



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 10 [MB Confession of Faith]

Discipleship

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Discipleship is the norm for all believers. Discipleship means that every believer is called to follow, learn from, and imitate Christ. Devotion to Christ and spiritual growth are not only for a special few. Our calling as a church is to accept people at different stages in their discipleship journey and to stimulate them toward Christlikeness.

Discipleship as Modeling

Our confession asserts that discipleship involves being united in a distinct community, a local church. This means entering into a covenant relationship with other disciples, not simply becoming part of an institutional program.

Imitation is a key concept in the biblical teaching of discipleship. God's people are called to be like God, to imitate the character and actions of God. Jesus invites his followers to "learn from him." The apostle Paul tells Christians to follow his example as he followed Christ.

Discipleship happens when mature Christians walk with younger believers in their spiritual journey. Effective modeling requires frequent contact between people over an extended period of time. As believers experience a variety of life situations together, they have opportunities to develop Christian attitudes, values, and actions, and to discuss the principles that guide a Christlike lifestyle. Discipleship also involves learning to practice disciplines that lead to spiritual growth. These include regular prayer, Bible study, meditation, fellowship with other Christians, and sharing of one's faith. A mentoring relationship provides a context for mutual accountability in the practice of these disciplines. Congregations are strengthened when they are intentional about facilitating discipling relationships.

Positive Christian modeling should also take place within the biological family. A church should place high priority on protecting and nurturing families and challenging them to consistent discipleship. At the same time a church should avoid doing for families what they should do for themselves. Instructing parents to love their children and accept responsibility for educating them in the faith is a key to building spiritually healthy people and relationships within the church.

The prevailing mood of our culture encourages personal independence and individualism. To counter this many churches are developing small groups within the larger church family. They offer a viable context for deepening relationships, growing spiritually, meeting special support needs, maintaining accountability in a secure setting, and providing opportunities to sharpen ministry skills.

Developing a variety of small groups and ministry teams helps meet the diverse needs within a church family, with each group providing a context for discipleship. Even task-oriented groups become opportunities for discipleship when they seek to build relationships as they conduct business. Church groups need to share more readily how their faith impacts the decisions they make.

Discipleship and Accountability

Discipleship implies accountability within a community. This accountability can be practiced on several levels. One-to-one relationships and small groups can provide a context for encouragement, challenge, reproof, and correction.

The New Testament teaches that the attitudes and actions of each believer affect the life of the entire body. Congregational discipline ministers to those in the church that are in bondage to sin. Discipline must



never be carried out in a spirit of hostility but should be administered in love with the desire to produce conviction, repentance, and restoration. Care must be taken to practice corporate accountability with a clear understanding of relevant Scripture and God's pattern for church discipline. At the same time leaders and congregations should inform themselves of the various legal issues that this type of accountability may involve.

Discipleship and Separation from the World

Jesus instructed his followers to be in the world but not of the world. Some have understood this separation to mean cultural isolation and the avoidance of particular cultural activities. They associate discipleship with a rigid lifestyle—the more austere, the more godly. Our confessional statement seeks to present non-conformity as a call to separation from the godless values and evil practices in the world. Disciples are set apart as they dedicate themselves to God, aligning their values to God's values and their lives to God's purposes.

Disciples separate themselves from evil practices, but they can never separate themselves from the practical need to love people. Believers are called to be salt and light in a lost world. The perceptive disciple on a redemptive mission will live with the tension between influencing the community and satisfying the expectations of other believers. Jesus certainly frequented the wrong places and met with the wrong people according to the religious legalists. Yet he neither condoned a sinner's sinfulness nor left the sinners to continue in their notorious ways.

Jesus prayed not that the Father would take his disciples out of the world but that He would protect them from the evil one. Great sensitivity is needed to teach disciples to avoid evil but not necessarily every association with victims of the evil one.

Discipleship in Everyday Life

Jesus teaches that discipleship is the way of self-denial. As his followers take up the cross, they consciously decide to represent Christ in the various situations of life. They choose to respect other believers as fellow creations in Christ. They give time and attention to others' interests and money for their welfare. They treat people of other faiths with respect and recognize that it is a privilege to share time, money, and possessions to help spread the Gospel and to help the needy.

Disciples learn to speak edifying and encouraging words, avoiding harmful talk. When they are required to speak the truth in unpleasant situations, they do so gently and in love. They determine to be honest and to eliminate evasiveness in business and with government. When personal conflicts occur, disciples work toward reconciliation.

The New Testament instructs believers not to take other believers to court to settle a wrong. In the past, some Mennonite Brethren have taken these instructions to mean that a Christian should never go to court. On closer examination, we see that Christians do not take each other to court because both parties submit to one and the same authority, God, in matters of justice. However, when there is an injustice to be addressed and the other party does not submit to the laws of God, the Bible remains silent on how to proceed. Frequently believers are asked to make court appearances.

Pastors need to know how to give counsel concerning the use of courts. We believe that the Christian disciple upholds the justice system in our society, including going to court with nonbelievers if necessary, as long as it is for the good of society and not for personal revenge.

Believers will face inevitable conflicts. They must continue to love each other while finding solutions that are not destructive to interpersonal relationships nor to God's purposes for their congregation. In society Christians must take initiative to defend the powerless, speak out against injustice, and work towards solutions which reconcile those in conflict.

Some of the decisions disciples make as they follow Jesus in everyday life come at great cost to personal plans, hopes, ambition, and self-interest. As believers grow in discipleship, they also grow in their love for God and experience an intimacy and love with Jesus, which is like "finding the pearl of great price." They know joy, peace, and fulfillment as they are transformed into mature disciples by the liberating work of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

