

response to the baptism and church membership study conference

summary

Mennonite Brethren churches reflect a growing diversity of practice regarding baptism and membership. This diversity is based more on pragmatic values than on a tradition-informed interpretation of specific scriptural passages. While some congregations separate baptism from membership, others question the significance of membership.

The starting point for understanding baptism is Jesus' example, Jesus' command, and New Testament church practice. The New Testament's most basic teaching regarding baptism is its symbolic meaning of cleansing and initiation. Baptism "into the name of Jesus" carries the freight of being aligned with His death and resurrection, being included into the family of God, being ordained to the mission of God, having one's allegiance transferred to God, becoming a member of the body of Christ, realizing one's true humanity and experiencing the regeneration and outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The relationship between the universal church and the local church was unclear at times. The local church is the visible manifestation of the people of God; therefore, any assumption that it is possible to live as a Christian apart from the body of Christ needs to be challenged.

There was recognition that people yearn for a deep experience of community and a felt sense of belonging. It was also recognized that such a yearning denied or unfulfilled might prevent people from joining the church through baptism when they distinguish in the church a greater stress on institutionalism than on relationship and spiritual formation. A tension was recognized between wishing to remove barriers to participation in community and the desire to raise expectations for covenant relationship that would elevate the aspects of accountability, sacrificial servanthood, and mission.

Appreciation for seeing discipleship as a journey, with baptism as one step on the way, was affirmed. Caution was expressed that the separation of baptism from membership may lead to the separation of salvation and discipleship. On the other hand, caution was expressed about adopting a sacramental understanding of baptism.

pastoral concerns

Pastoral concerns, congregational values, and confessional integrity merge and often collide over the recognition of infant baptism. Christian brothers and sisters who are contributing adherents, who had earlier in their lives gone through confirmation of their faith in an evangelical church, are asking for membership in the MB church without rebaptism.

While many in other Christian denominations hold to the practice of infant baptism, we as Mennonite Brethren affirm our confession of faith, which states:

Baptism is for those who understand its meaning, are able to be accountable to Christ and the church, and voluntarily request it on the basis of their faith response to Jesus Christ.... Persons who claim baptism as infants and wish to become members of a Mennonite Brethren congregation are to receive baptism on their confession of faith.

affirmation

Churches are encouraged to deepen and broaden their teaching on the meaning of believer's baptism and church membership. The Board of Faith and Life endeavours to remain biblical in its theology and praxis of baptism and membership. Therefore it calls all Mennonite Brethren churches to revisit, reconsider and recommit to the Confession of Faith's teaching on believer's baptism. We urge that this be done in willing partnership with, not independent of, the larger covenant community.