

General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America

Board of Reference and Council

Study Conference
The Nature and Ministry of the Church
 Normal, Illinois
 August 2-4, 1989

Findings Committee ReportI. Format of the Conference

The 1989 study conference on "The Nature and Ministry of the Church" was held in conjunction with "Normal 89," an inter-Mennonite convention gathering at Normal, Illinois August 1-6, 1989. Four papers and one formal response were presented and discussed. John E. Toews presented a paper, "The Nature of the Church," followed by a formal response prepared by Jim Holm. Two writers addressed the topic of women and ministry in the church. Ed Boschman presented "Women's Role in Ministry in the Church" and Timothy J. Geddert presented "The Ministry of Women—A Proposal for M. B.'s." Finally, Erwin Penner presented "The Lord's Supper and the Church," a paper prepared in consultation with John Wall. The conference participants responded to the writers by discussing their papers in small groups led by BORAC members followed by further discussion in plenary session. A findings committee comprised of Harry Heidebrecht and Gerry Ediger gathered the reports of the seven discussion groups and attempted to record the salient points made in the plenary discussion.

II. The Nature of the Church

- A. The paper was presented by John E. Toews. The respondent was Jim Holm. Both received strong affirmation. Several sample comments are, "There were sufficient themes in the paper for three months of sermons." and "The presentation and discussion drew up together."

The multi-image interpretation of the church in John's paper brought scope and flexibility to our understanding of the church. Jim's comments added to the practicality of the presentation.

The presentations provided a view of the church which was more dynamic and less doctrinaire and static.

- B. The papers presented a more Christ-centred approach to the church. It was a centred rather than a bounded approach.

What constitutes the centre of the church? Is the centre confessional (i.e., the Confession of Faith) or is it Christological? The presentation and discussion affirmed the latter. The encouragement to grow as a body in an invitation to move together toward the centre. A bounded approach promotes the setting of boundaries and guarding them. There is great freedom in a centred approach.

- C. The emphasis of the paper was on "community and accountability." Much of the discussion in groups deviated from this central theme. A number of lingering sub-surface issues surfaced in the discussion groups. These were issues such as: Confessional integrity—What percentage of our membership could unconditionally endorse our

confession of faith? What degree of conformity does it require? Is the Confession of Faith normative or is it descriptive? There is a diversity of opinion.

- D. There is an emerging consensus among participants that there are different levels of commitment required to our Confession of Faith. 1. The leadership level requires a high degree of commitment because leadership determines the confessional direction of the church. 2. The entry level is less informed and therefore requires another level of commitment. These are Christians at an early stage of growth. This difference allows for scope in receiving members into the church and for clear direction from leadership. It leads the church towards confessional integrity.
- E. The need for more pastoral interpretation of the paper is advisable. BORAC should consider assigning a series of interpretive statements to deal more precisely with the meaning of this paper at a functional level. For example:
1. What difference does "community and accountability" make in Christian Education, both in content and method?
 2. How does this affect the way we do pastoral care?
 3. What does this mean in ethical discernment?
 4. How does this impact evangelism and the integration of new members?

We need to link up practically with what we believe conceptually. Covenant community needs further processing.

- F. The question of the mission of the church arose several times in the discussion. Can we speak of the nature of the church without more explicitly dealing with its mission? Although mission is implicit in the paper, several expressed the opinion that it needed to be more explicit.
- G. There seemed to be some discomfort with the paper because in some people's minds, they were already anticipating the implications of this paper for other topics yet to be considered, specifically, "Communion, Baptism and Membership." This was quite deliberate on BORAC's part in order to provide a framework for subsequent discussion.
- H. The definition of community raised other concerns. What gives this community definition? Is it defined by baptism or by faith? If by baptism, where do children, adolescents or non-baptized believers fit? Where may they be included? Where are they excluded?

III. The Role of Women in the Ministry of the Church

The discussion of Ed Boschman's and Tim Gedert's papers was influenced by the fact that they were not suitable for comparative analysis. Ed's paper dealt more directly with the issues of women in ministry and was supported by arguments from Scripture. Tim's paper was more an historical analysis of changing Evangelical conviction regarding the role of women, followed by four proposed actions designed to move Mennonite Brethren towards consensus on the issue. This difference in the two papers precluded any substantive discussion of the relative biblical merits of the more restrictive and less restrictive convictions regarding the issue. The discussion, then, centred on the more practical and pastoral aspects of the question with considerable attention to Tim's fourth proposed plan of action, namely, "to grant freedom to practice our convictions, even when others do not share them." (p. 17)

The findings to follow represent a reading of the discussion group reports and a grouping of those responses which occurred more than once. Beside the general responses to the papers, five issues emerged as having sufficient mention to warrant recording.

A. General Response to the Papers

1. "Women's Role in Ministry in the Church"

Ed Boschman's paper was affirmed as being clear and understandable. There was also the frequent observation, and even protest, that his statement predates the present conference resolution on women in ministry. There seemed to an assumption implicit in the tone and content of the comments that Ed was "behind" the Mennonite Brethren Church on the issue. At the same time, some were in support of this position and others were not.

2. "The Ministry of Women—A Proposal for M. B.'s"

There were repeated expressions of frustration and disappointment that Tim Geddert's paper did not provide an exegetical alternative to Ed's position. However, action number four was recognized as being a creative and stimulating proposal designed to lessen tension and acrimony in the church on this issue even while continuing to work for broader consensus. This interest in Tim's proposal was translated into both positive enthusiasm for, and cautious concern regarding his suggestion.

B. The Call for Freedom of Conviction of and Practice

Tim's call for congregational freedom of conviction and practice found support as being the best course of action for the present. This seemed to be motivated by a concern to preserve unity in the broader Mennonite Brethren Church through the recognition and legitimation of congregational diversity. The proposal was appreciated as an acknowledgment of the present state of affairs and the difficulty Mennonite Brethren are having in bringing this issue to resolution.

At the same time, there was also considerable uneasiness with the proposal. Some seemed ready to immediately apply the same solution to confessional issues such as our peace-making conviction. At least implicitly, the question was being asked, "If the church were to admit and even encourage congregational diversity on the question of women and ministry, why not apply the same solution to other confession-related issues which are creating a divergence of conviction and practice among Mennonite Brethren? It was feared that this proposal might undermine the current efforts being made to bring Mennonite Brethren into greater confessional congruence. The likelihood of considerable difficulty in working out the proposal in local practice was also noted. Tolerance between congregations would do little to address the diversity of conviction within local Mennonite Brethren assemblies.

C. The Call for Continued Pro-active BORAC Initiative

Discussion, and even positive encouragement, of Tim's proposal did not seem to lessen the desire for a Mennonite Brethren consensus on the issue. This appeared to be the case whether one was more or less restrictive in one's approach to women in ministry. Some favoured Tim's idea as sanctioning the present state of affairs while BORAC continued to address the possibility of women being allowed into roles of ordained leadership. Others feared that the sanctioning of the present diversity would mean that women would be granted more, and finally unrestricted, freedom to minister, by default. There was a call for exegetical consensus on issues such as "headship" and "creation order" before answering the question of ordination and senior

leadership. BORAC, it was said, should lead Mennonite Brethren in direct engagement with the text of the Bible in deciding this question. There was also a request for study materials suitable for use in congregations, as well as the speedy releasing of the BORAC-sponsored manuscript on the issue.

D. Confusion Regarding the Definition and Practice of Hermeneutics

Conference participants perceived a confusion of concepts between the Giddert and Boeckman papers and themselves with respect to exegesis, hermeneutic and application. Repeatedly it was said that we must come to common understanding regarding these more technical aspects of reading and applying the Bible before we can make progress in the resolution of issues.

E. Concern for the Pastoral Implications of Diverging Conviction

Concern was expressed regarding the implications of conflicting conviction on both sides of the question. Hurt and confusion are experienced by women who are convinced of God's call into roles of service not sanctioned by their local Mennonite Brethren congregation or the larger church. This hurt and confusion is compounded when these women are affirmed in their giftedness and call by their peers, and supported in their desire by being trained for such ministries in Mennonite Brethren schools. Other Mennonite Brethren experience equally profound confusion and hurt when they feel forced by biblical conviction to deny ministry or service to women, sometimes contrary to their less restrictive impulses. Others seem to take deep offence when women are granted roles or ministries which they are convinced are reserved for men only. Conference participants recognized these needs for sensitive pastoral care, but also admitted that the personal convictions of the care-giver were a factor in whether suitable pastoral care could be given and/or received by those involved.

IV. The Lord's Supper and the Church

- A. The topic was introduced by John Wall and the paper was read by Erwin Penner. The presentation concluded with a summary statement suggesting a possible revision of our Confession of Faith to read:

All who have peace with God through Jesus Christ, live at peace with their fellowmen, and have been baptized upon their faith or have a publicly recognized testimony of their faith in Jesus Christ, are invited to partake of the Lord's Supper. (Note: This was a suggested revision, not an approved revision of the Confession of Faith.)

- B. There was a consensus that a freer interpretation for participation in the Lord's supper was needed. This appeared to be a consensus at several levels:
1. Current practice: In a number of groups there was indication that a majority of our churches longer practise this aspect of our Confession of Faith.
 2. Group discussion was weighted in favour of change, although not unanimously.
 3. General discussion encouraged BORAC to formulate a revision.
- C. Although favouring a revision, there were also concerns and cautions expressed. There appeared to be consensus that discernment and accountability were necessary. Several suggestions regarding discerning processes received support. The discerning process should encourage responsibility participation. It should be seen as an opportunity to teach and lead participants toward baptism and membership. The discerning process should take into consideration several groups in the church.

1. Unbaptized adults: Should be left to individual concerned after careful explanation of the meaning of baptism.
2. Visitors: A right relationship to the Lord and their church whatever that might mean.
3. Children: a series of guidelines or even carefully prepared lessons to involve parents and the church in discerning their readiness; that this also become the occasion for instruction and discipling.

D. Again, the question of "a covenanting community" was discussed. Does it consist of the baptized or those who believe? Can a covenanting community include non-covenanting participants? How do we harmonize the first paper on a "covenanting community" with an open practice of the Lord's Supper? The summary statement on the Lord's Supper speaks of accountability via "a publicly recognized testimony." This does suggest accountability, but is this adequate?

E. Another question raised in discussion groups requested guidance for communion in other congregational settings, e.g. retreats, weddings, schools, etc.. There appeared to be a degree of consensus that communion at weddings was inappropriate, but that it might take place in other settings with the knowledge and support of the church leadership.

Note: These again represented views expressed with some degree of support. These are not conference positions.

F. There was also some urging that we consider a further paper on the topic, "children and a covenanting community." Some aspects of this study might include:

1. The conversion of children.
2. The nurturing of children.
3. The place of children within a "covenanting community."
4. Children and the ordinances.

G. Church discipline and communion: Is there a relationship between the two? How do we deal with longstanding members whose lives are not consistent, but partake of the Lord's Supper?

H. The Lord's Supper, a celebration: In all of this, let us never forget that the Lord's Supper is a celebration.

V. Continuing Agenda

In the final plenary session five issues of continuing concern related to the themes of the conference were raised. Some of these were matters of process while others were more substantive.

A. The question of ordination: Ordination was described as needing complete restudy from the stand-point of the Bible. The outcome of this study would address the issues of leadership roles, the status of leadership, the call to leadership, and the change of leadership. It was suggested that present practice was creating a "clergy class" in the church.

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- B. The nature of the church in the context of mission and vision: This item was raised because of the perceived need to broaden the base of Toews' concept of the church to include mission, eschatology, purpose and vision.
- C. The process of achieving unity in the church: While study conference such as this one were affirmed, the need for more direct study of the Bible together, a greater sensitivity to the work and energy of God among us, and more practice in the corporate spiritual disciplines were affirmed.
- D. The need for ways to process concerns like those of this conference in the context of the congregation.
- E. The question of the conversion, baptism and church participation of children and adolescents: There is an urgent need for clarity on this issue, and also a need for materials to assist pastors, teachers, parents and children in their teaching and learning about this matter.

Respectfully submitted,

Harry Heidbracht
Gerry Ediger

Findings Committee, August 9, 1989