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RESPONSE TO THE PAPER
THE CHURCH GROWTH THEORY AND MENNONITE BRETHREN POLITY
By Herb Neufeld

The writer of the paper, The Church Growth Theory and Mennonite Brethren Polity has divided his analysis into two primary sections. I will follow this general outline so that our discussion can be more clearly focused.

I. Mennonite Brethren Church Polity

The brief overview of the primary leadership structures used by a variety of denominations provides a helpful backdrop in our consideration of Mennonite Brethren polity. For some the review of the historical Anabaptist-Mennonite approach to leadership will be a refreshing reminder that for those believers the Bible provided the primary source in shaping the church, but for others the suggestion that historically our polity has been a "modified Presbyterian polity" will come somewhat as a surprise (see page 3). Another observation may suggest that while we may have retained some aspects of the modified Presbyterian model, as outlined by brother Toews, this today may be more true in theory than in reality. The self-sufficiency of the local congregation, the embracing of the North American democratic process by the church and the undermining of the significance of leadership have all contributed to the departure from our earlier position.

On the local church scene Mennonite Brethren governance has also experienced a considerable shift, as outlined by Toews (pp. 4-6). It would appear that the shift that happened in the 1960s was influenced by the introduction of the "hired pastor" system and by the reaction to the "governance structure" that was "fairly hierarchical". Some of the greatest resistance to any kind of "hierarchy" seems to come from those with a lingering memory of those earlier structures. My limited experience would suggest that younger members, and those coming from other backgrounds do not share such resistance when considering new leadership structures. A large percentage of our people would in fact encourage a leadership model made up of a team of godly trusted leaders who with the pastor are seen as "guardians of scripture in nurture, fellowship and watchcare for the life and needs of the flock" (p. 5). Obviously such leadership must enjoy the confidence of the membership and their involvement in "deliberations and decision-making" where appropriate. There also will need to be some "renewal" in our understanding of the concept of the "priesthood of believers" to one of every member involved in ministry rather than primarily that of having a vote on every issue.

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The lack of clear guidance on a broader conference level regarding leadership models on the local level has resulted in the emergence of a variety of structures. This has resulted in confusion, conflict and hurts which could have been minimized.

Of equal concern is the growing sense of fragmentation regarding commitment to the work of the larger conference. The fear of any kind of "hierarchy" with any "authority" has negatively impacted the function of leadership in our conference. As stated by Anabaptist scholar, Rodney Sawatzky, "unless we recapture a more balanced view of leadership which includes respect for the "office" as well as that of "function" we are in danger of total disintegration as a conference". The New Testament would appear to support this view (I Thess. 5:13; I Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7,17). Without such a change of support and respect for those discerned for such roles is to vote for a "chaplaincy" approach to leadership which has little hope of calling individuals and local churches to be accountable.

II. The Polity of Church Growth Theory

Brother J.B. Toews recognizes that the church growth movement has contributed to the renewal emphasis on evangelism, but in focusing on the issue of leadership he appears to see this movement as having more negatives than strengths. It is evident that some of the weaknesses cited cannot easily be ignored. Examples include the over-emphasis on the pastoral role which is "defined as the CEO of a corporation or the commander of an army". Such leadership models are "highly centralized and autocratic" (p. 8) and clearly do not fit our understanding of a New Testament leadership model.

On the other side of the coin the church growth movement does address the functional responsibility of leadership which includes "motivating and training lay leadership to reach people for Christ and the church" (p. 8). Both of these functions could be much stronger in many of our churches. The examples of our early Anabaptist leaders and the record of the New Testament reflect the kind of leaders which were clearly visionary and committed to aggressive evangelism. They may well have appeared "autocratic" to our generation.

The conclusions made by Toews regarding the three M.B. church examples cited appear somewhat one-sided. We obviously cannot argue the fact that they grew rapidly under "strong centralized leadership" and then declined and/or experienced a crises when that pastor left. There are however some additional factors which must be considered in such church experiences. (1) Since the assimilation of newcomers is a key factor in retaining such members, how did the more traditional members accept these newcomers, or was the pastor their primary association with the church. (2) Active participation and the sense that 'I am needed' is another important factor in staying in a fellowship. Some churches carefully protect these leadership positions for the inner circle, and (3) What kind of responsibility does a congregation have in choosing a suitable successor to lead the church when a gifted pastor leaves. It should be obvious that this discernment process will significantly determine the future of most churches. This choice of a successor may in fact be as

significant in the decline of the church as the former pastor was in it's growth. The reality of many choices regarding where individuals worship and serve will not diminish in this next decade and there are many factors which will determine whether or not people attend our churches.

While there will always be some negative samples to cite, there also are many examples in which strong centralized leadership has produced very positive models. The challenge we face is 'how can we take the best ingredients of a variety of models and apply them for our churches?'

SUMMARY STATEMENTS

1. A "modified Presbyterian polity" may today be more true in theory than in practice in our conference.
2. The change in "church polity" is happening faster in our churches than in our conference. The mobility of the membership, healthy church growth, outside influences and the size of some churches necessitates this.
3. Conference loyalty can no longer be assumed. The diversity in our leadership in our churches, a growing number of new Christians, and members coming in from other traditions are all impacting this reality.
4. The respect for the "office" of leadership as well as the "function" of leadership must be re-established.
5. Leadership without the authority to hold individuals and churches accountable will not be very helpful. We need a renewed commitment to submit and to support.
6. Some Biblical and practical guidelines prepared by conference leadership could greatly assist churches in developing local leadership structures. To neglect this is to assure greater diversity in this regard. The strengths and weaknesses of the church growth movement should be considered in these proposals.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Do we see ourselves as operating under a "modified Presbyterian polity" today?
2. What are some positive leadership models which could be recommended for implementation in the local church? What are some important principles that must be considered in such a model?
3. What are the key issues that will enhance the recognition and respect of leaders today?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the church growth leadership emphasis?
5. Is it time for the M.B. Conference to more formally develop a "bishop system" in our conference or does the "Conference Minister's" role address the concern about fragmentation sufficiently?