

BFL calls for study of women in leadership (captured from website September 11, 2012)

In March 2003, the Canadian Board of Faith and Life (BFL) received a request from the Manitoba MB Conference to “consider lifting the current restriction we have on women being senior pastors (and) . . . to simply allow individual churches to make that decision when faced with it” (Don Petker, moderator). BFL’s agenda for its May meetings, which included a study conference on baptism and church membership, was full. At its September meeting the Board devoted an entire day to reflect on the biblical and hermeneutical issues surrounding women in church leadership.

To bring this agenda forward in the constituency, the Board of Faith and Life, together with provincial leadership, is planning open-invitation one-day Learning and Listening Sessions across the country to prepare the national Church for a decision regarding women in leadership. In addition, the Board has time allotted for focused discussion on this issue at Gathering 2004 in Toronto, July 7–10.

The Board of Faith and Life is committed to lead the MB Church through the constructive tension of biblical interpretation and our present context. The Board invites all congregational and individual views, questions and concerns. These may be sent to either our Canadian Conference executive director **David Wiebe** or Board of Faith and Life chair **Walter Unger**.

The purpose of the open-invitation Learning and Listening Sessions is to explore the biblical, hermeneutical, pragmatic, political, symbolic and personal aspects of the current restriction on women to be lead pastors. We will explore the biblical trajectory that points to the freeing of women for all ministry. There will also be time for reflection, sharing and prayer.

The first two Learning and Listening Sessions have been set for Ontario, May 14–15, and Manitoba, October 30. Look for upcoming sessions in your region, to be announced in the Herald.

—*Walter Unger, chair*

The purpose of a study conference

The Mennonite Brethren are a confessional people. As such, we continually seek to hear what God is saying to us. Five hundred years ago, the Anabaptists determined four ways that they could discern the will of God: through Scripture; through the life of Christ; through the voice of the Holy Spirit who resides in each believer; and through the discerning community of faith.

We believe the community of faith working together – such as at a study conference – and guided by the Holy Spirit and the Word, forms a community hermeneutic. That is, we interpret Scripture and choose a direction together. We hope to uphold our Confession of Faith, yet consider the challenge of variant practice in this issue.

Resources

- Biblical support for positions
- MB resolutions regarding women in church leadership
- *Continuing the conversation: Mennonite Brethren and women in church leadership* by Doug Heidebrecht
- *The hermeneutical task: crossing from the world of the Bible to our world today* by Doug Heidebrecht
- Further reading list

Biblical support for positions (captured Aug 31, 2011)

1. Biblical support for restricting women in church leadership

Women in creation

- The image of God involves both male and female – [Genesis 1:27](#)
- Man is given primary leadership responsibility in God’s arrangement of order in creation ([Genesis 2:4–25](#)):
 - Adam is responsible for the environment
 - Adam is responsible for obedience before God
 - Adam is responsible for naming animals and the woman
 - The woman as “helper” signifies one who assists
 - Adam was created first, then Eve
- The distortion of God’s order after the fall is not annulled by redemption – [Genesis 3:16](#)

Women leaders in the Old Testament

- Women were restricted from the priesthood
- Women’s involvement in the prophetic ministry was temporary or the exception

Jesus and women

- Women were not part of the twelve disciples – [Matthew 10:1–4](#); [Luke 6:12–16](#)

Women in the early church

- Women were not appointed as elders in the church – [1 Timothy 3:1-7](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#); [1 Peter 5:1-5](#)
- Women’s involvement in the work of the early church was under the authority of men

Women in the New Testament letters

- [Galatians 3:28](#)
 - The context of Galatians 3:28 does not address social implications
 - While women and men are equal in status in Christ, functional differences in the church remain
 - The analogy between women and slaves does not apply since slavery is not a God-ordained institution
- [1 Corinthians 11:2–16](#)
 - “The head of the woman is man” (headship is defined as “authority”) – 1 Corinthians 11:3
 - Women prophesying in the church cannot be equated with preaching – 1 Corinthians 11:5
 - The significance of a head covering represents man’s authority over the woman
 - Serving in the church without the proper “head covering” is “shameful”
 - Woman was made from man and for the sake of man
 - Nature requires that the distinction between the sexes be reflected in different roles in the church
- [1 Corinthians 14:34–35](#)
 - The principle behind the command for women to be silent in the church is based on:
 - An appeal to the practice of the churches

- The principle of submission of wives to husbands
 - An appeal to the law ([Genesis 3:16?](#))
- [Ephesians 5:22–33](#) ([Colossians 3:18–19](#); [Titus 2:3–5](#))
 - The husband is the head of the wife – Ephesians 5:23
 - Headship is defined as “authority” reflected through loving leadership and responsibility
 - Wives are to submit to their husbands in everything
 - The husband/wife relationship is the pattern for the relationship of men/women in the church
- [1 Timothy 2:9–15](#)
 - Women are to learn in quietness and in submission – 1 Timothy 2:11
 - The meaning of *authentain* is “to have authority” – 1 Timothy 2:12
 - Women are not to teach men or have authority over men – 1 Timothy 2:12
 - The appeal to man’s priority in the “order of creation” indicates this command is a permanent principle that transcends cultural practices
 - Woman’s role in the fall reflects her overstepping of God’s order for male/female relationships
 - “To teach” and “to have authority” are equated with pastoral leadership and eldership
 - [1 Timothy 3:1–7](#) assumes overseers are male
- [1 Peter 3:1–7](#)
 - Women are to submit to their husbands and husbands are to provide considerate leadership

2. Biblical support for affirming women in church leadership

Women in creation

- The image of God involves both male and female – [Genesis 1:27](#)
- Both male and female are commanded to be fruitful and have dominion over the earth – [Genesis 1:28](#)
- Woman was created as a “helper” of man to address the social dimension – [Genesis 2:18](#)
- Adam recognizes the mutuality of woman – [Genesis 2:23](#)
- The hierarchy of the husband over his wife is a result of the fall and is not prescriptive – [Genesis 3:16](#)

Women leaders in the Old Testament

- Women were prophetesses – Miriam and Hulda – [Exodus 15:20](#); [Micah 6:4](#); [2 Kings 22:14–20](#)
- Deborah was a prophetess and judge – [Judges 4:4–5](#)

Jesus and women

- Women were among Jesus’ disciples – [Matthew 27:55–56](#); [Mark 15:40–41](#)
- Mary learned as a student of Jesus – [Luke 10:39](#)
- Women proclaimed Jesus’ true identity – [John 4:1–42, 11:27](#) (compare to Peter – [Mark 8:27–30](#))
- Women remained as faithful witnesses of the crucifixion and resurrection – [Matthew 27:55–56, 28:1–10](#); [Mark 15:40–41](#); [John 20:10–18](#)
- Women were commanded to proclaim the resurrection – [Matthew 28:7](#); [Mark 16:7](#); [John 20:17–18](#)

Women in the early church

- Women received the Spirit at the inception of the church at Pentecost and were empowered to prophesy by the Spirit – [Acts 2:4](#); [Acts 2:17–18](#)
- Lydia was the first convert and house church leader in Philippi – [Acts 16:11–15](#)
- Priscilla taught Apollos – [Acts 18:24–26](#)
- Four daughters of Philip were prophetesses – [Acts 21:8–9](#)
- Women were co-workers of Paul
 - Euodia and Syntyche (co-workers) – [Philippians 4:2–3](#)
 - Priscilla (co-worker and house church leader) – [Romans 16:3–5](#); [1 Corinthians 16:19](#)
- Junia was outstanding among the apostles – [Romans 16:7](#)
- Phoebe was deacon of the church at Cenchreae and patron of Paul – [Romans 16:1–2](#) ([Romans 12:8](#))
- Chloe and Nympha were house church leaders – [1 Corinthians 1:1](#); [Colossians 4:15](#)

Women in the New Testament letters

- [Galatians 3:28](#)
 - In Christ there are no distinctions
 - Compare to [1 Corinthians 12:13](#) (gifts) and [Colossians 3:11](#) (teaching one another – [Colossians 3:16](#))
 - Comparison with instructions to slaves and free – with God there is no favouritism – [Ephesians 6:9](#); [Colossians 3:25](#) (compare also to [Acts 10:34](#) and [Romans 2:11](#))
 - The “new creation” in Christ becomes the model for relationships – [2 Corinthians 5:16–17](#)
- [1 Corinthians 11:2–16](#)
 - Meaning of headship is unclear (“source?”) – [1 Corinthians 11:3](#) ([1 Corinthians 11:12](#))
 - Women were praying and prophesying in the church – [1 Corinthians 11:5](#) ([1 Corinthians 14:3, 26](#))
 - Proper dress provides authority for women to prophesy – [1 Corinthians 11:10](#)
 - Interdependence marks relationships between women and men “in the Lord” – [1 Corinthians 11:11](#)
- [1 Corinthians 14:34–35](#)
 - Spiritual gifts are given without distinction by the Spirit – [1 Corinthians 12:7, 11](#)
 - Three groups of people (tongue speakers, prophets and women) are told to be quiet – Paul’s concern is for order in the service – [1 Corinthians 14:28, 30, 34](#)
- [Ephesians 5:21–32](#)
 - The wife’s submission is an expression of mutual submission among believers – [Ephesians 5:21](#)
 - Headship is defined in [Ephesians 1:22–23, 4:15–16](#) (nourishes and tenderly cares for the body)
- [1 Timothy 2:8–15](#)
 - The primary issue of concern in 1 Timothy is false teaching, the promotion of controversy, meaningless talk, and presumption about the ability to teach – [1 Timothy 1:3–7](#); [4:1–7](#); [6:3–5](#)
 - The call for quietness must be understood in the context of living peaceful lives – [1 Timothy 2:1](#)
 - The meaning of *authentain* is “to domineer” – [1 Timothy 2:12](#)

- 1 Timothy 2:9–15 should be read in light of the situation described in [1 Timothy 5:9–15](#)
- The restriction on women is contextual – in relation to the situation in the church in Ephesus

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MB Resolutions (captured Aug 31, 2011)

**Mennonite Brethren General Conference Resolution
Sister's Participation**

General Conference Yearbook, 1879, 4

That sisters may take part in church activities as the Holy Spirit leads. However, they should not preach nor take part in discussion in business meetings of the church.

**Mennonite Brethren General Conference Resolution
Ordaining, Commissioning, and Licensing of Workers**

General Conference Yearbook, 1957, 106

C. That in view of the fact that we as an MB Church, on the basis of clearly conceived scriptural convictions, do not admit sisters to the public gospel preaching ministry on par with brethren, we as a Conference designate the fact of setting aside sisters to missionary work "a commissioning" rather than "an ordination."

**Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference Resolution
Role of Women in Conference and Church Ministries (Revised Resolution)
Canadian Conference Yearbook, 1975, 106**

The Scriptures teach that men and women "are joint heirs of the grace of life" ([1 Peter 3:7](#)). They also record the significant role women filled as fellow workers in the early church ([Romans 16](#); [Philippians 2:2-3](#)). However, several biblical texts also put strictures on the place of the woman in the church ([1 Corinthians 14](#); [1 Timothy 2](#)) on the basis of which we must recognize a distinction between the function of men and women in the church. God's creation order has not been abrogated by redemption.

Be it therefore resolved:

1. That the Canadian Conference of MB Churches go on record as not favouring the ordination of women for the preaching and pastoral ministry nor their election to Boards and offices whose work is of the nature of eldership, such as the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns, and the Board of Reference and Counsel or its equivalent.
2. That the Canadian Conference declare women eligible to be elected as delegates to Conferences and to church and Conference Boards and Committees other than those referred to in recommendation #1.

**Mennonite Brethren General Conference Resolution
Ministry of the Women in the Church**

General Conference Yearbook, 1981, 46-47

Many churches are asking whether we as Mennonite Brethren have been faithful to the Scriptures by restricting certain ministries in the church to men only. The Canadian Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns brought a resolution on this matter to the Canadian Conference some five years ago. Since then the question has come up repeatedly at both local and conference levels and BORAC put it on the agenda for the study conference last May in Clearbrook, B.C. In view of the continuing debate on this matter we would like to present the following concerns and proposals to our General Conference.

1. We should be careful not to take our models for the husband/wife relationship and for the place of the woman in the church from the current feminist movement, which is largely secular in orientation. We recognize, of course, that movements in society at times force students of the Bible to ask whether they have understood the Scriptures correctly, but the church must always

hold a critical stance toward such movements, including also Christian interpretations which have denied Christian women their rightful place in family, church and society.

2. We would caution against those modern currents of thought which tend to minimize the significance of a woman's high calling to be a wife and a mother to her children, and we should do all that we can to strengthen the family and to establish it on biblical principles.
3. We, as men, confess that we have not always loved our wives and honored them as we should. However, we believe that the Scriptures teach that "the husband is the head of the wife." and that a wife's submission to a loving husband is in no way demeaning. True fulfillment comes to both husband and wife when they seek to serve one another, and to be submissive one to another ([Ephesians 5:21](#), "and be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord."), rather than in the desire for equality or even superiority. This, however, does not mean that we condone any form of oppression (either of men or women) in our society.
4. We recognize that the language of Scripture reflects the patriarchal societies in which the Bible emerged. We should not, however, sit in judgment over Scripture, for God's Word was given for all times and all cultures. It should be understood that when words such as "brother," "brotherhood" and the like are used for the believers that these terms include also the sisters. Therefore, we should not accuse those who use this biblical patriarchal language in teaching and preaching, of being anti-feminist. On the other hand we should avoid using sexist language that offends.
5. We acknowledge the great contribution of our sisters to the work of the Lord in local church, in mission fields, and other areas of kingdom work, and we encourage our churches to continue to discover and to draw upon the spiritual resources found in our sisters for various ministries in the church and in the world. This may also include participation in local church and conference ministries, if the local church so chooses.
6. We do not hold that the reciprocal relationship between male and female, as established in creation, has been annulled by redemption. We do believe that the Bible's teaching on the headship of the husband has a bearing on the place of the woman in the church. We do not hold that the passages in the New Testament (such as [1 Corinthians 14](#) and [1 Timothy 2](#)), which put restrictions on the Christian woman, have become irrelevant, even though they were given in a different cultural context and, therefore, do need to be re-applied. And while we recognize that women played a significant role in the early church – something we would encourage them to do in our day as well – we do not believe that the Mennonite Brethren Church should ordain women to pastoral leadership.

Mennonite Brethren General Conference Statement of Counsel

Ministry of Women in our Churches

General Conference Yearbook, 1984, 75–76

Times change! So do insights and understandings as we keep the Bible open, and allow the Spirit of God to instruct us. The thinking of our brotherhood has changed greatly over the years regarding the ministry of women in our churches, and in our conferences. Contrast, for example, the resolutions of 1879 and 1981:

- 1879: "That sisters may take part in church activities as the Holy Spirit leads. However, they should not preach nor take part in discussion in business meetings in the church."
- 1981: "We acknowledge the great contribution of our sisters to the work of the Lord in local church, in mission fields, and other areas of kingdom work, and we encourage our churches to continue to discover and to draw upon the spiritual resources found in our sisters for various ministries in the church and in the world. This may also include participation in local church and conference ministries, if the local church so chooses."

The 1981 resolution on the place of women in the church has, of course, been quoted only in part. The rather lengthy resolution closes with the words, “We do not believe that the Mennonite Brethren Church should ordain women to pastoral leaderships.” The minutes of the conference discussions on this matter conclude as follows: “In response to a considerable number of negative comments from the floor, the moderator declared that the intent of the resolution was to encourage the expanded involvement of women in the work of the church, not to limit their ministry” (*General Conference Yearbook*, 1981, pp. 46–47).

We wrestle with culture, tradition, but particularly with a variety of interpretations, and authentic ones, of the pertinent biblical passages which speak to the subject of women’s ministry in the church.

Since our last convention the Board of Reference and Counsel has continued some discussion on this subject. This has not a settled issue among us, and this question should receive continued study and consideration in the future. Guidance is needed as we recognize that more women will graduate with seminary degrees who will be available for ministries in churches. We encourage churches and our conferences to be open to their services.

In view of the current need for further study regarding this matter the Board of Reference and Counsel suggests that the following steps be taken:

1. We urge that the resolution on the “Ministry of the Women in the Church” adopted by the General Conference in 1981, be followed and observed until such a time as the Board of Reference and Counsel and the conference can agree on further guidelines relative to this matter.
2. We urge churches, as we did in 1981, “to continue to discover and to draw upon the spiritual resources found in our sisters for various ministries in the church and in the world.” More encouragement and more open doors for service should be give to our sisters.
3. The Board of Reference and Counsel intends to expand the resolution of 1981 and come to the next convention with a report of its findings.

Mennonite Brethren General Conference Resolution

Women in Ministry (Revised Resolution)

General Conference Yearbook, 1987, 46–47

The Board of Reference and Counsel submitted a resolution in 1981 that was designed to affirm and free women for ministry in the church. The resolution was interpreted as too negative by the conference delegates. BORAC was mandated in 1981 and again in 1984 to prepare a more affirmative statement.

BORAC submits the following resolution for approval and implementation in our churches:

We believe that God created both men and women in his image, and therefore both share an equal humanity before God ([Genesis 1:27](#)).

We believe that Christians are joint heirs with Christ, and therefore both women and men experience full salvation in him ([Galatians 3:28](#)).

We believe that the Spirit grants gifts to all believers, irrespective of gender, for diverse ministries both in the church and in the world, and therefore both men and women minister God’s grace ([1 Peter 4:10](#)).

We believe that God calls all women and men to serve in the church and in the world; we also believe he calls some women, as well as some men, for ministries within the context of the church ([Acts 2:17, 18](#); [Ephesians 4:11ff](#); [Romans 12:4–8](#); [1 Peter 4:10](#)).

We believe that since God has gifted and called both men and women, the church should recognize and affirm them in their ministry for the common good of the church ([1 Corinthians 12:7](#); [Romans 16:1–6](#)).

We encourage our churches to free and affirm women for ministries in the church, at home and abroad, in decision-making, evangelizing, teaching, counseling, encouragement, music, youth visitations, etc.

BORAC recommends a careful biblical study process by our congregations on the role and ministry of women in the church, and has commissioned the preparation of a book and study guide of all relevant biblical passages.

In the meantime, the guidelines of the 1981 resolution remain in effect.

**Mennonite Brethren General Conference Proposed Resolution (Defeated)
Women in Leadership
General Conference Yearbook, 1993, 33–35**

Terms of reference

The Board of Faith and Life recommends the approval of Recommendation 4, Women in Leadership, with the following terms of reference:

1. That we understand the recommendation as a mediating and interim solution to diversity and disagreement in the denomination, including this Board. The Board's intent with this resolution is to act in a pastoral manner.
2. That we understand the issue of women in ministry as a polity issue that is based in disagreements about biblical interpretation. It does not involve a historical central theological teaching of the Christian church (e.g., Christology, salvation).
3. That this resolution supersedes the 1981 and 1987 resolutions.
4. That if a local church calls a woman to leading pastoral ministry, that affirmation is for that local church.
5. That this recommendation does not address the question of ordination of women to pastoral ministry. Reflection on this issue will be part of the '94 Denver Consultation on ordination and authority in ministry.
6. That the Board of Faith and Life be authorized to work out some of the practical implications and issues of the recommendation (e.g. licensing, pastoral support systems) in consultation with district and provincial boards of faith and life.
7. That the Board of Faith and Life work on the continued study of the issues and the processing of disagreements with the goal of greater consensus and unity.

Preamble

The subject of gender, ministry and leadership has been on the agenda of the Mennonite Brethren Church in North America for 20 years. As the debate concerning "women and ministry" developed in the 1970's, the Canadian Conference endorsed the appointment of women to service on committees, church councils and as conference delegates but not for preaching, pastoring or functioning as "elders." In 1981 the General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel presented its resolution on "The Place of Women in the Church." Responding to this resolution, the convention delegates agreed that women should be encouraged to play significant roles in Mennonite Brethren congregations, but that they should not be ordained to pastoral leadership. The 1984 report of the Board reaffirmed the 1981 decision but also urged that "more encouragement and more open doors for service should be given to our sisters." This exhortation to open more ministry opportunities for women was made more specific by the Board in 1987, and women were affirmed for decision-making, evangelizing, teaching and preaching, pastoral counseling and serving as associate pastors, but not as a senior pastor or leading elder. Convention delegates, however, were not prepared to accept wording which invited women to preach or serve in associate pastoral roles, but they did agree to female participation in "decision-making, evangelizing, teaching, counseling, encouragement, music, youth, visitations, etc." Delegates also approved the

preparation of a book dealing with all the relevant passages relating to the subject women and ministry, and agreed that “in the meantime, the guidelines of the 1981 resolution remain in effect.” A 1990 Board recommendation to approve the ordination or licensing of women specifically for chaplaincy ministries was not presented to the convention for decision.

As the Conference considered these actions and resolutions over the years a parallel process of study and discernment went forward. Studies by Mennonite Brethren leaders such as Ed Boschman, David Ewert, Tim Geddert, Allan Guenther, George Konrad, Howard Loewen, Herb Swartz, and John E. Toews were either presented at study conferences or published. In the spring of 1992, the book approved in 1987 was published under the title *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*. For a year, congregations have been encouraged to study the question, and all the pastors of the General Conference have been polled for their response to the book and their views on the subject of women in ministry and leadership. At this stage in the study process, the General Conference Board of Faith and Life presents the following recommendation:

Recommendation 4:

The Mennonite Brethren Church has formally discussed the role of women in ministry since 1974. All study conferences and resolutions have affirmed the giftedness of women for ministry. All churches are blessing women for ministry within the congregation.

During the past triennium, Mennonite Brethren have again in good faith examined the biblical material and arrived at different and sometimes opposing views on the question of women in leadership. Despite our efforts, we are unable to come to consensus on the issue at this time. For these reasons, let us agree that neither this matter, nor the various convictions regarding it, shall be used to question or doubt one another’s Christian integrity and faithfulness. We covenant that this issue shall not be a test of our faithfulness to Christ. We also resolve not to break the bond of fellowship with one another on this issue but to allow for diversity of conviction and practice in the appointment of women to pastoral leadership in ways that are consistent with the governance patterns of the local congregation.

Added amendment

We resolve to continue in prayerful study of Scriptures and affirm that the Bible remain authoritative and normative for the local congregation also in this area. We will continue to seek consensus in our Biblical interpretation.

BFL statement (after the vote):

Yesterday’s vote on the recommendation regarding women in senior pastoral leadership left several questions. Some have expressed hope that the matter has been settled for the present. People have asked us to allow the matter to rest for a while and we consider that to be wise counsel. Still, some questions need to be answered:

1. How does our decision affect the 1981 resolution?
2. How does our decision affect mission and evangelism to women and men in our culture?
3. Where does this leave women who have been gifted, called, and affirmed by the church to exercise leadership as non-senior pastors?

We agree that we continue in prayerful study of the Scriptures and affirm that the Bible remain authoritative and normative for us. We will continue to seek consensus in our biblical interpretation.

We also continue to affirm the 1981 resolution. We understand this to mean that women are encouraged to minister in the church in every function other than the senior pastorate. It also means that women are invited to exercise leadership on conference boards, in pastoral staff positions, and in our congregations, institutions and agencies. We ask them to minister as gifted, called and affirmed.

We encourage the church to be increasingly alert to the gifts of women and to become more active in calling them to minister. We, furthermore, call people in the Spirit of Christ to relate to one another in mutual respect as brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Mennonite Brethren General Conference Resolution
Women in Leadership
General Conference, 1999**

That women be encouraged to minister in the church in every function other than the lead pastorate. The church is to invite women to exercise leadership on Conference boards, in pastoral staff positions and in our congregations, institutions, and agencies. We ask women to minister as gifted, called and affirmed. We call the church to be increasingly alert to the gifts of women and to become more active in calling them to minister. We further call people in the Spirit of Christ to related to one another in mutual respect as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Implications:

1. The 1981 resolution regarding ordination of women remains in effect.
2. Conference leadership roles should be open to men and women equally. If necessary, changes should be made in the structures by which boards are selected to facilitate service by gifted women.
3. Local congregations are called to free women to give leadership and service in all positions other than the lead pastorate.
4. Members of the Mennonite Brethren church are to pray for growing unity in biblical understanding and in the practice of affirming leaders.
5. Leaders are called to open the informal networks so that all members of leadership groups serve as full partners without any form of prejudicial exclusion from their inner workings, whether intentional or not, because of race, gender, age, or ethnicity.

**MB Church of Manitoba Resolution
Leadership and Gender in the MB Church of Manitoba
MB Church of Manitoba Yearbook, 2003**

Resolution

“We call our people in the Spirit of Christ to relate to one another in mutual respect as sisters and brothers in Christ.”

Furthermore, “We invite men and women to exercise leadership on Conference boards, in pastoral staff positions and in our congregations, institutions and agencies. We ask them to minister as gifted, called and affirmed.”

And finally, “We call the Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba to be increasingly alert to the gifts of women and men, and to become more active in calling and blessing them to minister in all areas of church life.”

Please note:

- This ballot will not change our practice in the immediate future. The results will be passed on to BFL for their consideration in the hope that the Canadian Conference will deal with this matter accordingly.

- The MBCM Executive Committee's preferred position is to adopt the above resolution which is consistent with the 1993 General Conference resolution. (In 1993, a watershed year on this issue, a motion to "allow for diversity of conviction and practice in the appointment of women to pastoral leadership in ways that are consistent with the governance patterns of the local congregation," was defeated by almost a 2-to-1 ratio.)

**AN INFORMAL HISTORICAL SYNOPSIS OF THE
“MENNONITE BRETHREN WOMEN IN MINISTRY” ISSUE
TC 1993**

- Purpose: To review, in about ten minutes, an outline chronology of our decisions as “Mennonite Brethren” concerning the place of Mennonite Brethren women in the church and in ministry.
- Any reading of the record, even a brief synopsis such as this, is subject to one’s own presuppositions and prior convictions.
 - Thus, you should know that I favour the removal of all restrictions on the ministry and service of Christian women in the church.
 - I look forward to the day when both women and men, without respect of gender, can serve and lead in the Mennonite Brethren church as they are redeemed by Christ, gifted by the Holy Spirit, called by God, and affirmed by his people.
- The Mennonite Brethren “women in ministry” controversy dates from a May, 1973 MB Herald article by two Mennonite Brethren Bible College professors, Allan Guenther and Herb Swartz.
 - They argued that:
 - As believers, women and men are equal.
 - The Holy Spirit gifts both to teach and lead.
 - The restrictive texts in Paul’s letters do not apply to qualifications for ministry for all time, but to local and historical situations.
 - That is, they concluded, women should be encouraged to exercise their gifts in the church.
- The situation prior to 1973 had not been entirely consistent.
 - In 1864, in Russia, the fledgling Mennonite Brethren movement was criticized by other more conservative Mennonites because Mennonite Brethren women were allowed to speak and pray aloud in home gatherings. Critics accused Mennonite Brethren of contradicting the plain teaching of texts such as I Corinthians 12 and I Timothy 2:12.
 - In North America, the participation of women in Conference sessions was discussed in 1879. Women were allowed to attend conference sessions, but were not allowed to participate in the deliberations.
 - Significantly, the question of women voting in church membership meetings was left to the local congregation.
 - In 1957 the General Conference specifically addressed the ordination of women to the ministry.

- Quoting: “That in view of the fact that we as a Mennonite Brethren Church, on the basis of clearly conceived Scriptural convictions, do not admit sisters to the public Gospel preaching ministry on par with brethren, we as Conference designate the fact of setting aside sisters to missionary work a commissioning” rather than “an ordination.”
- In effect, the Conference was closing a loop-hole in its rules. Prior to 1957 at least 85 Mennonite Brethren women had been ordained to missionary service. Now, as Mennonite Brethren were adopting the professional paid pastorate, we specifically barred women from the office of pastor and the preaching ministry.
- This was the situation when Guenther and Swartz opened the question in 1973, and for 20 years, we have debated this issue.
 - In 1974, David Ewert presented the Canadian Conference with a paper which affirmed the Guenther & Swartz reading of the biblical texts, and declared women eligible for all forms of service and ministry except the ordained pastoral ministry.
 - The following year, 1975, the Canadian Conference exhorted congregations to appoint women to committees and councils, and as conference delegates. They were, however, prohibited from preaching, pasturing, or functioning as “elders.”
 - Six years later, in 1981, the issue was on the General Conference agenda. A formal resolution from the Board of Reference and Council on “the Place of Women in the Church” began with this sentence, “Many churches are asking whether we as Mennonite Brethren have been faithful to the Scriptures by restricting certain ministries in the church to men only.” In the six resolutions that follow, we are cautioned against the secular feminist movement. Woman’s calling as wife and mother is emphasized. Wifely submission to the husband as family head is affirmed. Patriarchal language such as “brother” and “brotherhood” is declared inoffensive. Churches are exhorted to “draw upon the spiritual resources found in our sisters for various ministries in the church and the world.” And finally, the so-called creation order of gender relationships is upheld. All this led to the conclusion that women should be encouraged to play significant roles in Mennonite Brethren congregations, but they should not be ordained to pastoral leadership.
 - In the words of the official record, the statement elicited “a considerable number of negative comments from the floor.”
 - The moderator’s response to this protest was that the statement intended to expand the involvement of women in the work of the church, and not to limit their ministry.
- At the next General Conference convention the issue was again discussed.
 - In the interval between 1981 and 1984, the resolution encouraging female participation in “local church and conference ministries” had acquired a qualification. When the 1981 resolution is quoted in the 1984 Conference report, a new phrase, “if the local church so chooses” had been added. The local congregation had been made the gate keeper of women’s freedom to serve in the church.

- The prohibition on female ordination to the pastorate was reaffirmed. At the same time, the Board of Reference and Council report acknowledged that women were graduating from our seminary, and again exhorted congregations to encourage women and provide more opportunities for them to serve.
- In 1987, the Board of Reference and Council acknowledged that the 1981 resolution, now six years old, had repeatedly been criticized as being too negative. Convention delegates had demanded a more affirmative position. In response, the board offered a series of statements. Both men and women “share an equal humanity before God.” Both “experience full salvation in [Christ].” All believers, “irrespective of gender” are gifted for ministry. Both men and women are called to serve in the church.
 - The most significant passage reads as follows:
 - “We urge that Mennonite Brethren churches free and affirm women for ministries in the church, at home and abroad, e.g., decision-making (committees and boards), evangelizing (visitation and discipling), teaching (Bible study and preaching), pastoral counselling (shepherding and soul care). We affirm women as associate pastors but do not, at this time, endorse women as senior pastors or “leading elder.”
 - The statement closed by acknowledging the issue of ordination as unfinished business, and recommending the preparation of a study guide.
 - This statement, with its detailed examples and openness to women in the associate pastorate, elicited protest from conservatives and the resolution was referred back to the board for revision.
 - Later a revised resolution was presented:
 - “We encourage our churches to free and affirm women for ministries in the church, at home and abroad, in decision-making, evangelizing, teaching, counselling, encouragement, music, youth, visitations, etc.
 - BORAC recommends a careful biblical study process by our congregations on the role and ministry of women in the church, and has commissioned the preparation of a book and study guide of all relevant biblical passages.
 - In the meantime, the guidelines of the 1981 resolution remain in effect.”
 - This resolution was carried.
- Conclusion:
 - No action on the issue was taken at the 1990 General Conference convention in Hillsboro.
 - The present formal decision of the General Conference is that we should not ordain women to the pastoral ministry. The spirit of the position is that women are barred from pastoral leadership in Mennonite Brethren congregations. The numerous but carefully edited examples finally accepted in 1987 are instructive. The BORAC was unable to secure passage of a resolution that explicitly affirmed women to shepherd, preach and serve as associate pastors.

- In practice, some local congregations have, since 1987, been guided by the originally rejected resolution, and have appointed women as assistant or associate pastors and, in at least one instance, as the sole pastor of a congregation. Many congregations are increasingly opening their pulpits for women to serve in a manner that closely resembles the preaching ministry.
- Response to the book sponsored by the General Conference Board of Faith and Life, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*, indicates that we as Mennonite Brethren believers are presently far from consensus on the issue.

Note: Specific references are from the relevant conference yearbooks and from *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*.

Gerry Ediger
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Further Reading List (captured Aug 31, 2011)

Articles published in *Direction* journal

- Boschman, Ed. ["Women's Role in Ministry in the Church."](#) *Direction* 18.2 (1989): 44–53.
- Geddert, Timothy J. ["The Ministry of Women: A Proposal for Mennonite Brethren."](#) *Direction* 18.2 (1989): 54–71.
- Heidebrecht, Doug. ["Reading 1 Timothy 2:9-15 in Its Literary Context."](#) *Direction* 33.2 (2004): 171–184.
- Heidebrecht, Doug. ["Distinction and Function in the Church: Reading Galatians 3:28 in Context."](#) *Direction* 34.2 (2005): 181–193.
- Isaak, Jon M. ["Hearing God's Word in the Silence: A Canonical Approach to 1 Corinthians 14.34–35."](#) *Direction* 24.2 (1995): 55–64.
- Janzen, Jean. ["The Church Can Help Women Choose."](#) *Direction* 9.1 (1980): 3–6.
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- Plett, Sandra. ["Attitudes Toward Women as Reflected in Mennonite Brethren Periodicals."](#) *Direction* 9.1 (1980): 13–24.
- Reimer, Luetta. ["A Christian Response to the Women's Liberation Movement."](#) *Direction* 3.1 (1974): 167–172.
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Online resources

- [The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood](#)
- [Christians for Biblical Equality](#)