



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 6 [MB Confession of Faith]

Nature of the Church

PASTORAL APPLICATION

The article on the “Nature of the Church” is one of the key elements in our Confession of Faith. Because Mennonite Brethren are with other Anabaptist groups part of the Believer’s Church tradition, what we say about the church is especially important in defining our identity. The Anabaptists came into existence in the sixteenth century because of concerns about the church, and the Mennonite Brethren Church was formed 300 years later for similar reasons. Our self-description as a Believer’s Church distinguishes us from those who practice infant baptism and puts us in the company of followers of Jesus who insist that being part of the church requires a personal surrender to the Lord.

The church plays a central role in the writings of the New Testament. When Jesus said that he would build his church, he was establishing the primary institution through which God has chosen to do His work in this world. The church of Christ is God’s agent of redemption in the world. Like many denominations, Mennonite Brethren are grappling with the issues of maintaining biblical principles regarding the nature of the church while being relevant in our post-Christian context. Article 6 summarizes our understanding of the church.

Membership and Commitment

The church does not choose whom God will call into its membership. We receive people into church membership who confess salvation through faith in Christ, obey his command to be baptized, and submit themselves to our Confession of Faith. We believe that joining the church as a member is an important expression of a commitment to a covenant relationship. At the minimum, this covenant is a declaration that “these are my people, and I am a part of this family of believers.”

Though the church ministers in the world, the New Testament calls believers to be different than the world. This kind of separation is based on our understanding of holiness. The church needs to model and display the character of holiness, which immediately marks a distinction from the world. Separation to God and to holiness is part of what it means to be the church. This develops as God’s people gather regularly to minister to each other and worship God (see portions on worship in the Article 1 pastoral application).

Racism and Reconciliation

Racial hatred and division are serious issues for the church to address in our time. Various governmental and educational attempts at racial reconciliation have not produced significant results. The reason for this is these programs cannot touch the heart of a person, the root of the problem of racism. But the church of Christ, with its message of hope and reconciliation, can indeed make a difference. The church is perhaps the only body on this earth that can demonstrate in its own membership the ability to cross racial and cultural lines. Almost every community in North America is being inhabited and impacted by people of different races. The pastoral interpreter of the confession must contend seriously with this matter, seeking to pray for, teach, and demonstrate the reconciling power of the gospel. If the church does not move to confront racial division and demonstrate an alternative, our message cannot be taken seriously.

Cooperation with Other Christian Groups

Mennonite Brethren believe in cooperating with other Christian groups. We have supported various



evangelical and inter-denominational bodies such as the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the National Association of Evangelicals. We cooperate with such groups willingly. More difficult, however, is the matter of cooperating with those who are Christian and whose political or social agendas we endorse, but whose theology makes us uncomfortable. Should we join forces to oppose abortion, for example, with those who do not view Christ as we do? Should we fight crime in our neighborhoods by entering into alliances with those whose theology is questionable to us? These are matters that cannot be answered in a general way, but become part of the responsibility and discernment of the local Mennonite Brethren church as it establishes an identity in its community.

Baptism in the Spirit and Use of Spiritual Gifts

Mennonite Brethren believe that the Holy Spirit is received at the time of conversion, and that the gift of the Spirit is not a second experience subsequent to salvation. We do believe in the continual and repeated “filling with the Holy Spirit.” Those who give leadership in our churches need to teach what is consistent with Mennonite Brethren understanding and practice in this area.

We believe in spiritual gifts. Given the contemporary concern about overly busy schedules and potential “burnout,” individual Christians need to be given opportunity to discover and use their gifts both for the building up of others and their own fulfillment. Churches that follow some pattern of gift discernment find that their people serve with more enthusiasm and a greater sense of fruitfulness. The understanding of the gifts must be fleshed out by leaders who are committed to preparing God’s people for works of service. The church must encourage, equip, and empower people to use their spiritual gifts in ministry. Ministry is defined here as much more than merely serving on boards or committees. Ministry is not performed only by pastors. All Christians are ministers.

Our understanding of giftedness is important when the local church discerns leaders. Leaders should be chosen on the basis of gifts and character. Success in the world does not guarantee that a person is spiritually gifted for leadership in the church.

For many years, Mennonite Brethren generally discouraged the use of sign gifts, perhaps as a reaction to extreme pentecostalism. Today, however, use of all gifts is encouraged in most of our congregations. The practice of all gifts needs to be for the sake of the building up of the body of Christ, the church, and according to the principles given in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. It is understood that no gift is essential for every Christian to have, and also that no Christian has all of the gifts by him or herself.

The Relationship of Local Church and Conference

Each congregation regulates its own affairs, but also affiliates with the denomination. The work of the church is to be conducted in a spirit of interdependence, love, and submission to one another. In practice this becomes difficult when individuals or congregations operate with an overly independent spirit. It becomes especially awkward when a local church is having internal problems, as over doctrinal issues or the style of pastoral leadership. Pastors and local churches need to understand that because we have covenanted to be a conference together, we are also accountable to each other. When those charged with conference leadership sense a concern in the affairs of a local church and feel a need to intervene, the members of the local church should open themselves to such intervention. At the same time, members and leaders of the local church should feel freedom to invite conference leaders to assist in the resolution of difficult problems. Mutual accountability is part of the Christian life.

A congregation will sometimes appeal to its members to give the local church priority in their giving because all members have made a commitment to that church. Can that same local church, with integrity, hold back giving to ministries we have committed ourselves to as a conference? The covenant community extends beyond the local church.

Accountability in the Local Church

There is another kind of accountability in the local church, the accountability of church members to and for each other. In an increasingly diverse society, it is important for people who join a local church to understand that they have agreed to make themselves accountable to each other in a number of areas



involving personal, spiritual, family, moral, business, ethical, and other matters. Through the preaching and example of church leaders, mutual accountability based on our commitment to be a covenant community needs to be taught and practiced. Pastors need to make themselves accountable to their leaders at the conference level, and in turn church members need to be accountable to their local church leaders. Someone involved in wrongdoing once told her pastor, “I am glad I am not a member so that the church can’t discipline me.” Some years later after a change of heart, she came to the pastor and asked to join the church. Her reason for seeking membership was to be held accountable, recognizing that accountability was necessary for her protection and growth. All members of our churches should have such an understanding.

Church discipline is part of accountability. Where a Christian is believed to be involved in sinful actions, fellow believers or church leaders need to lovingly approach that person in accordance with biblical principles. It is not easy to practice both judgment and mercy, but that is the goal of all disciplinary action. Church discipline for Mennonite Brethren has changed from a time when it was often harsh to a day when it is often lax or even nonexistent. It is time to recover a healthier balance. The congregation has freedom to intervene in the lives of its members because of the covenantal nature of the local church.

Organization of the Local Church

Mennonite Brethren do not have a prescribed pattern for organization of a local body of believers. Congregations choose their own form of government and their own structure of leadership. While most MB churches are governed by some form of elder board or church council, in all these the larger congregation is given voice and involvement in making major decisions. The brother and sisterhood of believers implies that local churches take the time to discuss matters of direction and organization among the members of the congregation, rather than implementing changes solely by decision of a few. Open communication usually enhances the ownership of new ideas and plans. While it takes extra time to secure agreement of the congregation on a new direction, it often leads to greater involvement and commitment in the long run. The Scriptures describe the church as a *body* and a *family*. Both terms speak of communication and clarity between the members involved. Within such guidelines, each local church can determine the patterns of organization and leadership which best serve its needs.

