as a celebration;
- ii. that a ministry would be sought by the end of June who could take over Mission Central in February 2023;
- iii. if that partner was not identified, that Mission Central would close at the end of February 2023;
- iv. time and energy would be invested into ending well, which includes closing debt free.

Several interconnecting factors have led to the decision to close:

1. Finances – Pre-pandemic Mission Central relied on the SERVE conference for three-quarters of its annual operating revenue. In 2020 we had 211 exhibitors and in 2022 we had 40 online. Two years of COVID have severely constrained our finances. Without government wage subsidies and loans (\$60K), Mission Central would have closed in 2021.

The 2023 conference is projected to have 154 exhibitors in a smaller space at the Vancouver Convention Centre (VCC) with a corresponding decrease in revenue.

The idea of continuing SERVE in smaller less expensive venues or a church have been suggested to make the conference more affordable. In 1989, when Missions Fest moved to the VCC, it was already a challenge to conceive of a location that could accommodate all the features of the conference (General Sessions, Exhibit Hall, Youth Rally, Seminars). The VCC became one of the only viable locations in the entire city.

Effort has been applied to considering new sources of revenue, such as developing courses or offering consulting to local churches, however COVID interrupted this as a consideration.

2. Staffing – Connected to finances are staff. There are four part-time staff who work three days a week and one full-time staff – the Executive Director. Salaries are the ministry's second largest budget item after the SERVE conference expenses. Ideas have been put forward to get the staff to raise their own support, but not all are willing, and time is of the essence.

The majority of time investment for each staff member is still directed to the planning and execution of the SERVE conference. The possibility of generating new services for individuals and churches is constrained by the capacity of the staff who already give sacrificially. Without more staff or more paid hours there is a limit to what can be accomplished.

COVID has been mentally, emotionally, and physically draining on the staff. Multiple pivots and course corrections have been navigated successfully but at a cost. Staff fragility is high.

Finally, John Hall has given notice that he will be completing his term as ED in February 2023. Finding a new ED seems impractical in light of the many internal and external challenges facing Mission Central.

3. Partner Church Engagement – At this time there are 114 partner churches. Partner church engagement falls into four main areas:

First, partner churches commit to provide two representatives who will be liaisons with Mission Central. These members also become members of the society and it is from the membership that the Board of Directors are selected. This creates a direct connection between partner churches and the governance of the ministry. Few partner churches have two representatives and only a small percentage of members are active in the society, demonstrated by attending the AGM. This impacts other areas of engagement.

Second, partner churches are asked to provide financial assistance to run the ministry. Gifts are often sown because of shared vision and a desire to see missional disciples formed and encouraged. Giving by partner churches often falls below the recommended gift level and is likely connected to the small percentage of active members.

Third, representatives of partner churches are asked to become advocates for the work of Mission Central. As a voice for the ministry, they keep their community apprised of seminars, workshops, website content, and conferences. Without this grass roots communication, promoting the benefits of the ministry are financially out of reach.

Fourth, the SERVE conference remains reliant on a large pool of volunteers. Without strong advocates in the churches there is increased stress associated with volunteer recruitment.

The final factor is the impact of COVID on churches. A recent study by Waybase reveals that “The pandemic has shrunk the Christian sector by 6%—just over \$1B. Churches account for around \$970M of this loss.” They go on to note that while revenues have declined, the needs of communities have increased. In the face of great challenges, partner churches have continued to support Mission Central close to pre-pandemic levels, and for that we are grateful. We acknowledge the COVID related challenges faced by local churches are not over and that is without considering the socio-cultural changes that perplexed many.

4. Partner Agencies – As noted above, the Christian sector has seen a financial reduction of 6% compared to pre-pandemic levels. If churches are affected, then a knock-on impact can be anticipated in mission agencies and other ministries.

Anecdotally we know that many agencies view their return on investment as being low for participation at SERVE. Their main goal has often been the recruitment of new supporters or missionaries (short & long-term). The perception is that these participants have been declining. On the other hand, the fruitfulness of collaborations that arise from the conference are real and often undervalued.

One last consideration is that the role of mission agencies is changing. There is increasing interest, particularly among global sending agencies, to shift human resources to impact diaspora communities in Canada. This is a role that is best performed as a partner with churches and facilitated through personal relationships.

5. Changes in technology and culture— These two issues could each be examined separately and at length. The short version is that society at large does not have a clear understanding of the impact of technology on culture in the 21st century. Digital natives live in a totally new world where digital technology impacts every aspect of life. Those over 40 grew up on the dark side of the latest “Copernican Revolution” and are struggling to catch up in theology and practice.

On the culture side, our Christian communities bear the scars of the massive shift in Canada from nominally “Christian” to secular and the disruption grows. Other factors shaking the Christian community from inside and out include the impacts of post modern angst, pluralism, and consumerism.

6. Timing – Each element that has impacted the decision to close Mission Central must be considered against the backdrop of time. We have an annual financial cycle that is tied to putting on SERVE. If we want to take a break from business as usual, we have to ask the question how it will be financed. If we want the staff to become support raising missionaries, we must ask how long that would take. If we want to shut the ministry down, there is only one short window when that can happen for minimal financial impact on ourselves and others, that is, immediately following the SERVE conference.

Conclusion

When you read this list of factors that have collided and have collectively contributed to the decision to close Mission Central you may be left without much hope for the church, mission agencies and ministries in Canada. On that front you would be wrong.

It seems clear that God has used COVID in particular, to make the Christian community in North America aware of our many challenges and deficiencies. Some institutions might close, but that is not the end. We are the people of God, not simply a charity. If we turn to Jesus and humble ourselves, we have great promises that God will provide all our needs. Moreover, Jesus is more passionate about the lost than you or I could ever be. Our prayer should be to love him more and follow him more closely. He knows how to navigate life and ministry in the 21st century.