

The Mennonite Brethren journey towards freeing women for ministry

Walter Unger, BFL Chair

Mennonite Brethren have made slow and at times painful strides towards freeing women to exercise their gifts. An 1878 resolution instructed women to wear head coverings in church and family worship, and an 1879 resolution prohibited women from preaching or participating in discussions in church business meetings. Then, in the first part of the 20th century, women missionaries were ordained. In 1957, however, ordination was withdrawn and sisters were commissioned.

Many resolutions through the latter part of the past century have led us to our current position, “that women be encouraged to minister in the church in every function other than the lead pastorate” (1999 resolution of the General Conference of MB Churches).

We are now at a juncture where both leadership bodies of the Canadian Conference, the Board of Faith and Life and the Executive Board, strongly affirm a recommendation that churches be given the liberty to call and affirm women for ministry in the church without restriction when they see such actions as being faithful to Scripture and true to fulfilling God’s mission in their context.

The Board of Faith and Life respects those churches and individuals in the conference who believe restrictive texts limit women in the exercise of their gifts in the church. By our citation of numerous Scripture texts in stating the rationale to support the resolution coming to Gathering this summer in Calgary, we do not imply that there is not a scriptural basis for a more restrictive view.

The role of women in ministry leadership has been discerned and treated as a non-confessional issue by previous convention and study conference delegations. It is the counsel of BFL that this issue remains at the level of polity.

The purpose of the Calgary resolution is to empower congregations to exercise freedom of conscience before God in determining what leadership polity will be most effective in advancing the gospel in their ministry context. BFL encourages congregations to articulate the means of reaching a consensus within each congregation on this issue.

BFL is aware that our best, biblically-sound scholars and church leaders take differing views on this issue. Realism, not biblical infidelity or spiritual immaturity, behooves us to maintain interpretive humility. In facing this issue, we call our conference to live out the biblical injunction:

“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister...Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14: 13,19).

Women in Ministry Leadership Board of Faith and Life

Background/Gathering 2006 Action

The BFL received the request from the Manitoba Conference in 2003 to respond to a decision made at the provincial level to “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.”

After three years of study, listening and testing within the Canadian conference the BFL offers the resolution below. The accompanying rationale is provided for delegates’ understanding of the BFL’s conclusions on this matter.

Delegates of Gathering 2006 will be asked to vote on the resolution. If the resolution passes, it will stand as the new polity of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches. If it is defeated, the polity established in 1999 in Wichita, KS (General Conference) will continue to stand (*included at the end of this document for delegates’ information*).

The BFL recommends for acceptance the following resolution:

Resolution

It is evident that individuals and congregations practice a diversity of convictions based on different interpretations of Scripture as it regards the church’s freedom to call women to serve in ministry and pastoral leadership. On this non-confessional issue, the Board of Faith and Life recommends that the Conference bless each member church in its own discernment of Scripture, conviction and practice to call and affirm gifted men and women to serve in ministry and pastoral leadership.

Rationale

There are several interpretive frameworks through which people arrive at their conclusions about the subject of women in ministry. We invite those who are in agreement with the resolution, those who are still searching, and those who disagree to consider the following interpretive framework that stands behind the resolution.

Jesus modelled and taught how men and women should treat one another, in life and in ministry. He challenged prevailing unjust practices towards women. He set forth a new paradigm that saw women as persons equal to men and rejected the practices of his day that devalued women (**Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 5:21–43; 10:11–12; 15:40–41, 47; Luke 10:38–42; 13:10–17; 24:10–11; John 4:7–42; 11:2–45; 12:1–8**). Jesus had female disciples who travelled with him, supported him out of their means (**Luke 8:1–3**) and received spiritual instruction from our Lord (**Matthew 12:46–50; 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 10:39**).

Paul stated that in Christ Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female are one (**Galatians 3:26–28**). Paul had female co-workers in Philippi (**Philippians 4:2–3**) and in Rome who were commended for their leadership ministry (**Romans 16:1–16**). Neither Jesus nor Paul overturned the cultural norms of their day because to do so would have shifted the focus away from God’s redemptive mission (**Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:43–44; 5:12–14; Acts 16:1–3; 28:31; 1 Corinthians 7:21–24; Galatians 5:6; 6:15; Ephesians 6:5–9**).

The Church is Christ’s “new creation” (**2 Corinthians 5:16–17**), still resident in an old created order that “waits in eager anticipation” to be “liberated” and “brought into freedom” (**Romans 8:19, 21**). As believers we are to limit the exercise of our Christian liberty if it promotes the greater good and the

advance of the gospel (**Romans 14:1–23; 1 Corinthians 10:23–24**; see also **1 Peter 2:16–17**). There were expedient social contingencies that informed church leaders what could and could not be done in a given situation if the gospel were to proceed. Some New Testament churches in Corinth and Ephesus had their missional effectiveness threatened by false doctrine (**Acts 20:29–30**), inappropriate behaviour (**1 Timothy 2:1–15; 2 Timothy 3:6–7**), a lack of order in public worship (**1 Corinthians 14:22–35**) and a lack of mutual submission and respect in marriage, the home and the church (**Ephesians 5:21–6:9**). Thus, while affirming Christian liberty in some contexts like Galatia, Philippi and Rome, Paul gave restrictions regarding the ministry and conduct of men and women in Ephesus and Corinth because *not to do so* would have impeded the gospel (**1 Corinthians 14:26–28; 34–40; 1 Timothy 2:11–12; 4:1–2, 7; 5:20; 6:3–5; 2 Timothy 2:14–19, 23–24; 3:1–5; Titus 1:10–11, 13–14; 3:9–11**).

In our day there are church contexts where freedom granted to women in ministry and pastoral leadership would impede the gospel in that setting. In such cases, congregations are wise to heed such biblical counsel that restricts women’s leadership involvement. It is hoped that in such contexts, churches will abide by the spirit of the Wichita 1999 resolution of the General Conference of MB Churches that states:

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 relate to one another in mutual respect as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Likewise, there are church contexts where the gospel would be impeded if women were not granted the complete freedom to minister the gospel as called, gifted and affirmed, including the role of pastor. Congregations are to celebrate Christ’s gifts of leadership to his church (**Ephesians 4:11–16**). The Holy Spirit grants gifts to all believers irrespective of gender for diverse ministries both in the church and in the world (**2 Corinthians 3:4–6**).

Let it be our choice that this diversity of practice regarding the churches’ freedom to call women into ministry and pastoral leadership will not undermine our unity. This resolution is not prescriptive, but enabling. No member or member church is compelled to act outside its understanding of Scripture on the matter of women in ministry leadership. Rather, let us covenant with one another to offer encouragement, love, prayer and support for each church and its mission “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (**Ephesians 4:16; Matthew 28:18–20; John 17:17–19; 20:21–23**).

FOR DELEGATES’ INFORMATION

The following is the polity that currently exists as approved by the General Conference delegation in Wichita, Kansas in 1999.

1999 Recommendation (Wichita):

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 relate 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 (p. 30).*

Results of the vote: 241-yes, 28-no.

**Board of Faith and Life Process and Timeline
Resolution on Women in Ministry Leadership
Gathering 2006 - Calgary**

1. A Request by the Manitoba Conf. – March 2003
 - a. MB Conference of Manitoba Council of Representatives November 2002
 - b. Brought to BFL January 2003 meeting as an agenda item
 - c. Official request at the Manitoba Conference Convention – March 2003.
2. National Response – March 2003 – July 2004
 - a. Voices in the Herald
 - b. Letters to the BFL
3. Board of Faith & Life Orientation – September 2003
 - a. Reacquainting ourselves with our history regarding women in ministry leadership
 - b. Historical survey of MB hermeneutics
 - c. Critical hermeneutical issues in the debate
 - d. Hermeneutical complexity
4. Discussion and development of strategy – January 2004 BFL meetings
5. *Gathering '04* – Toronto July 2004
 - a. Breakout sessions and hallway conversations
6. Implementation of Listen and Learn Study Conferences
 - a. Ontario – May 2004
 - b. Saskatchewan – September 2004
 - c. Alberta – October 2004
 - d. Manitoba – October 2004
 - e. B.C. – February 2005
7. Canadian Conference Executive Board Questionnaire – January 2005
 - a. Question 24 – “Qualified women should be permitted to fill any ministry role including that of senior pastor.”
8. Research & Study
9. WIML BFL Study Session – June 2005
 - a. Recap of January '05 Cdn. Conf. Survey Question #24
 - b. National Summary Statement of WIML Consultations
 - c. Review of Letters Received
 - d. Review of Doug Heidebrecht's Thesis *Sisters Leading Brothers?*
 - e. Exploration of Biblical Issues
 - i. Pauline corpus
 - ii. Gospel & Acts
 - iii. Galatians / 1 Corinthians / I, II Timothy – the “restrictive” texts
 - iv. Historical Issues in the Ancient Near East

- f. Theological Issues
 - i. Christocentric Hermeneutic
 - ii. Trinitarian Hermeneutic
 - iii. Canonical Approach vs. Atomization of Scripture
 - iv. Polity & Confessional Integrity
 - v. Theology of Human Nature
 - vi. Eschatology
 - 1. Mission of God
 - 2. Kingdom of God
 - vii. Theology of Culture
 - 1. Cultural forces
 - 2. Relational forces
 - g. Ecclesiastical / Denominational Issues
 - i. Defining Roles
 - ii. Defining Leadership
 - iii. Power, Authority & Servanthood
10. Resolution to MB Herald (July '05) and to Churches (September '05) requesting feedback
11. Feedback – July '05 – Jan '06
 - a. Letters to MB Herald
 - b. Letters to BFL
12. Further Listening, Discernment, Discussion and Synthesis – BFL Meeting – January '06
 - a. Creation of Calgary Resolution on WIML
13. Continuing Response and Discussion in Preparation of *Gathering* 2006 – Calgary

Gathering 2006 Resolution (posted September 26, 2006; captured from website September 11, 2012)

David Wiebe, Executive Director

At Gathering 2006 in Calgary, delegates discussed and voted on the resolution concerning women in ministry leadership. I believe that God was very present in the discussion. One breakout during Gathering invited people to consider how we discuss and decide controversial issues. This was important as we tried to teach and practice the principle of “speaking truth in a loving manner.” Another breakout encouraged people to raise their concerns for their churches and our conference about the issue. Participants recognized that the biblical and theological components had been actively discussed over many years, especially in the last two years connected to Bible study symposia across Canada.

I also believe God led us in the voting procedure on the last day of Gathering. An hour was devoted to receiving input from the plenary body. Many spoke up. Some apologized for speaking somewhat harshly or stridently the day before. Others continued to express doubts and fears. Others endorsed the resolution. A very good spirit prevailed. 77% of the delegation affirmed the resolution. Many expressed prayers * of gratefulness, of concern for those who had fears, and for wisdom in proceeding.

All delegates received a sheet outlining the implications of this resolution. These are listed below.

The Board of Faith and Life (BFL) continues to seek appropriate ways for guiding the theology and doctrine of the Mennonite Brethren conference. A prayer request follows as well.

Once the biblical basis of an issue is determined, the churches are then challenged to apply the implications within their own settings in light of their mission and purposes. Many churches may elect to continue the practice of limiting or restricting the role of senior/lead pastor to men only as a function of their mission. Others may choose to open that position theoretically but it may take some time before the right candidate becomes available for their situation. Others may choose to implement openness immediately. A new church plant may decide to implement the polity immediately and begin with a female church planter. The BFL and Conference will not force any church to act beyond its understanding of how to fulfill its mission regarding this specific resolution. However, we do believe that the process leading up to this resolution and vote may be a model for churches to follow in matters of theological diversity and controversy.

The Conference will make a variety of helps available over the next year for churches needing to work out their policy and protocols in light of the new resolution.

Implications

1. Reality, not moral failure nor biblical infidelity, nor spiritual immaturity dictates there will be many ways, not just one way of looking at the issue of the role of women in ministry leadership. “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister . . . Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” ([Romans 14:13, 19](#)).
2. In the spirit of unity ([John 17:20, 21](#)), the Board of Faith and Life requests that we all proceed with a raised awareness of the significance our decision has upon our collective witness to our communities and country. It is a unified church that advances the gospel ([1 Corinthians 8:12, 13; 10:23, 24](#)).
3. The role of women in ministry leadership has been previously discerned and treated as a non-confessional issue by previous convention and study conference delegations. It is the counsel of the present Board of Faith and Life that this issue remain at the level of polity.

4. The purpose of this resolution is to empower congregations to exercise freedom of conscience before Christ in determining what leadership polity will reflect their faithfulness to the Word of God. The Board of Faith and Life encourages congregations to articulate the means and method of reaching that consensus for its members and adherents.
5. As a matter of polity, the Board of Faith and Life requests all constituent members, leaders and congregations to exercise a spirit of unity, charity and respect for every church's discerned ministry context, including its resolve regarding women in ministry leadership roles.

Prayer request

Please pray for our conference unity following the acceptance of the Board of Faith and Life resolution on women in ministry leadership in Calgary. In addition, pray that as churches engage in their unique responses to this challenge, they will clarify their mission to their communities, their awareness of community needs, and that as church bodies they will “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” ([Ephesians 4:13](#)).