



Response to: "The Mennonite Brethren Church: A Covenanting Community"

By Katie Funk Wiebe

Why a paper on the church as covenant community when we, as Mennonite Brethren, have prided ourselves on our cohesiveness? When we were a people with common experiences, memories, language, customs and theology, we could take covenantness for granted. That is no longer possible.

I agree with Edmund Janzen that the covenant model of the church is biblical and that Mennonite Brethren are heirs of the covenant model through our Anabaptist heritage. I also agree that congregational life and work has traditionally been important to Mennonite Brethren. Our corporate identity has been wrapped up with the promises to God and to one another regarding our ethics, our concern for missions, evangelism and our institutions. But because of the growing individualism among us, and the strains of legalism, authoritarianism and clericism we have inherited from an earlier worldview of Mennonite Brethren, the glue holding us together is drying out. What to do? Janzen suggests several ways to stem the erosion of church loyalty to our theology and institutional support. Let me reinforce his and add a few others.

1. Our main theological emphasis in the past has been on conversion, evangelism and missions, all aimed at individuals, while assuming the covenant people. Now we need to implement a strong teaching ministry about the church as a covenant community so that this concept becomes as familiar as the teaching about the spiritual rebirth. Since individualism is nurtured by affluence, an added emphasis needs to be on the use of material possessions.

2. To strengthen the covenanting qualities of our congregations we will also need to commit ourselves to a stronger teaching of the community of gifts, to include women as well as men, old as well as middle-aged, lay people as well as ordained, singles as well as married, minorities as well as mainline Mennonite Brethren. There can be no community when only a certain segment is expected to hear God's call to ministry and to decision making. Youth are not the only ones who have never been involved in decision making, particularly at conference levels, where theological issues are determined.

3. Janzen recommends a change in name. We need to consider other linguistic changes also, particularly our use of the term "brotherhood," which had warm and rich connotations for the emerging church in Russia but no longer includes the entire body for all members. It has become a non-theological term which Mennonite Brethren have tried to endue with theological meaning because it meant much to the "brethren" but has lost meaning for those not brought up in the Russian Mennonite patriarchal tradition. Should we shift to terms like "covenant community" for "brotherhood" and the "Mennonite Covenant Church" for "Mennonite Brethren Church?"

Will re-introducing the concept of the church as covenant community to our churches moving into the 21st century mean that our structures and forms will need only a little exterior decorating or that they will need redemption? I think we face a greater crisis of loyalty to the Mennonite Brethren view of the church than Janzen's paper indicates.