



**CANADIAN CONFERENCE**  
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

**ARTICLE 14 [MB Confession of Faith]**

# The Sanctity of Human Life

## PASTORAL APPLICATION

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As Christians, we acknowledge God as the giver and sustainer of life. The biblical account of creation reminds us that it is God who first breathed life into human form and called it good. Christians have understood this statement to mean that God values human life, and that the nurture and care of physical life is a part of the stewardship mandate given by God.

In our technological society, the giving and taking of life is often understood to lie primarily within human jurisdiction. Increasingly both birth and death are events to be managed. Issues such as genetic engineering, the use of fertility drugs, and the ability to sustain a heartbeat even though brain function has ceased have complicated what once seemed to be the natural cycle of life and death. This article seeks to help the church wrestle with the complicated sanctity of life issues its members face, both personally and professionally.

### **Celebrating and Nurturing Individuals**

Congregations and pastors perform a number of symbolic acts to celebrate life. Births, anniversaries, educational or professional achievements, as well as other special occasions are frequently acknowledged with flowers, cards, or public announcements. But the care and nurture of life must move to a deeper level if it is to significantly impact those in our care.

Nurturing the individual is a discipleship task. Opportunities should exist within the church for every individual to grow from where they are to where God wants them to be. Small group gatherings for Bible study, prayer, and support can often provide intimate settings for the nurture of spiritual and emotional life. Personal visitation and prayer by pastoral staff is also important for the nurture of individuals within the congregation. The care and nurture of children and young people are an extension of Jesus' love for children and his desire that all come to know the Father.

Many of us will recognize these things as a part of normal pastoral care. When we think further about the implications of the sacredness of life, we must open our eyes to the ways in which this care can be further expressed. Making our church facilities accessible to those with special physical needs, for example, acknowledges their place within our congregations. Providing and maintaining equipment for the hearing impaired can be a significant ministry to an often overlooked group of people. Objecting to building codes which require handicap access is not only a poor witness to the community, but also suggests that the church wants only "whole" people. Likewise, to teach against abortion, while failing to provide a place for the handicapped child within our Sunday school program, suggests that we are unwilling to see the image of God within each person. Intentionally withholding ministry from certain populations of people may be a grievous sin against God, who longs for all people to know Christ.

The teaching and preaching ministries of the church are excellent opportunities to influence the attitudes of those around us towards others. Care should be given in the kinds of stories and sermon illustrations we use. Making women, teenagers, the elderly, or any ethnic or social group the butt of jokes is usually inappropriate and will be noted by those in the audience. The dignity of life should extend to all. However, we should also be cautious about the present-day preoccupation with the rights of the individual. The dignity of human existence is God-given, not self-imposed, and we invite all people to actively participate in the family of God.



## Opposing Actions and Attitudes Which Devalue Human Life

Expressing opposition can be a necessary and valuable part of the church's witness to the world. Appropriate forms of opposition may vary with each situation and should be discussed within the church community. Consider degrees of opposition on a continuum. One extreme is to do nothing. Praying, contributing resources, voting for appropriate candidates or issues where laws are involved, and writing letters to the editor or to government officials are ways to increase active opposition without being physically present. Counseling unwed mothers, protesting legally at life-devaluing sites or retailers, and even adopting an unwanted child are instances of more personal involvement. There are times when opposition could mean breaking human laws through civil disobedience. Individuals should not make such decisions without prayer within the context of the church community.

At the end of the continuum is opposition that breaks God's law. Committing murder, for instance, by killing an abortion doctor adds wrong to wrong. We also do well to remember Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount when he extends the prohibition against murder to the hatred of one's brother or sister. Characterizing political leaders, or anyone who holds differing opinions, as evil or stupid reflects poorly on the church's witness.

## Caring for the Defenseless

Caring stems from compassion, and compassion is the work of God in human hearts. Emphasizing God's tenderhearted mercy and grace toward all can be done through preaching and teaching, by prayer and example. Exposure to the plight of the defenseless through mission and service trips, media presentations, and personal testimonies increases awareness of the need for the application of God's mercy and grace.

Acts of caring that channel God's mercy and grace inside the church include prayer in public worship, communicating respect in speech and print, and remodeling facilities to make them accessible to everyone. The church itself becomes defenseless, in a sense, as a captive audience when it gathers. Regulating the public address system to enhance worship and to avoid hearing damage, being sensitive to visiting individuals and groups to ensure that content and presentation are appropriate, and making considerations for all believers present to participate in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, reflect an attitude of caring for the defenseless.

The Church extends caring beyond its walls by sending regular financial support to agencies that meet specific needs locally and globally, and by encouraging individuals to participate with such agencies to meet needs. Caring is also extended when individuals of the church become involved in such activities as volunteering in clinics, retirement centers, and safe houses, offering foster care, and providing home maintenance and other services to the aged and challenged. These outward acts are as valuable to the body of Christ as involvement within the church.

## Decisions Regarding Life and Death

To state in the confession that "ultimate decisions regarding life and death belong to God" reminds us of the opportunity the church has to witness to the high value of life and God's sovereignty over it. While the issue of murder is easily seen as wrong, other decisions regarding life and death may be less clear.

### Medical Issues:

Pastors, counselors and medical personnel are called to help individuals and families sort out complex medical decisions. This must be done with care, recognizing that such decisions are often made in times of crisis. As Mennonite Brethren we do not condone determining the time of death through an act of euthanasia. At the same time, helping to determine when to stop aggressive medical procedures can be an act of compassionate care for both the dying and for those who stand alongside. There are times when it is quite appropriate to refuse treatment (for example, when disease is already widespread), or to reject the use of artificial life-support systems. These kinds of decisions are best made in community—with the individual, the family, the physician, and a praying church family cooperating and seeking a wise decision.



Encouraging people to donate organs can be a life-affirming act in the midst of what is often personal tragedy. The decision to accept or reject an organ transplant should also be carefully considered. The giving or receiving of human organs can be understood as a matter of stewardship. As members of an affluent society with access to abundant medical resources, we may be tempted to see these resources as a part of our natural human rights. We remember again, however, that the dignity of human existence is God-given rather than self-imposed, and caution needs to be exercised in a culture preoccupied with individual rights.

Assisting people to make wise choices in their use of medical technology and resources can serve as a witness to our confidence in God's ultimate care and provision. Nurturing attitudes of gratefulness to God, who is the ultimate healer and sustainer of life, reminds us that our trust is in His care for us. While we greatly value the technology that allows us to sustain and care for life, we must not forget that this earthly life cannot be sustained indefinitely. We also witness to God's grace in the way we endure suffering and approach the end of our earthly life. Helping congregations think about these issues before the point of crisis is wise. There are many Christian doctors and medical personnel who might serve as resource persons for Sunday school classes or other study groups. Those who are suffering or in the last stages of life can be inappropriately marginalized in our congregations if we avoid these important issues.

#### Fertility Issues:

The Old Testament charge to "be fruitful and multiply" has ethical implications for Christian couples. Many choose to see family planning as a part of responsible stewardship—not only of personal resources but also of the earth's resources. It is appropriate for pastors and counselors to help couples think through the implications of their decisions regarding birth control methods and fertility procedures. For example, choosing birth control methods that prevent fertilization rather than methods that induce abortion reflects our belief that life is never to be regarded as waste material. It is also appropriate to call for responsible use of fertility drugs and procedures. Methods such as warehousing of fertilized eggs or the use of selective abortion to reduce the risks of multiple births seem an affront to the dignity of human life and God's design for its conception. This can be a very emotional issue for couples who are having difficulty conceiving and great care must be taken in helping couples work through these issues. It must be remembered, however, that our worth in God's eyes and our place in the Christian community are not based on our ability to reproduce. At the same time, to ignore the pain of couples who cannot conceive is to deny a very real grief.

### **Recognizing the Limits of Medical Science**

Pastors who maintain a diet of reading material covering a wide range of current topics and issues, including scientific/medical breakthroughs and treatments, will find themselves better able to recognize limits to the value and use of such findings. However, recognizing such limits and applying them to individual situations may require more discernment than any one pastor can provide. Since application in this area depends largely on individual cases, there are others such as family members and physicians that will share in the responsibility for determining these limits. Good communication and rapport with others in these settings is vital to carrying out the pastor's unique role.

The pastor's role can include assessing a person's underlying beliefs, fears, and spiritual condition, presenting appropriate Scripture, and providing assurance of God's faithfulness and promises through counsel and prayer. In cases where end-of-life decisions are being made, the pastor's role should be readily accepted and offered graciously in support of individuals and families in need.

Positions such as those on local ethics boards are often open to pastors and people within local congregations who have medical/ philosophical training and experience. Such opportunities provide unique ways to bear witness to God's sovereignty in matters of life and death.

### **Offering Hope and Healing, Support and Counsel**

Churches offer hope to all through the proclamation of the Gospel. This hope is effective for this life and the next. Where individuals have suffered injustice or felt the pain of life-devaluing procedures or



situations, the church can do more than speak of salvation's hope to come. Hope is available already to provide freedom from guilt and shame, fear and despair. The Holy Spirit manifests such hope through the church in ministries of healing. As people are invited to receive salvation so they should be invited to receive healing. Such healing may require confession and repentance, counsel or more medical care. The Bible calls the church to pray, and on occasion, to fast to effect healing.

Hope is evident through ministries of support and counsel. Small groups form an excellent environment for support and invite members of the congregation to participate actively in the ministry of healing. Where more intensive counseling seems necessary, the church can draw on the resources of Christian counselors and agencies. Pastors should be clear about the limits of their personal abilities to provide counseling services. Developing good working relationships with Christian counselors increases the ministries of the church and is an effective way to offer hope and healing to those in need.

It must be remembered that many of the decisions concerning life and death are enormously complex. The boundaries between right and wrong are often difficult to determine. We should be cautious in our approach, acknowledging the limits of our knowledge and the ultimate grace of God.

