



1 Study Conference
2 Mennonite Brethren General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel
3 Fresno, California
4 October 15-17, 1986
5
6
7

8 THE LEADING MINISTRY IN A COVENANT BROTHERHOOD COMMUNITY
9

10
11 by Gerry Ediger
12

13 INTRODUCTION
14

15 Throughout its history the Mennonite Brethren Church has been blessed
16 with qualities that have made it a constructive and fruitful presence in the
17 Kingdom of God. Missionary zeal, evangelical warmth, dedicated Biblicism
18 and a desire to live as disciples and servants in mutual brotherhood have
19 characterized the century and a quarter of Mennonite Brethren witness. At
20 the same time we have repeatedly faced several issues that challenge our
21 integrity as a Christian community and our ability to carry out our mission
22 as a church. One of these issues, which has been with us from our very
23 beginning, has been the issue of leadership. In the challenges and
24 opportunities which have shaped Mennonite Brethren, we have both desired and
25 feared strong, front-line leadership. We have determined to value and
26 maintain a polity which affirms the worth and contribution of each believer
27 in ministry and which places ultimate responsibility for the work and
28 character of the church with the believers gathered in the local
29 congregation. We have, throughout our pilgrimage, lived in the tension
30 between leading and following. ✓
31

32 During the past decade issues of leading and following have been
33 something of a preoccupation among us. In part this has been a reflection
34 of trends in the broader society in which we find ourselves. Also, we have
35 felt the need to address the subject of leadership as we are emerging from
36 our ethno-cultural isolation into the religious and social mainstream of our
37 society, and have begun to outgrow the bondedness of sect and seek the
38 community of church. Furthermore, our growth and widening distribution,
39 both geographically and socially, have stretched the ties of common
40 experience and identity until we find ourselves looking for a center about
41 which to collect ourselves again.¹ At this center we hope we find ourselves
42 leadership that will be worthy of a following. At the same time we want to
43 affirm the indispensable contribution and counsel of the follower.²
44

45 In the mid-seventies, after retreating from strong central authority
46 during the previous decade, we began again to ask questions about leading
47 and following. A review of Direction and recent study conferences reveals

1 that a respectable literature has been generated in this area during the
2 past decade.³ Mennonite Brethren began again to sort out the issues of
3 authority and servanthood and, in a new way, to examine the implications of
4 a growing professional pastorate for the life and ministry of the church.
5 Typically, we began to seriously re-read Scripture to find our direction and
6 to gather the church to study and discern together. While many urgent
7 issues continue to press upon the Mennonite Brethren Church,⁴ the question
8 of leadership is one that we have made a concerted effort to address.
9 Still, after all this, there are dimensions of leadership which remain as
10 points of uncertainty, debate and divergent practice.

11
12 This paper sets out to discuss leading and following within the context
13 of a covenant brotherhood community. The original assignment which it was
14 designed to address read as "A Ministering People." Through consultation
15 the topic has been adjusted to distinguish it from the subsequent paper, "A
16 Serving People," and to focus on the ministry of leadership as exercised
17 within the larger community of the Mennonite Brethren Church.⁵ This is
18 neither a position paper nor a study paper. Rather, it is written to
19 provoke discussion; it is not an answer so much as a series of questions.

20
21 The purpose of this paper is to suggest current issues of leading and
22 following that have implications for Mennonite Brethren and their future
23 solidarity as a covenant brotherhood. I will attempt to place some of these
24 suggested issues or trends into a historical context. In so doing I will
25 have raised three overlapping sets of agenda relevant to the ministry of
26 leading a covenant brotherhood. The responsibility for resolving these
27 issues lies with the discerning community prompted by Spirit-led leadership. llc
28 If this paper will have sharpened the questions to a point of fruitful
29 discussion it will have achieved its aim.

30 31 I. PRINCIPLES OF LEADING AND FOLLOWING FOR A COVENANT BROTHERHOOD

32
33 The following will not retrace the steps and contributions of those who
34 have given us the literature of the past ten years. A brief review,
35 however, may be helpful. In the process of reexamining Scripture for
36 principles of leadership, there has been a strong emphasis on certain
37 central values: For example: We want to agree that leaders are servants.
38 All members of the church are gifted for ministry. Leadership is a role and
39 function rather than an office. Leadership is exercised by a plurality of
40 persons called by the church or congregation for that purpose. A closer
41 examination of these convictions suggests the following random catalogue of
42 principles of leading and following. This offering is no doubt partial and
43 oversimplified, but it may serve, nonetheless, as an agenda for discussing
44 leading in a covenant brotherhood.

45
46 A. Leaders are primarily qualified through spiritual maturity, giftedness
47 and appointment through the church; they are not, in the first instance
48 qualified through professional training or designation of office.

49 B. New Testament leadership is the shared function of a group of persons;
50 it is not exercised independently by one individual apart from
accountability to leader-colleagues and the members of the church.

- 1 C. Leaders are experienced by the church as sacrificial servants engaged in
2 teaching, enabling and shepherding activities; there is a legitimate
3 functional primacy of these activities among the ministries of the
4 church.
5
- 6 D. The church freely entrusts leaders with the necessary authority and
7 power to exercise their role (not office) of ministry.
8
- 9 E. Full time, "professional" leadership is the legitimate freeing of a
10 person from among the leaders of the church in order to more fully
11 utilize that person's gifts for the common good, both within the context
12 of the local congregation and the broader church.
13
- 14 F. The church is responsible to discern, call and appoint leaders under the
15 lordship of Christ.
16
- 17 G. The church, under God, is responsible for the character, service and
18 discipline of its leaders.
19
- 20 H. The church must follow the spiritually sound and biblically founded
21 guidance of its leadership in a freely expressed attitude of submission,
22 obedience and respect.
23
- 24 I. The church is responsible for the adequate support and maintenance of
25 its leaders.
26
- 27 J. Leaders and followers are equally called to submit to the lordship of
28 Christ as corporately discerned through the Holy Spirit and the
29 examination of Scripture.
30

31 The principle of covenant which must breathe through all these
32 suggested descriptions of leading must be the principle of the basin and
33 the towel graphically demonstrated by our Lord as he introduced the new
34 testament. This new covenant must minister in that same sacrificial
35 spirit. Followers in such a brotherhood must remember that the servant
36 is not greater than the master, nor the pupil greater than the teacher.
37

38 II. ISSUES IN THE MINISTRY OF LEADING FACING MENNONITE BRETHREN 39

40 The occasion of this study conference is a collection of concerns
41 summarized in a pastoral letter issued by our Board of Reference and
42 Counsel.⁶ Threading through these concerns is the observation that, "we
43 are no longer clear what the church, and particularly the Mennonite Brethren
44 Church, is all about. . . . [We] recognize with a sense of urgency the need
45 to redefine our understanding of the nature of the church."⁷ This lack of
46 clarity has had important implications for the ministry of leading among
47 Mennonite Brethren. The relationship between leadership issues and broader
48 ecclesiastical uncertainties is complex. Leadership inevitably shapes
49 ecclesiology and polity. These in turn form and inform leaders and their
50 styles of ministry.

1 At the same time, there have been tendencies among us that have
2 contributed to our present concerns. An introduction to several of these
3 tendencies may help us to better understand our present situation.
4 Following are six statements suggesting tendencies in the leadership
5 ministry of our church. There are many issues that might be cited. These
6 have been selected to illustrate the kinds of leadership concerns which are
7 particularly relevant to the larger coherence and identity of the Mennonite
8 Brethren Church. It is ^{the} issues such as these which must be grappled with by
9 a church which means to ^{the} covenant brotherhood.

10
11 Because these proposals grow out of limited and personal experience,
12 they are, of course, tentative. They grow more out of impressions and
13 informal observation than investigation amenable to documentation. Their
14 validity as an agenda for leading among Mennonite Brethren needs to be
15 tested in discussion.

16
17 A. We face a growing tendency towards congregational autonomy and
18 independence. This has encouraged a parallel decrease in a wholistic
19 understanding for the broader unity and integrity of the Mennonite
20 Brethren Church.⁸

21
22 This is one of the principle challenges facing Mennonite Brethren
23 today. It will also be one of the most difficult to address. In a
24 1985 essay, "The Autonomy of the Local Church in the Light of the New
25 Testament" John A. Toews warned, "An emphasis upon the absolute
26 autonomy of the local church in a Darbyistic and, to some degree, also
27 baptistic sense, as it is being promoted in our own church at present,
28 would have thrust the apostolic churches into a destructive
29 subjectivism."⁹ It may be this "destructive subjectivism" which has
30 brought Mennonite Brethren to the point where it is difficult to speak
31 meaningfully of a Mennonite Brethren Church beyond the borders of the
32 local congregation and be understood. (Indeed, my decision to
33 distinguish the Mennonite Brethren Church and Mennonite Brethren
34 congregations in the language of this paper will no doubt prove
35 disconcerting to some.)

36
37 Many of the following issues can be traced to this basic trend
38 toward local autonomy.

39
40 B. A lack of mutually submissive solidarity can be seen among the pastors
41 and leaders of the Mennonite Brethren Church.¹⁰

42
43 We seem to have difficulty in reading the Biblical text together
44 and coming to agreed convictions on its basis. The difficulty we have
45 experienced on issues of divorce and remarriage, peace and
46 nonresistance, and admission to the communion table, to name only three
47 practical questions, indicates that we seem to be demanding for
48 ourselves at the local congregational level the latitude of conviction
49 and practice we usually afford other denominations.

50
51
52
53 A serious concern is the occasional comment that if Mennonite Brethren
54 congregations do not achieve greater congruence in standards of membership

1 and discipline, some congregations may no longer be willing to accept the
2 transfer of membership at face value. If this should become a reality, then
3 at best, the Mennonite Brethren Church will have devolved into a loose
4 association of churches allied through a few common ministries and projects.
5

6 C. There is a growing impotence on the part of the Mennonite Brethren
7 Church in giving authoritative leadership in matters of faith and
8 practice.
9

10 This tendency can be seen as an outgrowth of the previous
11 observation. As leaders find themselves unable to speak in unity on
12 issues, and as Mennonite Brethren generally sense this weakness, there
13 seems to be a loss of confidence in the ability of leadership to take
14 definitive positions and call the church to consensus. This is
15 reinforced when leaders attempt to resolve difficult issues by polling
16 local congregations for their positions. This can be seen as leaders
17 asking rank and file members to accomplish what they themselves seem
18 unable or unwilling to do.
19

20 D. An entrenched attitude of independence on the part of congregational
21 leadership¹¹ regarding the collective convictions of Mennonite Brethren
22 Church can be discerned in board and convention settings.
23

24 The perceived indecisiveness and lack of unified conviction on the
25 part of leaders may be in part rooted in the practice of congregations
26 engaging in passive local resistance to resolutions affirmed by the
27 church at large in convention. It can seem unrealistic for church
28 leadership to take positions which will have little effect on local
29 practice because congregational leadership does not support the stand
30 taken by the church.
31

32 E. Direct and systematic congregational involvement in local decision-
33 making may be competing, in some larger, rapidly growing congregations,
34 with a tendency towards much of the decision-making being concentrated
35 in the hands of a full-time church staff primarily accountable to some
36 form of eldership.
37

38 This can be seen as an erosion of "brotherhood" in the congrega-
39 tion although this is not necessarily the case. Such a development
40 does have obvious implications for congregational polity. It should be
41 noted that not all congregations which have opted for church elderships
42 have at the same time decreased the involvement of memberships in
43 decision-making.
44

45 In effect two trends intersect at this point. One is the trend
46 towards larger multiple paid staffs in some churches. Another trend is
47 the increasing move towards some form of formally constituted eldership
48 as the primary leadership body of the congregation. This eldership
49 either is taking the place of the more traditional church council or
50 combining the functions of the council and the traditional board of
51 elders/deacons/ministers. Neither of these trends in itself
52 compromises congregational involvement. In fact, both can effectively

1 enhance membership ministry in the congregation. However, when a
2 growing paid staff begins to perform more and more ministry at the
3 expense of members' involvement, and when these staffs are accountable
4 primarily to an eldership largely independent of congregational input
5 and consultation, the vitality of the believers' church as a
6 ministering, discerning body is compromised.

- 7
8 F. There are conflicting convictions and practices regarding the meaning
9 and application of ordination, and the commissioning of congregational
10 and church leadership.

11
12 Some leaders and ministers welcome ordination while others submit ✓
13 to it and still others decline it altogether. Such a situation carries
14 with it the potential for further confusion in the minds of Mennonite
15 Brethren regarding the meaning and status of ministry and leadership.
16 We are in serious need of clarifying the meaning of ordination for
17 Mennonite Brethren and teaching this understanding in our congrega-
18 tions. Some may favor the elimination of the practice altogether.
19 Others will seek for greater consistency in the requirement of
20 ordination for front-line leadership in the church.

21
22 One factor should be remembered. One way in which so-called
23 "main-line" denominations maintain a degree of identity and consistency
24 in their churches is by centrally controlling or supervising the
25 accreditation of ministers through ordination. While this would
26 present serious difficulties for our church, we need to maintain and
27 support meaningful "conference/district" involvement in the calling and
28 affirmation of front-line ministers for our congregations. In the
29 past, ordination was expected to serve as a means of affirming a
30 minister for service throughout the church, but there is no guarantee
31 that a Mennonite Brethren minister is ordained. When congregations
32 choose to call a pastor from outside the Mennonite Brethren Church
33 "conference/district" involvement in the call is even more important to
34 consider.

35
36 Another area of divergent understanding among Mennonite Brethren
37 in the appointment of leadership is the ministry of women. There is
38 general agreement that in the broad scope of ministry, the church must
39 engage both women and men in full and free recognition of their
40 individual giftedness and aptitude. As one moves through the various
41 possible roles of service in the church towards the front lines of
42 leadership however, this consensus seems to break down until women are
43 generally not affirmed for ministry as pastors or service as primary
44 leaders. Some see this as a serious breach of solidarity in a covenant
45 fellowship. They are convinced that God does not will leaders to be
46 preselected according to their sex. Others hold the conviction that
47 God has clearly ordained men to hold the primary roles of leadership in
48 the church as elsewhere in society. Still others are more than
49 sympathetic to the free affirmation of suitable women to any and all
50 leadership roles but are kept from espousing such a conviction by a
51 desire to be faithful to New Testament texts which they suspect may
52 preclude such a lack of restriction.

1 Running through these examples is the lack of clarity regarding
2 the meaning of "church" among Mennonite Brethren. This lack of clarity
3 is not new. It is rooted, in part, in shifts of attitude and practice
4 in our past. Our discussion of leading in a covenant-brotherhood will
5 be enhanced by gaining an historical perspective on some of these
6 questions.
7

8 III. LEADING AND FOLLOWING IN THE STORY OF THE MENNONITE BRETHERN CHURCH 9

10 Most would readily admit that the questions facing Mennonite Brethren
11 have an historical development. However, many do not have an historical
12 perspective on the questions presently facing us. This is an important
13 augment to the Biblical studies already in hand. Such a perspective is also
14 especially important if we are seeking to refurbish a sense of identity and
15 cohesion in the Mennonite Brethren Church. The following, therefore, is a
16 brief outline of five observations from history. These are offered as a
17 resource for the discussion at hand.
18

- 19 A. "Brotherhood" was initially a quality of church life and fellowship
20 rather than a democratic principle of church polity.
21

22 As Mennonite Brethren seek a renewed understanding of leading and
23 following, much of the dialogue revolves about the concept of
24 brotherhood. "Brotherhood" has become a vague, general description for
25 "the way we do things" in the Mennonite Brethren Church. "Brotherhood"
26 has come to encompass a set of attitudes and norms that most would find
27 very difficult to define with precision, but that many resort to in any
28 discussion of the Mennonite Brethren Church and especially of its
29 polity and leadership-followership relations. As with any belief or
30 conviction that passes beyond confession into assumption, our
31 understanding of brotherhood has probably been cast adrift from its
32 *with* historical and theological moorings.
33

34 Following the analysis of P.M. Friesen, it appears that a partial
35 concept of "brotherhood" and its use as a self designation of
36 reform-minded Mennonites was already established before the formation
37 of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Brotherhood was not in the first
38 instance a paradigm of congregational polity consciously adopted by the
39 Mennonite Brethren to shape their church governance and leadership. It
40 is instructive to note what Friesen understands "brotherhood" to have
41 meant to the conventicle movement prior to 1860.
42

43 Tobias Voth was the first among us in Russia to put into
44 practice what we today call "brotherhood," a warm hearted
45 Christian fellowship, something that is now found in the M.B.
46 Church as well as in all truly vital Christian circles of
47 the "old" or Mennonite Church.¹²
48

49 The background to this growth of the "brotherhood movement among
50 the Mennonites includes the Prussian experience of the Gnadenfeld
51 congregation with its Moravian connections and its later openness to
52 pietist influence when already in Russia.¹³ This background is

1 important to note for it indicates that the historical background to
2 brotherhood among Mennonite Brethren was not first of all an experience
3 or conviction of church polity. It did not at first address the
4 relationship between leaders and followers. It was rather a quality of
5 religious experience and association born of an evangelical stream of
6 warmth and conviction long present in the broader Mennonite Church and
7 remaining within that church after the secession of the Mennonite
8 Brethren. The experience of serious splits among those called "the
9 brethren" during the period of reform also bears witness that the
10 quality of "brotherhood" was far from being an ideal of solidarity
11 among fellow believers.¹⁴ Nevertheless, "brotherhood" became a
12 distinguishing feature of the reform-minded in spite of their
13 factiousness, but this was before the question of polity could even be
14 posed, for the reformers were still only a movement within the broader
15 church at the time.

16
17 What has been, to this point called "brotherhood" needs to be
18 distinguished from another usage. It might be better to describe what
19 the reformers experienced as "brotherliness" rather than "brotherhood"
20 for they formally used the latter term in a different way. In the
21 document of secession, the founders refer to the Mennonite brotherhood
22 and mean the larger Mennonite body as it was recognized by the Russian
23 authorities. They admit that they were trying to separate from the
24 "decadent churches" and in that sense could "no longer continue
25 [with]in" the Mennonite brotherhood.¹⁵ In a subsequent clarification
26 however, it becomes apparent that this did not mean that they wished to
27 lose their identity as Mennonites. For economic and political reasons
28 they wished to remain within the Mennonite brotherhood as a "religious
29 society" but saw themselves as separating from the decadent churches
30 within that society.¹⁶ Thus, brotherhood could also mean a broader
31 religious association within which churches or congregations could find
32 themselves.

33
34 It would seem from this superficial reading of the reform period
35 that "brotherhood" was no more a concrete and precise understanding for
36 the founding Mennonite Brethren that it is for their descendants.
37 Above all, it is important to note that "brotherhood" was not for the
38 early Mennonite Brethren, in the first instance, a democratic approach
39 to church polity or decision making within the church. Their
40 congregational polity did, however, reflect the quality of
41 brotherliness among them and thus tended to stand in contrast to
42 examples of autocratic and status-minded leadership in their former
43 church.

44
45 B. Multiple leadership, emerging out of the congregation and appointed by
46 the membership of the church, has been the historic Mennonite Brethren
47 pattern.

48 The document of secession did not deal to any extent with the
49 polity of the fledgling church, nor was this its purpose. Article (h)
50 however does address the question briefly. Leaders¹⁷ could be "chosen
51 by God alone, without human assistance, [and] . . . self-appointed to
52 the ministry of the saints. . . . Others are called through the

1 instrumentality of true believers as recorded in Acts 1."¹⁸ The
2 founders seemed to conceive of a dual mode of emerging leadership.
3 They did not wish to stifle the sovereign movement of God in
4 designating leadership. At the same time, they saw the practical
5 necessity of suggesting a way of appointing this leadership in concrete
6 terms. Their vague phrase, "through the instrumentality of true
7 believers" is not greatly clarified by their citation of Acts 1. They
8 also appeal to Menno when he says, "Other [Christian preachers] are
9 called by means of the pious. . . ."19

10
11 Their practice indicates that ministers were first appointed by a
12 recorded congregational vote of the male members of the church.²⁰ It
13 is essential to note that from the beginning the leadership appointed
14 was multiple. Heinrich Huebert and Jacob Becker were confirmed as
15 ministers. Huebert was considered the first minister and was later
16 formally designated as the elder of the Mennonite Brethren. Becker
17 was Huebert's first assistant.

18
19 The appointment of a Mennonite Brethren elder may seem unusual to
20 modern readers. The second ordination of Huebert took place in 1868,
21 eight years after he was appointed minister, and three years after the
22 June Reform. Huebert in turn ordained Abram Schellenberg as elder for
23 the Molotschna in 1878 and Daniel Fast for the Kuban in 1877.²¹ In
24 1869 special arrangements were made through the German Baptist to
25 ordain Abraham Unger as elder in Chortitza.²² By 1885 the six
26 Mennonite Brethren churches in Russia were served by four elders and
27 thirty five ministers.²³ Thus, the establishment of the multiple
28 ministry among Mennonite Brethren is well documented.

29
30 The place of the eldership within this multiple ministry is much
31 less clear. There is little indication of why leadership came to be
32 distinguished as ministers and elders. Toews speculates that the
33 eldership was a way of affirming the authority of Huebert and Unger
34 after they were so severely challenged during the Froehliche Richtung.²⁴
35 Another possibility is that as the church came to be distributed into
36 scattered congregations, it was felt that some specially designated
37 leader was needed to represent the church and its authority as a whole,
38 as distinct from the leadership of the local congregation. This is
39 supported by the suggestion of Toews that elders functioned as
40 superintendents of parishes or districts.²⁵ That elders were not
41 initially seen as threats to a vital congregational polity is seen by
42 the fact that they emerged after the Froehliche Richtung and its
43 results. Thus, as a congregational polity was strengthened after the
44 Froehliche Richtung, this was not seen as incompatible with the
45 eldership.

46
47 C. The experience of the Froehliche Richtung left Mennonite Brethren with a
48 deep fear of arbitrary, autocratic leadership.

49
50 The Froehliche Richtung was a wave of excessive religious
51 emotionalism that took on characteristics of what we today might call a
52 cultic movement. It did not originate in Mennonite Brethren circles

1 but it constituted a major challenge to the infant church as it
2 attracted a group of arbitrary leaders who directly challenged the
3 integrity and authority of the Mennonite Brethren ministers.²⁶ The
4 movement was repudiated in June of 1885 but not before its leaders had
5 indulged in severe, single-handed excommunications and harsh judgements
6 of Mennonite Brethren ministers. In the reforms of June 26 and 27,
7 accepted in Gnadenheim, it is clear that the issue of the power and
8 authority of ministers, especially in exercising the ban, lay very
9 close to the center of Mennonite Brethren rejection of this
10 aberration.²⁷ In article two of the reforms a statement of principle
11 is made which is the root of the enduring Mennonite Brethren attitude
12 regarding leadership down to the present day.

13
14 Since the minister does not choose the church, but on the
15 contrary, the church chooses the minister, a brother from her
16 midst who is considered capable and has the confidence of the
17 church to watch over them, thus it is the duty of the
18 minister to serve the church and carry out whatever
19 decisions the church may make. In return, the church is
20 obligated to obey her minister as the shepherd of her soul as
21 long as he remains true to the pure teaching of Christ.²⁸

22
23 This clear statement of qualified congregational priority over the
24 role and authority of leadership did not emerge solely from the
25 Froehliche Richtung. It's background must also be found in a leadership
26 of the former Mennonite Church which was seen as no less arbitrary and
27 unspiritual. In fact, Toews sees in the Mennonite Brethren reaction
28 against such leadership the seeds of a long standing weakness.

29
30 An analysis of the problems of the Mennonite Brethren Church
31 during this early period leads to the conclusion that the
32 divinely ordained role of the leadership for congregational
33 life was not sufficiently recognized and appreciated by most
34 members. The negative reaction against the arbitrary and
35 oppressive leadership of the established church influenced
36 the Brethren (no doubt unknowingly) to develop a negative
37 attitude toward a properly constituted, scriptural authority
38 of the ministry. At times equality and fraternity were
39 emphasized at the expense of proper authority.²⁹

40
41 It is against this background that the eldership must again be
42 raised in surveying Mennonite Brethren attitudes regarding leadership
43 in a covenant community. Indeed this background suggests a further
44 tendency.

45
46 D. Mennonite Brethren have tended to reject formally constituted
47 strong central leadership when this has been seen as a threat to more
48 local autonomy.

49
50 This tendency can be illustrated by returning to the career of the
51 eldership among Mennonite Brethren. By the turn of the first decade in
52 the twentieth century in Russia and shortly thereafter in America, the
53

1 eldership was being repudiated by Mennonite Brethren. Background given
2 by A.H. Unruh is very instructive.³⁰ In a controversy over the
3 institution of "open communion" the elders took the conservative
4 position against a more liberal practice proposed by other ministers
5 and evangelists. Quoting Unruh, Toews reports that the eldership came
6 to be seen as a "sickness" afflicting Mennonite Brethren leadership.
7 It was felt that an ordained eldership was unscriptural because all
8 ministers were in fact elders serving as a council. In light of this,
9 the principle of congregational priority was again enunciated. "The
10 leader of the church is the man who has the gift of leadership; he is
11 the first among equals."³¹ This emphasis was consistent with a
12 footnote to the role of the elder and bishop in the 1902 confession
13 which seemed to limit the functional role of the elder somewhat.³² In
14 denying the status of elder to a few ministers, the church was
15 extending it, informally at least, to all ministers. While the
16 eldership was weakened, collective ministry and leadership was
17 reaffirmed.

18
19 In the United States the eldership was perceived as promoting a
20 rank or status among ministers and was seen as contributing to
21 competition among ministers for recognition. No elder was appointed in
22 American Mennonite Brethren Churches after 1919³³ and in Canada no
23 elders were ever ordained as the Canadian Mennonite Brethren adopted
24 the Russian attitude from Molotschna in 1909.³⁴

25
26 More than a generation later the question of the eldership was
27 again raised. In 1951 the Board of Reference and Counsel (B.O.R.A.C.)
28 presented the General Conference with a paper which, if it were read
29 here, would give the participants in this study conference a strong
30 feeling of *deja' vu*. The paper addressed four themes: I. A frank
31 analysis of our spiritual status. II. An appeal for reaffirmation of
32 the historic principle of the interrelationship of Mennonite Brethren
33 Churches. III. Proposed ways and means to be considered as a possible
34 way to meet the expressed needs. IV. Suggested efforts toward
35 unification of our doctrinal position.³⁵ The burden of the paper was
36 to present a scriptural and practical rationale for the establishment
37 of a Board of Elders for the General Conference. This proposal was
38 motivated in part by a desire to "safeguard the accepted Biblical
39 principle of collective leadership."³⁶ The assumption behind the
40 proposal was succinctly summarized in the conclusion to section II.

41
42 The background to this concern lies in a shift in the Mennonite
43 Brethren Church which still has far-reaching implications in the
44 present day. Beginning in the twenties in the United States and
45 somewhat later in Canada, the collective, unsalaried leadership was
46 abandoned in favor of the trained, full-time paid pastorate. Toews, in
47 a sharply worded analysis of this transition suggests that it occurred
48 for pragmatic reasons colored by a trend towards cultural
49 accommodation.³⁷ It does seem that the shift did occur piecemeal with
50 little deliberate theological reflection on its implications, or united
51 discernment by the Mennonite Brethren Church as a whole. By 1933 the
52 B.O.R.A.C. was recommending that local congregations needed to seek the

1 endorsement of other Mennonite Brethren congregations as they called
2 and ordained pastors, and that conference leadership should officiate
3 at such ordinations.³⁸ In 1948 the B.O.R.A.C. was warning against
4 "spiritually disintegrating influences" and in order to "safeguard the
5 spiritual unity of the brotherhood" they recommended that leaders
6 appointed in Mennonite Brethren congregations should have been trained
7 and tested in the conference. When pastors were being called from
8 outside Mennonite Brethren circles, the B.O.R.A.C. recommended that
9 they be examined thoroughly by the district conference whose
10 endorsement should be necessary for such an appointment to be made.³⁹
11 This was accepted, but not by all. Some churches still elected to
12 proceed on their own without the aid of the conference. According to
13 Toews, "The spirit of individualism and the emphasis on local autonomy
14 continued to threaten the scriptural relationship of interdependence
15 and unity in the brotherhood."⁴⁰ It was this spirit that the 1951
16 proposal for a denominational eldership was designed to combat.
17

18 The analysis of the challenges facing the conference was accepted
19 except for its key provision for addressing those challenges. The
20 recommendation of the Board of Elders for the General Conference was
21 referred back to the committee and to the churches and district
22 conferences for study. Three years later the eldership was quietly
23 shelved because of opposition from the district conferences.⁴¹ The
24 Mennonite Brethren Church had rejected a collective shepherding
25 leadership for the church as a whole as a means of maintaining
26 theological solidarity and a sense of wholistic identity. 2
27

28 This introduces, finally, the tendency towards a polity of
29 association.
30

31 E. ✓ Mennonite Brethren, in their increasing drift into individualism, have
32 tended to sacrifice the brotherhood of the larger church to the
33 independence of the local congregation and the regional district.
34

35 Mennonite Brethren are caught in a confusion of "congregation,"
36 "church" and "conference." Historically, the focus of church and the
37 covenant brotherhood had been supra-congregational. In the period from
38 1865 to 1885 the Mennonite Brethren Church enjoyed a time of rapid
39 growth and expansion. During this time there was deliberate care taken
40 not to confuse the new and growing number of scattered congregations
41 and the larger church. In both the Molotschna colony and in Chortitza
42 the proliferation of gatherings and Sunday meetings was not allowed to
43 threaten the "unity of spirit" valued by the larger brotherhood.⁴² As
44 the church expanded into the Kuban district, a third "Gemeinde" was
45 established with its own elder. Between these three churches
46 (Molotschna-Ruckenau, Chortitza-Einlage and the Kuban) and their
47 attendant congregations, the larger sense of unity was maintained by
48 the oversight and visitation ministry of the elders, periodic larger
49 gatherings of the church as a whole, and the work of itinerant
50 preachers. In spite of this, some tension towards autonomy was already
51 felt. It is instructive to note its source. It was through the heavy
52 Baptist influence that pressure to emphasize local autonomy came. Thus
53 it was influence and aid from other evangelical denominations that

1 mediated the threat to "a concept of church as a brotherhood
2 independent of geographical location or distance."⁴³
3

4 In the move to North America, Mennonite Brethren faced several
5 severe challenges to the maintenance of a larger church identity.
6 Among these was the increasing loss of social and cultural cohesion so
7 natural to the "colony" setting. The geographical spread and isolation
8 of Mennonite Brethren congregations was greatly increased. Exposure to
9 other evangelical denominations already rooted in the North American
10 culture was increased and these served as models for the immigrant
11 church seeking its way. The movement away from the collective model of
12 leadership and ministry, and the repudiation of the eldership in
13 concert with increasing moves in favor of independent pastorates has
14 already been briefly described.
15

16 In 1963, it was decided to change the official designation of the
17 General Conference. It is ironic that the very name cited by the
18 B.O.R.A.C. in 1951 as illustrating what the Mennonite Brethren Church
19 was not, was now adopted to replace the former name which was then
20 affirmed as describing the center of Mennonite Brethren identity. The
21 Church of the Mennonite Brethren Conference of North America, had
22 become the ^{general} Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America.
23

24 The thirty-five years since 1951 seem to indicate that the con-
25 cerns of some Mennonite Brethren leaders at that time were well
26 founded.⁴⁴ It is those same concerns which have brought us together
27 in 1986. The decision of 1963, as well intentioned and biblically
28 based as it appeared, also seems to have been a weather-vane decision
29 indicating which way the wind was really blowing among Mennonite
30 Brethren.
31

32 CONCLUSION

33

34 Several issues seem to emerge from this discussion as basic to
35 leadership questions facing Mennonite Brethren as a covenant community. The
36 most basic is the question of whether we still want to regard what we now
37 call the "conference" as in some way embodying the believers' church.
38 Another way of asking this question is whether the root of Mennonite
39 Brethren identity is the local congregation or the larger Mennonite Brethren
40 Church of which the congregation is a part.
41

42 The larger Mennonite Brethren Church has only a very limited repertoire
43 of common experience and structure to bind it together. This is in contrast
44 to the local congregation with its regular gatherings and possibilities for
45 developing quality relationships on a broad scale. Two major elements which
46 can serve as the bonding of the larger church are a focused authoritative
47 leadership and a common confession or covenant of faith and practice. The
48 present association model of a conference of churches essentially truncates
49 the Mennonite Brethren Church at the local congregation. The structures of
50 boards and conferences forward from this line have little to do with New
51 Testament leadership principles of shepherding, care, teaching and
52 discipline. The conference is an extra-Biblical innovation. We have,

1 however, in the emergence of the district/conference minister the seed of
2 validating our desire to be the church in a larger context. Title is not
3 the most important consideration but one quickly recognizes that if such a
4 trend towards conference/district ministers is supported with a New
5 Testament understanding of church and leadership authority, then "bishops"
6 or "elders" may soon follow, whatever they may be called formally.

7
8 I believe that it may be time for us to seriously reconsider two
9 decisions we have taken in the past. The rejection of a council of elders
10 in 1951-54 and the symbolic change in the name of our church in 1963 need to
11 be looked at again. Both decisions appear from the vantage of 1986 to be
12 decisions showing an inability to discern and retain basic elements of a
13 covenant brotherhood in the face of the pressures of accommodation,
14 modernization (if not secularization) and growth.

15
16 The immediate cry will be that such an eldership representing a larger
17 Mennonite Brethren Church beyond the congregation will institute a
18 hierarchy. "Brotherhood" is at risk! Such is not the case. Two things are
19 needed. First is the will and conviction that the Mennonite Brethren Church
20 exists first as a larger covenant community and that local congregations,
21 while embodying the fullness of the church locally, nevertheless derive
22 their identity and character from the larger church and not the other way
23 around. Secondly, we need to distinguish "brotherhood" and polity. To my
24 knowledge we do not have an explicit theology of brotherhood. This is a
25 piece of Biblical scholarship that is sorely needed. It is my suspicion that
26 such a study may reveal that "brotherhood" is much more a function of
27 relationship and fellowship than a form of polity. Certainly, "brotherhood"
28 cannot be confused with democracy. If this is true, then brotherhood need
29 not be compromised by authoritative servant-elders active in the front line
30 of the "General Conference."

31
32 (2) A second essential issue for the covenant community is that its
33 congregational and church leadership come to consensus regarding some basic
34 principles of polity and practice, and that these be clearly enunciated as
35 essential marks of Mennonite Brethren fellowship and church life. This does
36 not at all mean that each congregation must be structured in the same way.
37 It does mean that congregations should be accountable to the larger church
38 for the way in which they conduct their affairs so as to ensure that
39 congregational ministry and discernment, for example, are not jeopardized.
40 Greater consensus in the understanding and application of the Lord's supper,
41 baptism and membership is important to the basic meaning of "church" among
42 Mennonite Brethren. To require greater congruence among Mennonite Brethren
43 leaders in these areas is not to impose the handcuffs of sterile conformity,
44 but to strengthen the church's consistent conviction and identity of witness.

45
46 (3) A third important consideration is the need for the larger church to be
47 more active in the process of appointing pastoral leadership to the local
48 congregation. The larger church needs to move beyond the role of
49 facilitator and incidental examination or affirmation after the essential
50 decision is made within the local congregation. Local congregations should
51 be more accountable to the larger church for the leaders they call and
52 commission. It may also be time to broaden the terms of examination for

1 prospective pastors. Our confession of faith and a personal integrity as a
2 disciple of Jesus are already assumed as requisite to the Mennonite Brethren
3 pastorate. Perhaps elements of polity and practice should also be included.
4

5 Proposals such as these may be viewed as idealistic, reactionary,
6 authoritarian or even dangerous. Nevertheless, a covenant community must
7 have a covenanted leadership. Such a leadership covenant must have
8 substance. The discussion can start with these suggestions.
9

10 In conclusion, here are two practical recommendations we may want to
11 consider. First, let us change our name to something like "The Church of
12 the Mennonite Brethren of North America." Secondly, let us appoint and fund
13 a minister-elder for each district or provincial conference in the North
14 American church and constitute this group as the council of elders for the
15 Mennonite Brethren Church in North America. Such a modest initiative would
16 be a beginning to bridging our gaps of regionalism and local preoccupation
17 through the creation of a multiple ministry of leadership for the church as
18 a whole. As such regional ministers work with leader-colleagues in their
19 own settings but also consult on a regular basis with their counterparts
20 across the church the distance from Quebec to the Pacific District start to
21 be bridged. The gulf between North Carolina and British Columbia will at
22 least be recognized. As such leaders gain the trust and confidence of their
23 regional congregations and their pastors, and as they come to understand the
24 diversity that will always characterize a church spread over two nations and
25 a myriad of cultures, they may have the opportunity to begin to lead us to
26 the consensus of covenant essential to the existence and integrity of our
27 Mennonite Brethren Church.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51

NOTES

¹Alvin Dueck, Abram G. Konrad, and John B. Toews, "Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Profile, 1972 - 1982," Direction 14 (Fall 1985): 84-86. Hereafter referred to as Mennonite Brethren Profile.

²This is not to say that leadership defines that center; it is only one element of an identifying core. Each topic being addressed in this conference speaks to an important dimension of the heart of Mennonite Brethren identity.

³John Regehr, "'Democracy,' 'Brotherhood,' and Leadership," Direction 5 (October 1976): 26-28.

Marvin Warkentin, "The Roles of Elders in Church Leadership" (M.Div. dissertation, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1976).

Gary Wiens, "Understanding the Pastoral Role" (M.Div. dissertation, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1976).

Direction 8 (April, 1979).

Victor Adrian, "Ordination to the Ministry," paper presented at "Current Issues in Church Leadership," a study conference of the Board of Reference and Counsel, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Clearbrook, British Columbia, 8 May 1980.

Herb Brandt, "Church/Pastor Relations," paper presented at "Current Issues in Church Leadership," a study conference of the Board of Reference and Counsel, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Clearbrook, British Columbia, 9 May 1980.

David Ewert, "The Place of Women in the Congregation," paper presented at "Current Issues in Church leadership," a study conference of the Board of Reference and Counsel, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Clearbrook, British Columbia, 10 May 1980.

Marvin Hein, "the Ministry of Divorced and Remarried," paper presented at "Current Issues in Church Leadership," a study conference of the Board of Reference and Counsel, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Clearbrook, British Columbia, 9 May 1980.

John E. Toews, "Leadership Styles for our Churches," paper presented at "Current Issues in Church Leadership," a study conference of the Board of Reference and Counsel, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Clearbrook, British Columbia, 9 May 1980.

Henry J. Schmidt, "Leadership Under Lordship," series of papers presented to a leadership congress sponsored by the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns, Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Clearbrook, British Columbia, July 1984.

1 Alvin Dueck, Abram G. Konrad, and John B. Toews, "Mennonite Brethren
2 Church Membership Profile, 1972-1982," Direction 14 (Fall 1985).

3
4 ⁴Yearbook, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches,
5 (Reedley: 1984), 73-82.

6
7 ⁵While I of course retain responsibility for the content of this paper,
8 I must acknowledge the valuable consultation and stimulation provided by
9 Larry Martens and Ron Penner of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary.

10
11 ⁶Herb Brandt, "A Call to Reason Together: A Pastoral Letter,"
12 Mennonite Brethren Herald 25 (16 May 1986):6-7.

13
14 ⁷Ibid, 7.

15
16 ⁸Mennonite Brethren Profile, p. 47. In this paper "church" is
17 generally used to denote what is usually called the "conference," that is,
18 in this paper the "church" is the body of Mennonite Brethren believers in
19 the General Conference. These believers are gathered into local
20 "congregations" as constituent parts of the broader church.

21
22 ⁹John A. Toews, People of the Way, Selected Essays and Addresses, ed.
23 Abe J. Dueck, Herbert Giesbrecht, Allen R. Guenther (Winnipeg: Historical
24 Committee of the Board of Higher Education, Canadian Conference of Mennonite
25 Brethren Churches, 1981), 47.

26
27 ¹⁰Mennonite Brethren Profile, 83.

28
29 ¹¹For the purposes of this paper "leadership generally denotes those in
30 formally designated roles of decision making and opinion leading in the
31 church including pastors, ministers, preachers-teachers, moderators,
32 elders/councilors/board members, and perhaps deacons.

33
34 ¹²Peter M. Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789 - 1910),
35 trans. and ed. J.B. Toews, Abraham Friesen, Peter J. Klassen, Harry Loewen
36 (Fresno, California: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of
37 Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), 97.

38
39 ¹³Ibid., 97ff.

40
41 ¹⁴Ibid., 108.

42
43 ¹⁵Ibid., 230.

44
45 ¹⁶Ibid., 240.

46
47 ¹⁷At this writing the German original of the document was not at hand.
48 The J.B. Toews translation in P.M. Friesen says "ministers." The A.J.
49 Klassen translation cited in J.A. Toews' history says "teachers
50 (preachers)." "Leaders" is used here to cover both designations.

51
52 ¹⁸Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 232.

1 19 Menno Simons, The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, trans. Leonard
2 Verduin, ed. J. C. Wenger with a biography by H.S. Bender (Scottsdale,
3 Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1956), 159.

4
5 20 Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 242 and 343-344.

6
7 21 John A. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, Pilgrims
8 and Pioneers (Fresno, California: Board of Christian Literature, General
9 Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), 304.

10
11 22 Ibid. 72.

12
13 23 Ibid. 304.

14
15 24 Ibid.

16
17 25 Ibid.

18
19 26 Ibid., 60 ff.

20
21 27 Friesen Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 437.

22
23 28 Ibid.

24
25 29 Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 54.

26
27 30 A. H. Unruh, Die Geschichte der Mennoniten Bruder-Gemeinde (Winnipeg,
28 Christian Press: 1955), 226ff.

29
30 31 Ibid., 235.

31
32 32 Howard J. Loewen, One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God;
33 Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America - An Introduction (Elkhart:
34 Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 168.

35
36 33 Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 305.

37
38 34 Ibid., 309.

39
40 35 Yearbook, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of
41 North America, (Winkler: 1951), 124-144.

42
43 36 Ibid., 131.

44
45 37 Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 306-307.

46
47 38 Ibid., 310.

48
49 39 Ibid.

50
51 40 Ibid., 311.

- 1 41Ibid., 312.
- 2
- 3 42Ibid., 79.
- 4
- 5 43Ibid.
- 6
- 7 44Ibid., 312.