

ARTICLE 6

Nature of the Church

Called by God

We believe the church is the people called by God through Jesus Christ. People who respond in faith are united with the local congregation by the public confession of baptism. Church members commit themselves to follow Christ in a life of discipleship and witness as empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Body of Christ

The church is one body of believers, male and female, from every nation, race, and class. The head of this body is Christ. The church, united by the one Spirit, makes Christ visible in the world. The church exists as local bodies of believers and as a worldwide community of faith.

Worship

The church is nourished and renewed as God's people gather regularly to glorify God. The early church gathered on the first day of the week to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The worshipping community celebrates God's faithfulness and grace, reaffirms its faithfulness to God, builds up the members of the body, and seeks God's will for its life and mission. As the church observes baptism and the Lord's Supper, it proclaims the good news of salvation.*

Fellowship and Accountability

The church is a covenant community in which members are mutually accountable in matters of faith and life. They love, care, and pray for each other, share each other's joys and burdens, admonish and correct one another. They share material resources as there is need. Local congregations follow the New Testament example by seeking the counsel of the wider church on matters that affect its common witness and mission. Congregations work together in a spirit of love, mutual submission, and interdependence.

The New Testament guides the practice of redemptive church discipline. The church is responsible to correct members who continue to sin. Congregations forgive and restore those who repent, but formally exclude those who disregard discipline.

Gifts for Ministry

Through the Holy Spirit, God gives gifts to each member for the well-being of the whole body. These gifts are to be exercised in God's service to build up the church and to minister in the world.

God calls people to equip the church for ministry. Leaders are to model Christ in their personal, family, and church life. The church is to discern leaders prayerfully, and to affirm, support, and correct them in a spirit of love.

Matthew 16:13-20; 18:15-20; John 13:1-20; 17:1-26; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4, 37-47; 11:1-18; 15:1-35; Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 5:1-8; 12-14; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 3:26-28; 6:1-5; Ephesians 1:18-23; 2:11-22; 4:4-6, 11-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:22-23; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:7-9; 1 Peter 2:9-12; 5:1-4.

* One form of the church's worship is the practice of footwashing which can be a meaningful reminder of the humility, loving service, and personal cleansing that is to characterize the relationship of members within the church.

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COMMENTARY

The New Testament defines the church with many different images and word pictures. These images can be clustered into groups with similar motifs and themes.

Descriptions of the Church

One cluster of images describes the church as the people of God. The church is the people called by God. The accent is on God. God creates a people (1 Peter 2:9-10; Romans 9:25-26). The people of God in the New Testament includes all believers, both Jew and Gentile. This people replaces the temple as the place where God dwells (1 Corinthians 6:19; 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:21).

A second cluster of images describes the church as a community. Terms like “saints,” “faithful ones,” and “righteous ones” are always plural in the New Testament. Such terms describe the nature of the church rather than the individual Christian life. Thus the church is a saintly community, a “holy people” set apart by and for God. The church is described as “disciples,” “the way,” “slaves,” “friends,” “witnesses,” a “household.” Christians are described as “children” or as “brothers” and “sisters” in a common family. The point of all these images is that the church is a plurality of people viewed as a collective whole. And in the New Testament, the whole is always prior to the individual and gives identity to the individual, rather than the reverse as in the western world.

The church is more than a community. A third set of images pictures the church in cosmic and eschatological terms. It is the “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17), the “first fruits” (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:15; James 1:18), the “new humanity” (Ephesians 2:11-17; Colossians 3:10), “God’s Sabbath” (Hebrews 4:1-11), and “light” (Matthew 5:14-16; John 12:35; 2 Corinthians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:5; 1 Peter 2:9). The church is the fulfillment of God’s promises. The church is so grand that cosmic images are used to describe the church. These images assert that God is doing a new thing in the church; God is making all things new. The church is to be the fulfillment of what God intended in the original creation.

A fourth set of images pictures the church as the body of Christ. The church is a living body composed of many different members united together. Each member is necessary to the others and to the growth of the whole. Christ is the head of this body. The church grows as different

members are properly related to the head and to each other. Such imagery highlights the unity of the church in Christ and the diversity of gifts within the one body.

The People of God

The various images describing the church assert that God is creating a people through Christ and the Spirit. This people is an alternative or contrast-society in the world. It reflects the nature of God in its corporate life and witness. Though God reveals Himself in other ways, the church is the primary place of God's presence in the world and the primary means of God's mission in the world.

Article 6 of the confession highlights several themes emphasizing our desire to grow together as God's people. Our concern for unity is drawn from images such as the family of God and the body of Christ, and from teachings in 1 Corinthians 1-4, Galatians 3, and Ephesians 2. The unity theme teaches the oneness of different people in the church and in Christ.

The body of Christ has been a favourite image for the church among Anabaptists and Mennonite Brethren. Believers are united both to Christ and to each other to form one body. The church as the body of Christ is also the public witness of Christ to the world.

The theme of accountability in the covenant community reflects an understanding of what it means to be a family, a household, a people, a body, a bride, and follows explicit teachings that exhort believers to be accountable to each other (Matthew 18:15f.; Romans 12:3f.; Galatians 6:1f.).

Worship in the Church

The early church gathered regularly for worship (Matthew 18:20; Acts 4:31; 11:26; 13:44; 15:6, 30; 1 Corinthians 5:4; 11:17, 18, 20, 23; 14:23, 26; James 2:2). The apostles encouraged such meeting together (Hebrews 10:25).

The church gathers to celebrate the grace and goodness of God, to build up the believers, and to become a unified body (1 Corinthians 11; 14). The components of worship include proclamation, teaching, baptism, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, singing, offerings, and decision making (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11; 14; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

One form of worship used in some Mennonite Brethren churches is the practice of footwashing. This practice is based on Jesus' example and teaching in John 13:1-20. When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, he set aside the privileges of power and modelled true servanthood. Christians follow the example of Christ by "washing the feet of the saints" and by many other acts of hospitality, service, and love (1 Timothy 5:10).

Discipline in the Church

Jesus instructed the church to be a disciplining community (Matthew 18:15-25). “To bind and to loose” means to engage in ethical discernment about what it means to be faithful, and then to hold people to that discernment by dismissing those who have violated the consensus of the church and liberating those who have not. Discipline is a function of discernment, pastoral care, and renewal of individuals and the entire church (Galatians 6:1-2; Ephesians 4:25; 1 Corinthians 5:3-5; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11). The goal of discipline is always restoration to Christ and the church.

The pattern for discipline begins with “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) in direct, one-to-one conversation with the erring believer. If there is no change, a small circle of additional church members becomes involved in the confrontation. The matter becomes a concern for the entire congregation if this step is ineffective. The person who repents is to be forgiven and nurtured in making the necessary changes. If the erring person continues in sin against the admonition of the church, the church determines the appropriate discipline. Such discipline is taught in the Scriptures both to protect the purity of the internal life of the church and the integrity of the church’s witness in the world.

While all believers are responsible for discipline in the church (Matthew 18:15-25; Galatians 6:1-2), church leaders have a special responsibility to give guidance and to carry out discipline (Acts 20:28-31; Titus 1:5-11; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Hebrews 13:17). Leaders are accountable to the church. They must be disciplined as well for incorrect teaching or misconduct. Such discipline, however, must be carefully tested because of the danger of gossip and unjust accusations (1 Timothy 5:19).

The purpose of church discipline is twofold. The first purpose is the restoration of the sinning brother or sister (Matthew 18:15f.; Galatians 6:1-2; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11). The New Testament identifies a very limited number of things that justify excommunication: denying that Jesus has come in the flesh (1 John 4:1-6), persisting in sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 5:1-13), and causing division in the church by opposing apostolic teaching (Romans 16:17-18). The second goal of discipline is to uphold the integrity of the church’s witness in the world (Matthew 18). The church loses its missionary witness when it does not discern the meaning of faithfulness to Christ in every age.

The practice of discipline in the church has become difficult for three reasons. First, the legalistic misuse and even abuse of discipline in Mennonite Brethren history has caused a reaction against the practice. Second, the mobility, individualism, and relativism of contemporary western society have made it difficult both to reach consensus on what constitutes sinful behaviour, and to hold people accountable to such a consensus. Third, the threat of litigation has

made churches cautious in the practice of discipline. But none of these problems justifies the abandonment of church discipline. Discipline is necessary in the church for correction, renewal, pastoral care, Christian nurture and growth, and missionary witness.

Ministry in the Church

The New Testament teaches that all believers have received gifts by the Spirit for ministry in the church and in the world (1 Corinthians 12-14; Ephesians 4:11-16; Romans 12:3-8). These gifts are to be exercised for the nurture and strengthening of the entire church.

The New Testament also teaches that the church needs leaders (Philippians 1:1; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3). The purpose of church leadership is to enable and administrate the diversity of gifts through teaching, correction, encouragement, and loving service. Church leaders are to be mature Christians who model Christlike conduct in their personal, family, and church life (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).

The New Testament describes a twofold pattern of ministry involving deacons and elders (the latter also called bishops or pastors). But this pattern is not taught as normative for the church. The New Testament does not prescribe a specific form of church organization. What it does teach is that the church should do all things decently and in order for the purpose of building up the whole church (1 Corinthians 14). The precise form of that ordering has varied in the history of the church and among Mennonite Brethren.

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

The article on the “Nature of the Church” is one of the key elements in our Confession of Faith. Because Mennonite Brethren are, with other Anabaptist groups, part of the Believers Church tradition, what we say about the church is especially important in defining our identity. The Anabaptists came into existence in the sixteenth century because of concerns about the church, and the Mennonite Brethren Church was formed 300 years later for similar reasons. Our self-description as a Believers Church distinguishes us from those who practice infant baptism and puts us in the company of followers of Jesus who insist that being part of the church requires a personal surrender to the Lord.

The church plays a central role in the writings of the New Testament. When Jesus said that he would build his church, he was establishing the primary institution through which God has chosen to do His work in this world. The church of Christ is God’s agent of redemption in the world. Like many denominations, Mennonite Brethren are grappling with the issues of maintaining biblical principles regarding the nature of the church while being relevant in our post-Christian context. Article 6 summarizes our understanding of the church.

Membership and Commitment

The church does not choose whom God will call into its membership. We receive people into church membership who confess salvation through faith in Christ, obey his command to be baptized, and submit themselves to our Confession of Faith. We believe that joining the church as a member is an important expression of a commitment to a covenant relationship. At the minimum, this covenant is a declaration that “these are my people, and I am a part of this family of believers.”

Though the church ministers in the world, the New Testament calls believers to be different than the world. This kind of separation is based on our understanding of holiness. The church needs to model and display the character of holiness, which immediately marks a distinction from the world. Separation to God and to holiness is part of what it means to be the church. This develops as God’s people gather regularly to minister to each other and worship God. (See portions on worship in the Article 1 pastoral application.)

Racism and Reconciliation

Racial hatred and division are serious issues for the church to address in our time. Various governmental and educational attempts at racial reconciliation have not produced significant results. The reason for this is these programs cannot touch the heart of a person, the root of the problem of racism. But the church of Christ, with its message of hope and reconciliation, can indeed make a difference. The church is perhaps the only body on this earth that can demonstrate in its own membership the ability to cross racial and cultural lines. Almost every community in North America is being inhabited and impacted by people of different races. The pastoral interpreter of the confession must contend seriously with this matter, seeking to pray for, teach, and demonstrate the reconciling power of the gospel. If the church does not move to confront racial division and demonstrate an alternative, our message cannot be taken seriously.

Cooperation with Other Christian Groups

Mennonite Brethren believe in cooperating with other Christian groups. We have supported various evangelical and inter-denominational bodies such as the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the National Association of Evangelicals. We cooperate with such groups willingly. More difficult, however, is the matter of cooperating with those who are Christian and whose political or social agendas we endorse, but whose theology makes us uncomfortable. Should we join forces to oppose abortion, for example, with those who do not view Christ as we do? Should we fight crime in our neighbourhoods by entering into alliances with those whose theology is questionable to us? These are matters that cannot be answered in a general way, but become part of the responsibility and discernment of the local Mennonite Brethren church as it establishes an identity in its community.

Baptism in the Spirit and Use of Spiritual Gifts

Mennonite Brethren believe that the Holy Spirit is received at the time of conversion, and that the gift of the Spirit is not a second experience subsequent to salvation. We do believe in the continual and repeated “filling with the Holy Spirit.” Those who give leadership in our churches need to teach what is consistent with Mennonite Brethren understanding and practice in this area.

We believe in spiritual gifts. Given the contemporary concern about overly busy schedules and potential “burnout,” individual Christians need to be given opportunity to discover and use their gifts both for the building up of others and their own fulfillment. Churches that follow some pattern of gift discernment find that their people serve with more enthusiasm and a greater sense of fruitfulness. The understanding of the gifts must be fleshed

out by leaders who are committed to preparing God's people for works of service. The church must encourage, equip, and empower people to use their spiritual gifts in ministry. Ministry is defined here as much more than merely serving on boards or committees. Ministry is not performed only by pastors. All Christians are ministers.

Our understanding of giftedness is important when the local church discerns leaders. Leaders should be chosen on the basis of gifts and character. Success in the world does not guarantee that a person is spiritually gifted for leadership in the church.

For many years, Mennonite Brethren generally discouraged the use of sign gifts, perhaps as a reaction to extreme pentecostalism. Today, however, use of all gifts is encouraged in most of our congregations. The practice of all gifts needs to be for the sake of the building up of the body of Christ, the church, and according to the principles given in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. It is understood that no gift is essential for every Christian to have, and also that no Christian has all of the gifts by him or herself.

The Relationship of Local Church and Conference

Each congregation regulates its own affairs, but also affiliates with the denomination. The work of the church is to be conducted in a spirit of interdependence, love, and submission to one another. In practice, this becomes difficult when individuals or congregations operate with an overly independent spirit. It becomes especially awkward when a local church is having internal problems, as over doctrinal issues or the style of pastoral leadership. Pastors and local churches need to understand that because we have covenanted to be a conference together, we are also accountable to each other. When those charged with conference leadership sense a concern in the affairs of a local church and feel a need to intervene, the members of the local church should open themselves to such intervention. At the same time, members and leaders of the local church should feel freedom to invite conference leaders to assist in the resolution of difficult problems. Mutual accountability is part of the Christian life.

A congregation will sometimes appeal to its members to give the local church priority in their giving because all members have made a commitment to that church. Can that same local church, with integrity, hold back giving to ministries we have committed ourselves to as a conference? The covenant community extends beyond the local church.

Accountability in the Local Church

There is another kind of accountability in the local church, the accountability of church members to and for each other. In an increasingly diverse society,

it is important for people who join a local church to understand that they have agreed to make themselves accountable to each other in a number of areas involving personal, spiritual, family, moral, business, ethical, and other matters. Through the preaching and example of church leaders, mutual accountability based on our commitment to be a covenant community needs to be taught and practiced. Pastors need to make themselves accountable to their leaders at the conference level, and in turn church members need to be accountable to their local church leaders. Someone involved in wrongdoing once told her pastor, “I am glad I am not a member so that the church can’t discipline me.” Some years later after a change of heart, she came to the pastor and asked to join the church. Her reason for seeking membership was to be held accountable, recognizing that accountability was necessary for her protection and growth. All members of our churches should have such an understanding.

Church discipline is part of accountability. Where a Christian is believed to be involved in sinful actions, fellow believers or church leaders need to lovingly approach that person in accordance with biblical principles. It is not easy to practice both judgment and mercy, but that is the goal of all disciplinary action. Church discipline for Mennonite Brethren has changed from a time when it was often harsh to a day when it is often lax or even nonexistent. It is time to recover a healthier balance. The congregation has freedom to intervene in the lives of its members because of the covenantal nature of the local church.

Organization of the Local Church

Mennonite Brethren do not have a prescribed pattern for organization of a local body of believers. Congregations choose their own form of government and their own structure of leadership. While most MB churches are governed by some form of elder board or church council, in all these the larger congregation is given voice and involvement in making major decisions. The brother and sisterhood of believers implies that local churches take the time to discuss matters of direction and organization among the members of the congregation, rather than implementing changes solely by decision of a few. Open communication usually enhances the ownership of new ideas and plans. While it takes extra time to secure agreement of the congregation on a new direction, it often leads to greater involvement and commitment in the long run. The Scriptures describe the church as a *body* and a *family*. Both terms speak of communication and clarity between the members involved. Within such guidelines, each local church can determine the patterns of organization and leadership which best serve its needs.