

## ARTICLE 6

# Nature of the Church <sup>1</sup>

### Called by God

We believe the church is the people called by God through Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> People who respond in faith are united with the local congregation by the public confession of baptism.<sup>3</sup> Church members commit themselves to follow Christ in a life of discipleship and witness as empowered by the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

### Body of Christ

The church is one body of believers, male and female, from every nation, race and class.<sup>5</sup> The head of this body is Christ.<sup>6</sup> The church, united by the one Spirit, makes Christ visible in the world.<sup>7</sup> The church exists as local bodies of believers and as a worldwide community of faith.<sup>8</sup>

### Worship

The church is nourished and renewed as God's people gather regularly to glorify God.<sup>9</sup> The early church gathered on the first day of the week to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> As the church observes baptism, and the Lord's Supper, it proclaims the good news of salvation.\*<sup>12</sup>

### 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

## **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. <sup>16</sup>

God calls people to equip the church for ministry.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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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.

## Preamble

The NFLT is working on an on-going project to update the existing resources (viz., Commentary and Pastoral Application) connected to our 1999 MB Confession of Faith. We are excited about this new project which will provide “Explanatory Notes” for almost every sentence of the actual Confession. In addition, we are replacing the Pastoral Application with what will be called “Living the Confession (FAQs).” While these resources do not carry the same authority as that of our Confession, we hope that these resources can provide significant help for our pastors/leaders, others within our congregations, folks interested in our MB theological convictions, and finally for prospective credentialing candidates as they move toward credentialing and leadership in our MB family.

We have already approved and printed a number of revised resources (viz., Article 8: Explanatory Notes and Living the Confession (FAQs); Article 1: Explanatory Notes; Article 2: Explanatory Notes). The NFLT has given approval in principle to Article 6: Explanatory Notes and Living the Confession (FAQs) and is seeking input from all of our Provincial Faith and Life Teams and other interested individuals so that this resource can be the most helpful to our wider family.

We are asking for input related to several larger questions: Is the particular note helpful in clarifying the statement made in the Confession—or is there something that should be added? Are there verse references that should be added or deleted? Is there any topic that needs to be added (note: our Confession has 18 Articles so there are other articles that might address what is missing but we are happy to hear what you think is missing). Does the response to an FAQ reflect well our convictions?

The best way to provide feedback is to explain how your comments relate to a specific note or FAQ. Please send feedback to [ken.esau@mbchurches.ca](mailto:ken.esau@mbchurches.ca). We hope to move forward with final approval of these resources in Fall of 2024, so feedback is welcome at any point over the next months.

Thank you for your help (and for your prayers) as we undertake this project. While we are glad to have you share this DRAFT with others who might be able to provide helpful feedback, please do not post this online or distribute it widely at this point.

Ken Esau (National Faith & Life Director)

<sup>1</sup>The MB Confession devotes Articles 6-9 to the church **because of the church's prominence in the New Testament, in God's mission, and in the Believers Church/Anabaptist tradition.**

**First, the church plays a prominent role in the writings of the New Testament where the key word *ekklesia* is used 110 times in reference to the church.** After the life of Jesus recorded in the four Gospels, Acts 2 describes the day of Pentecost and the dramatic birth and growth of the church (Acts 2:1-47). The focus of all the New Testament writings is the church. Every New Testament book, even those addressed to individuals (e.g., 1, 2 Tim), emphasizes building up the body of believers. As valuable as personal spiritual nurture of the individual believer is, the New Testament was primarily written to and for the church.

**Second, the MB Confession has four articles related to the church because it is hard to overemphasize the role of the church in God's mission of bringing the Kingdom to earth as it is in heaven (Matt 4:23; 6:10; 10:7; 24:14; Luke 4:43).** God's Kingdom is what Jesus came to announce was now coming and present in his ministry. God's Kingdom is where God reigns as Creator, Redeemer, and King over all creation and where the spiritual and physical powers in opposition to God's Kingdom have been defeated. God's Kingdom is where God reigns as Creator, Redeemer, and King in the midst of his people who respond to his grace and love with repentance, worship, and obedience. God's Kingdom is most evident as his people model God's character and purposes to the watching world. The New Testament declares the following truths about God's Kingdom:

1. **Jesus has overcome all competing powers in heaven and on earth, has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth," and is now the rightful King over all creation and therefore worthy of all worship, praise, and adoration** (Matt 28:18; Acts 7:56). Because of God's work in Jesus, God's Kingdom is present and active in the world in a real way right now bringing everything into subjection under Jesus's feet (1 Cor 15:20-28) and welcoming people to become Kingdom citizens who experience life to the full in Jesus (John 10:10). While God's Kingdom is growing and advancing today, it is not fully present, so we wait in hope for its full coming at the final return of King Jesus (Matt 3:2; 10:7; Luke 17:21).
2. **God's Kingdom has at its center the creation of a Kingdom people from all nations saved by Jesus and indwelt with God's presence through the Holy Spirit.** This Kingdom people participates in God's mission of bringing everything into subjection under Jesus's feet. This is accomplished most directly by prayer and worship in honour of King Jesus; by seeking first God's Kingdom and his righteousness (Matt 6:33);

by embodying the values and priorities of the Kingdom; by doing good deeds in the world; and by inviting all people to salvation and discipleship in Jesus (Matt 16:17-20; 28:16-20).

3. **God's Kingdom is embodied and displayed to the world when God's people embrace a new way of living that attunes to the character and purposes of God pointing toward ultimate human and creational life/flourishing.** Scripture is the foundational source for articulating God's Kingdom ethic (2 Tim 3:16-17). This Kingdom ethic prioritizes the reality of God's active presence in the world (Matt 28:20); the pursuit of both love of God and love of neighbour (Matt 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37), and the priority of God's Kingdom over all other allegiances (Matt 6:33). The faithful church worships and gives primary allegiance to a different King, lives by the ethics of a different Kingdom, and has a different hope for how the story will end. By these actions, the church challenges and dethrones the physical and spiritual structures and powers of this age ("the gates of Hades will not overcome it" [Matt 16:18]) and is a present witness to and embodiment of the future coming of the Kingdom of God in its fullness.

While God's Kingdom is universally present across the cosmos and specifically across our world, it is not universally welcomed, acknowledged, and pursued. This is why the people of God, Old Testament and then New Testament, are at the centre of God's Kingdom because God's people welcome, acknowledge, and pursue both King Jesus and the Kingdom that Jesus brought, is bringing, and will fully bring when he returns again. God's Kingdom is larger than the church, but the Kingdom is most evidently present in the midst of his gathered people who worship, serve, and declare his name in the world.

The church is not a building or a human institution but the very "body of Christ" (Christ here means Messiah or King). As the body, the church is the only collection of people in the world called and empowered to embrace, declare in words, and embody these truths about God's Kingdom. The church is symbolically the "firstfruits" of the new creation (2 Thess 2:13; Jas 1:18) displaying the nature and beauty of the future Kingdom in the present.

Scripture paints a highly exalted portrait of the nature and mission of the church in God's Kingdom mission. The church is not an optional add-on for individual disciples of Jesus but is central to God's Kingdom work in the world. When Jesus said that he would build his church (Matt 16:18), he was establishing the primary means through which God has chosen to model and embody his Kingdom in this world as God's agent of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-19).

**Third, the MB Confession has four articles about the church because**

**our larger Anabaptist tradition highlights the centrality of the church in Christian discipleship.** As the “Introduction to the MB Confession of Faith” (2023) states:

*We are...unashamedly Anabaptist, which identifies us with a long tradition of churches centred on and seeking to live daily into greater obedience to Jesus. By means of the filling of the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18; Gal 5:22-23) and the power and character that the Holy Spirit produces, we seek to be the kind of faithful community demonstrating sacrificial discipleship that we find in the book of Acts. There are at least two significant implications of this Anabaptist heritage. The first is that we value practical and costly discipleship in the way of Jesus. Articles 10-16 describe this day-to-day path of discipleship, and these articles are not an afterthought or an appendix to our Confession of Faith. The second is that we understand discipleship as necessarily lived in the context of a Jesus-worshipping church community. Discipleship is not a solitary walk with Jesus. The church community does not gather merely to assist individual disciples in their spiritual growth, but it gathers to be the signpost of God's Kingdom on earth drawing people to Jesus until he returns. Articles 6-9 speak about the nature, mission, and ordinances of the church. We believe that being committed to practical and costly discipleship in the context of healthy Jesus-centred and Kingdom-focused church communities is essential for being good news people and part of our fundamental identity as an MB family.*

Because of these three realities (the pervasiveness of the church in the New Testament; the centrality of the church to God's Kingdom mission in the world; the importance of the church in Anabaptist theology and ethics) the MB Confession of Faith gives a prominent place to the nature (Article 6), mission (Article 7), and ordinances (Article 8,9) of the church.

A challenge for us as we describe the nature (Article 6) and mission (Article 7) of the church is that the New Testament does not provide us with a concise summary of these items but teaches us about the church (also known as “ecclesiology”) by means of a collection of rich and varied metaphors. As John E. Toews notes: “New Testament ecclesiology is metaphorical, not doctrinal” (“The Nature of the Church,” *Direction* [18:2 Fall 1989], 11). He then goes on to identify 73 images for the church most of which fit under one of four main categories:

- **People of God images (e.g., chosen race, holy nation, twelve tribes, flock, sheep, Jerusalem)** link the New Testament church with the story and identity of the people of Israel in the Old Testament (e.g., holy nation, chosen race [1 Pet 2:9-10]). They also emphasize God's presence (temple [1 Cor 3:16-17]) and his care for his people (sheep [1 Pet 5:1-4]).
- **Community images (e.g., saints, faithful ones, righteous ones,**

**household of God**) point to a “community of disciples” (Acts 6:2) who are set apart from the world (e.g., the Way [Acts 9:1-2], saints [1 Cor 1:2]). These terms, which are always plural, demonstrate that the Christian life is not meant to be a solo journey but a life in community.

- **Cosmic images (e.g., new creation, first fruits, new humanity)** highlight the inbreaking of the new creation (2 Cor 5:16-17) through the work of the Holy Spirit.
- **Body images (e.g., body of Christ)** highlight how each person is “in Christ” as a member of the body attached to Christ, the Head (Gal 3:26-29; 1 Cor 12:12-13; Eph 4:15-16). This reflects the unity and diversity of the church where every believer is part of the body, yet each member has different gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to build up the ministry and mission of the church (1 Cor 12:4-11, 14-31).

Toews also highlights a number of other images that do not fit neatly into one of these four categories (e.g., Church as letter, bride of Christ, building, foreign embassy). The conclusion is that this New Testament diversity of images should teach us to appreciate the richness of the nature of the church that no one image can adequately capture. While these images are powerful conveyors of truth, they uniformly point beyond the church itself to God and specifically Jesus Christ, the “creator of God’s church,” whose story “defines the nature of the church” (23). [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>2</sup>This conviction highlights three things. **First, the Greek word *ekklesia*, translated into English as “church,” comes from two roots that together mean “called out ones” or “called together ones.”** However, the biblical word is used in the New Testament primarily in reference to the people of God assembled into a group. *Ekklesia* is in direct continuity with the Hebrew word *qahal* which is used in the Old Testament over 100 times to refer to the assembled people of God. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), *qahal* is normally translated using the Greek term *ekklesia* (Deut 4:10, 9:10). In the New Testament, the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost formed the church as the believers who gathered and confessed Jesus as Lord (Acts 2:38-42; cf. Matt 16:13-20).

**Whatever we say about the New Testament “church,” we cannot forget that being called and assembled as the people of God for a purpose is key to the church’s very DNA.** The church is not a human social club or simply a group of like-minded people. The accent is on God’s call rather than on human effort since God is the initiator and creator of the church. God creates a people (1 Pet 2:9-12; Rom 9:25-26) who belong to him as his “special possession.” The people of God in the New Testament include all true believers, both Jew and Gentile (Gal 3:26-28). This assembled group

replaces the Jerusalem temple as the place where God dwells by his Spirit (1 Cor 6:19; 3:16-17; Eph 2:21). The church as a people, not the temple as a physical building, is “God’s house” (Heb 3:6). Peter calls the church “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9).

**Second, the direct connection between the New Testament Greek word *ekklesia* and the Old Testament Hebrew word *qahal* should ensure that we recognize that the church has its roots much earlier than Acts 2.** John E. Toews (“The Nature of the Church,” *Direction* [18; 2], 1989) notes four points of continuity between the NT church and the OT people of God.

- The church’s calling out really began with God calling out Israel from slavery in Egypt.
- The church is not a brand-new community but a “renewed” people of God embracing God’s Kingdom.
- The church is the renewed “rock” (Matt 16:17-19) where God protects, saves, and overcomes the gates of Hades.
- Lastly, the church is the community of binding and loosing (Matt 18:15-20) as the church together discerns how to live as the people of God in the world.

**Third, the church is called by God through Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.** The Triune relational nature of God is central to the identity, nature, and mission of the church. There is no New Testament church without God’s call (1 Cor 1:2). There is no New Testament church without the centrality of Jesus Christ through whom we have “adoption to sonship” (Eph 1:5) and “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (1:7; cf. Col 1:13-14). Because of this, Jesus is the “head” of the church (Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:22; Col 1:18). The resurrected and ascended Jesus is present to the church and empowers the church by means of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2; Rom 8:9-17). [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>3</sup>There are three key implications of this statement:

**First, every believer is to become part of the church.** Article 6 does not say “some people who respond in faith” or “some very spiritually mature people who respond in faith” are to become part of the church. As the “Introduction to the MB Confession of Faith” (2023) describes:

*...it was not God’s purpose to produce scattered and solo disciples floundering along in isolation. Rather, God has brought disciples of Jesus together into a new family called the church (“the body of Christ” 1 Cor 12:27) so they can play a key role in God’s Kingdom story as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” (1 Pet 2:9). To be “in Christ” means*



*we have been baptized into one body, His church, by His Spirit. Our identity in Christ means that we are to live out our discipleship in the context of a local community (Acts 2:42; 6:2), which is a part of the larger body of Christ in the world....*

**Second, every person responding to Christ in faith is to be baptized.** Baptism is a visible testimony to what God has done in one's life and is the means by which the local church family incorporates followers of Jesus (see Article 8: Baptism).

**Third, the focus here is on becoming part of a local congregation that physically gathers together for worship, teaching, the breaking of bread, fellowship, prayer, and mission.** While the "universal church" is the collective term for all believers throughout history, individual disciples of Jesus are called to inclusion and participation in a specific local congregation which represents the universal church in its context.

Article 6 assumes that every believer is to be baptized which is the entry point to a mutually accountable covenant-like relationship with a local church family. This relationship has traditionally been referred to as being a "member" of the church. [[Return to article](#)]

**<sup>4</sup>Baptism is intended to unite new believers with a local congregation so that they are part of a community that cares about their discipleship growth.** Newly baptized believers need the church family just like newborn children are dependent on their parents. "Member" language describes how individuals can fully belong, identify with, and participate in the body of Christ (cf. Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-27). But local church membership is more organic than institutional; more relational than legal. Membership language is intended as a way of recognizing the new relational commitment of love, mutual obligation, nurture, and accountability that now exists. It clarifies what spiritual family and covenant mean for people who have become brothers and sisters since they now share the same Father and Lord. For more on the meaning of "membership," see FAQ#10 in Article 8: Living the Confession (FAQs).

Individual church members covenant themselves to live out discipleship and witness within the local church community, while the church (as a collective group) covenants to express care, nurture, and accountability to each individual member. As a spiritual family, members are to treat others in the community as valued brothers and sisters (2 Cor 13:11; 1 Thess 4:9-10; 1 John 3:16). **Having a way to express who has entered into this relational commitment (known traditionally as "membership") should help the congregation assist each baptized believer's growth in discipleship and help the congregation in its overall mission effectiveness.**

But this full relational commitment from the church to the individual (also called “membership” or “covenant community”) is predicated upon the individual believer a) repenting and responding in faith (cf. Acts 17:30; Rom 5:1; Eph 4:5), b) being baptized upon that confession of faith (Acts 2:38), c) desiring to join with and serve in a local church family, d) and committing themselves to “follow Christ in a life of discipleship and witness as empowered by the Holy Spirit” (Matt 16:24; John 16:13; Acts 1:8; 1 Thess 1:5; Titus 1:16; Jude 1:4). The church at its core is to be a group of baptized disciples of Jesus gathering to worship Jesus and live out God’s mission in the world. [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>5</sup>Article 6 highlights several implications that grow out of this body of Christ image. The first of these is expressed here: **“The church is one body of believers, male and female, from every nation, race and class.”** Since we are one body and not multiple bodies, any male/female and national/racial/class identities are necessarily subordinated to our profound shared unity under the lordship of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-31; Gal 3:26-28; Col 3:11). It is this shared unity where people who are foreigners and strangers to each other become fellow citizens and united members of God’s family that is part of the miracle of the gospel (Eph 2:11-22). The church’s calling is to be a community that makes “disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19; cf. Acts 15) welcoming them into the family of belonging regardless of the dividing lines that existed earlier. Christians have been given the “ministry of reconciliation, that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Cor 5:18-19).

This ministry of reconciliation means that the local church, as an embodied sign of God’s Kingdom, invites all people to repent, experience God’s forgiveness, and become part of God’s new family. **As this embodied sign, the church, both local and universal, demonstrates in its own membership the ability to transcend male/female, racial, cultural, ethnic, language, class/caste, and national divisions (Gal 3:26-28; Col 3:11).** Because of the empowering work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48), the church is to live today as God’s in-breaking New Creation, leaning into God’s Kingdom future where we find “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9).

**Inclusion in Christ’s “one body” is based on one’s identification with Jesus who is the only source of salvation and redemption (see Article 5), one’s commitment to walk in the way of Jesus (see Articles 10-16), and one’s desire to be incorporated and live in the local church’s mutually committed relationship—all symbolized together in baptism (see Article 8).** Inclusion is based not on one’s former identity or social standing but upon the “child of God” status bestowed on a believer by the saving and

gracious work of Jesus (John 1:12-13; Gal 3:26; 1 John 3:1-2). Everyone who has put their faith in Jesus, is “in Christ” (Rom 6:3-5). The New Testament opposes any sort of second class belonging (cf. Acts 6:1-6) based on other dividing lines, because church families should make “every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). Keeping the unity of the Spirit and transcending these human dividing lines should lead to renewed gospel witness in the world (cf. John 17:1-26; Acts 6:7; 15:1-35). [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>6</sup>Another implication of the church as the “body of Christ” is that Christ is “head” of the body. This leads us to greater understandings about the nature of the church:

**First, Christ is head over all things.** All things were created through Christ, and he has all authority over every ruler, principality, and power (Col 1:15-18; Eph 1:20-21; Matt 28:18). Yet Christ has been made head over all things “for the church” (Eph 1:22-23) and the church is called to submit to Christ in everything (Eph 5:24). At the “head” of the church is our victorious King who lived and died for the church. This profound truth should lead us to worship, service, obedience, and mission (see notes 9-12).

**Second, the head and body are integrally connected.** Christ as head fills the body and the body grows up into the head (Eph 1:22-23; 4:15-16). As members of Christ’s body, we are united with Christ—head and body are “one flesh” (Eph 5:30-32; 1 Cor 6:16-17).

**Third, as head, Jesus modeled a life of love**—giving up himself on behalf of the church, nurturing, and tenderly caring for his body (Eph 5:2, 25-29). Jesus provides the model for his body to grow into his image, becoming more and more like him (Eph 4:12-13). [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>7</sup>This implication of the church as the “body of Christ” produces three key results.

**First, the church is united.** As mentioned in note 5, the church is a diverse group from every tribe and nation who come together in reconciliation because of Jesus. This means that the “global church” shares a unity that transcends geography, culture, and national identities. The “regional church” in a province/state, city, town, and/or region shares this unity—and a local church shares this unity.

**Second, it is the one Spirit who unifies the church (Eph 4:3-6).** This unity is not ultimately through human effort, determination, or political will. It is only possible through the work of the divine Spirit.

**Third, it is this Holy Spirit unity, defying human explanation, that unifies the church and makes Christ visible in the world (John 17:20-23).**

The church's very shape, ethos, structure, good works, worship patterns, and message proclaim Christ to the watching world (1 Pet 2:9-12). Everything the local church is, does, and says is to demonstrate to the world Christ's alternative way of living life and being human. (See Article 7)

The unity of the church is a spiritual reality but one that still needs to be embraced and lived out: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). A couple during their marriage ceremony may be proclaimed a unity ("one flesh"), but they must choose each and every day to live into the reality of what was proclaimed over them. In the same way, the church (global, regional, and local) and every individual congregant and leader must make every effort to keep this unity.

Keeping the unity of the Spirit involves actively embracing actions and convictions that produce unity (and refusing to embrace everything that undermines this unity). The following are components of Christian unity:

1. **The unity of shared worship.** Active unity is possible as Christians together bow down before King Jesus in prayer, worship, confession, and covenant renewal.
2. **The unity of a redeemed identity.** Active unity is possible as Christians embrace their redeemed identity in Christ as children of God, citizens of God's Kingdom, and family members within the Body of Christ. This active unity means that Christians embrace love rather than hostility, forgiveness rather than retribution, and generosity rather than greed.
3. **The unity of shared convictions.** Active unity is possible as Christians embrace shared core theological/ethical convictions about the Triune God, the gospel, salvation, the church, discipleship, and the *telos*/goal of the biblical story.
4. **The unity of a shared mission/purpose.** Active unity is possible as Christians embrace their mission to live out God's Kingdom purposes articulated throughout the biblical story and particularly through the Great Commission and the Great Commandment (see Article 7).
5. **The unity of shared hope.** Active unity comes from shared hope as Christians lean into the promise that Jesus will one day come to restore all things. While the church experiences sin, failure, woundedness, and persecution in the present, it continues to embrace both forgiveness and hope because of what Jesus has promised.

The reality of church unity is that while it is lived out to varying degrees at all three levels of the church (global, regional, and local), it must be embraced most strongly at the local church level. This is the church that the watching world is most likely to observe. Often local churches who share high levels of unity in each of these five areas often come together into denominational families (or denominational families plant local churches

that reflect these high levels of unity). High levels of unity tend to produce local and denominational families who work together well and pursue their mission/purpose well. [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>8</sup>The “body of Christ” language is also expressed in the New Testament in three different but closely related ways: first, there is the universal body of Christ, which is expressed both globally and now historically over the centuries (Col 1:18); second, there is the collective group of local churches who are the body of Christ in a city or region (Acts 8:1); and finally, there is body of Christ expressed in the local gathering of believers (1 Cor 16:19).

Local churches are not isolated entities but are part of the larger reality of God’s church worldwide. **All local churches that identify with Jesus Christ and his Kingdom mission, are part of God’s universal church and thus are “family” members with all other churches, creating a worldwide unity of brothers and sisters in Christ** (cf. Matt 12:50; Phil 4:21). Strangers who are disciples of Jesus are actually spiritual family members worshipping the same Jesus and working together on the same mission (3 John 1:5). See Note 3.

**As a part of this reality, many individual churches have joined together into denominations and networks because of their shared theological convictions, histories, and missional leanings.** This fits the New Testament’s use of “church” that refers to a group of churches in a region. These larger groupings of local churches provide intentional relational connections, mutual support and accountability around theology and ethics, and opportunity for shared educational and missional endeavors not sustainable for a single local church. [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>9</sup>**This section begins with “Worship” as the heading.** Worship is not simply about individual or corporate rituals, the singing of songs, or even practicing spiritual disciplines. Worship in both the Old and New Testaments often involved a physical posture of “bowing down” (Hebrew root *shachab*; Greek *proskuneo*; cf. Gen 22:5; 24:52; 1 Sam 1:3; Matt 2:11; 4:9). Bowing down is a powerful posture that physically demonstrates valuing the other, submission to the other, and service for the other. Worship, therefore, is about a heart posture of bowing down before God’s throne, a vocalization of words that express valuing and glorification of Jesus, and a renewed commitment to live in a way that is consistent with the character and mission of Jesus.

Article 6 is focused specifically on corporate worship because it is at the core of the church’s nature and purpose. As N.T. Wright notes in *Simply Christian*: “The church exists primarily for two closely related purposes: to worship God and to work for his kingdom in the world” (HarperOne, 2018, 211). Even though New Testament church gatherings are not referred to

specifically as “worship services,” the gatherings seem to have included the elements that we normally associate with corporate worship (hymns; psalms; songs from the Spirit; word of instruction; etc. cf. 1 Cor 14:26; Col 3:16).

Acts 2:42 describes the first believers devoting themselves “to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” The text goes on to mention them breaking bread together and praising God as they met together in their homes (vv. 46-47). Acts 13:2 describes the church at Antioch “worshiping the Lord and fasting.” 1 Corinthians 14:26 describes how church gatherings involved “a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.” The regular gathering of the church body participating in these activities contributes to the long-term nourishing and renewal of the church. Corporate worship activities nourish and renew the church in the following ways:

**First, corporate worship activities reinforce affection, zeal, and the glorifying of God.** Corporate worship is part of God’s work of removing from us a “heart of stone” (a hard heart) and giving us a “heart of flesh” (a soft heart) (cf. Ezek 11:19). Some of the biblical words translated as “glorify” (Hebrew *kabod*; Greek *doxa*) are about making God “heavy” or “weighty” which is a metaphorical way of saying “important” (Ps 22:23; 86:9; Matt 5:16; John 12:28). Glorifying God involves making God important, which can reduce the temptation to value other things that conflict with the worship or valuing of God.

**Second, corporate worship activities reinforce a posture of submission to God.** Romans 12:1 highlights that our “true and proper worship [or service]” is “to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.” True worship involves the submission of one’s body (viz., head, heart, hands, feet), one’s life (viz., time, gifts, skill, possessions), and one’s affections to the Creator of the Universe.

**Third, corporate worship activities dethrone idolatrous powers tempting humans to worship them instead.** In Matthew 4:9, Jesus refused to bow in worship before Satan who offered him the kingdoms of the world. Corporate worship activities focused on Jesus necessarily move our eyes and hearts away from all misplaced affections and idolatrous attachments. Worship involves glorifying God through words and actions that increase God’s importance in our lives and decenter and dethrone all competing affections and idolatrous attractions.

**Fourth, corporate worship activities nurture a heart that responds with ongoing obedience and service** (cf., Matt 4:10; Luke 4:8; Rom 12:1). The Hebrew word *abad* is usually translated as “serve” or “work” (e.g., Gen 30:26; Exod 21:2), but in reference to God (or to pagan idols) it can be translated interchangeably as “serve” or “worship” (e.g., Exod 3:12; 4:23;

7:16; 12:31; 23:24). Corporate worship and practical acts of obedience and service and closely connected.

While corporate worship activities may not seem to produce measurable outcomes toward a local church's goals or mission, these activities are key in nourishing, renewing, and forming the church, as well as energizing it toward its mission. [[Return to article](#)]

<sup>10</sup>While some newly converted Jesus disciples in the early church continued to meet in the Jerusalem temple or in synagogues on Saturday and in homes on the Sunday, meeting together on Sundays quickly became the pattern. This pattern has continued for most of the global church for the past two centuries. The first day of the week became known as “the Lord’s Day” (Rev 1:10) because it honoured the day of Jesus’s resurrection. For more on the Lord’s Day, see Article 16. [[Return to article](#)]

<sup>11</sup>**The worshipping church gathers for celebration, commitment making (e.g., baptism, the breaking of bread, renewal), mutual edification, mutual accountability, and teaching/discernment.** 1 Corinthians 14:26 describes how their gatherings involved “a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.” Acts 2:42 describes how at the very earliest stage of the church’s existence they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.” Additional components such as singing, thanksgiving, prophecy, and mutual edification are evident in other texts (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; 1 Cor 14).

The worshipping community is also about building up of the members of the body. This is a shared responsibility by all those who identify as members of that community. Paul declares in Romans 12:3-8 that each member “belongs to all the others” (v.5) and has gifts for the building up of the church (cf. Eph 4:1-16).

The worshipping community seeks God’s will for its life and mission. The church must live in a posture of prayer and community discernment as it reads Scripture together and listens to the Holy Spirit about its life and mission. [[Return to article](#)]

<sup>12</sup>Baptism (see Article 8) and the Lord’s Supper (see Article 9) are sacred corporate actions with significant spiritual meaning. **While these actions are sacred and meaningful, the MB church refers to baptism and the Lord’s Supper as “ordinances” rather than “sacraments.”** These ordinances are significant symbolic actions that are neither merely individual “remembrances” of something that happened in a person’s past nor “sacraments” that impart divine grace to individuals. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are very important

actions that witness to spiritual realities as they build up, strengthen, and renew both individuals and the church corporately in its calling and mission. These ordinances shape individuals and the whole community as they express and re-enact profound realities in God's Kingdom story.

The one-time participation in baptism for the Christian disciple expresses and publicly celebrates the reality of God's great salvation in the life of that individual (viz., forgiveness and the movement from death to life, bondage to freedom), publicly demonstrates their full and loving inclusion into God's local church family, and publicly declares confidence that they have eternal hope with God both now and in the new creation.

The regular and repeated celebration of the Lord's Supper expresses and publicly proclaims the reality of believers' participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the need for ongoing individual and corporate confession, forgiveness, and covenant renewal within the church community. The Lord's Supper is a symbolic meal that anticipates future participation in the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19:6-10). Both baptism and the Lord's Supper speak powerfully in word and deed about God's good news for the world.

**A note at the end of Article 6 mentions the practice of footwashing as a "meaningful reminder of the humility, loving service, and personal cleansing that is to characterize the relationship of members within the church."** Getting down on one's knees to wash the feet of another disciple of Jesus is certainly a significant symbolic action that demonstrates humility, loving service, and personal cleansing. When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples in John 13:1-20, he set aside the privileges of power and modeled true servanthood and commanded his followers to follow his example (cf. v.15). As a result, and in alignment with the model and words of Jesus here, some local MB churches (and numerous other churches and denominations worldwide) practise this regularly. While footwashing was a regular practice among Mennonite Brethren in the past, it is not recognized as an official MB ordinance along with baptism and the Lord's Supper. (For more discussion about footwashing and its place in MB churches today, see "Article 6: Living the Confession (FAQs)"—Question 5.) [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>13</sup>**The church, local and global, is a "covenant community" or to use everyday language, a caring "family" (cf., John 1:12-13) with shared obligations and expectations (cf. John 13:34; Eph 4:1-6, 31-32; 1 Pet 4:8; 1 John 4:7-10).** A covenant community is a group who have entered a relationship of mutual obligation that is deeper than that expressed in a contract. Covenants involve a deep sense of mutual love, a commitment to



care for each other in spite of the shortcomings and failures of others in the group, and a long-term tenacious desire to stand with each other through whatever circumstances life brings. This is why the family metaphor fits so well for the church as a spiritual body with Christ as the head.

Covenant community members should seek to “spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together...” (Heb 20:24-25). Covenant community members should “encourage one another,” “live in peace” (2 Cor 13:11), “strive to do what is good for each other” (1 Thess 5:15), “encourage one another daily” (Heb 3:13), and “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Col 3:16). Covenant community stands in sharp contrast to the individualistic and independent leanings of our present culture.

**Covenant community in the way of Jesus is based on a foundation of sacrificial love.** The famous description of love found in 1 Corinthians 13 was originally addressed to congregations facing challenges in their relationships. A healthy covenant community needs a love that is patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, and not easily angered—the kind of love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. This Holy Spirit empowered mutual love that should exist between all church participants has implications for mutual support as well as mutual accountability. But accountability is meaningless with the presence of mutual submission.

The local church is meant to function in a similar way to a healthy family that practices mutual love, confession, forgiveness, and prayer for each member of the family; shares joys and burdens; assists with material needs as they arise; and admonishes and corrects in ways that are for each person’s ultimate well-being (see Acts 2:42-47).

**But healthy church life (like healthy family life) is often both beautiful and challenging.** Just as families can show incredible love, grace, forgiveness, and tenacious commitment, so the church family often demonstrates this by the power of the Holy Spirit. But just as families can be plagued with harmful behaviours and become dysfunctional, the church family is not immune from these challenges. The New Testament provides examples of churches plagued with selfishness (Phil 1:15-18), unconfessed sin (1 Cor 5), disunity (1 Cor 1:10-14), and the dangers of heresy (cf., 1 Tim 1:3-11). This is why church families constantly need to do the work of self-examination and allow the Holy Spirit to reveal sinful patterns and behaviours, so repentance, reconciliation, and renewal can happen. Article 6 is a description of what the local church *should* be like, utilizing the aspirational language of the New Testament writers. **Every local church will fail to live fully into this vision but should continually repent and seek to be the kind of family the New Testament calls it to be.** [[Return to article](#)]

<sup>14</sup>While individual disciples are in a family/covenant relationship of mutual love (John 13:34-35; Rom 12:10; 13:8; 1 Eph 4:1-6, 31-32; 1 Thess 4:9; 1 Pet 1:22; 1 John 4:7-10) and mutual accountability (Gal 6:1; Matt 18:15-20) with those in their local church, **Paul implies that each local church also has obligations of mutual generosity (Rom 15:26-29; 2 Cor 8-9) and mutual accountability with the larger church family (cf. 1 Cor 5).**

While local churches are spiritual brothers and sisters together living as a caring community of support and accountability, a local church should not be an island isolated from the larger family of spiritual brothers and sisters in the close vicinity and those further afield. It is natural then that local churches should come together into denominational groupings and networks for the purpose of gaining wisdom and insight from others, as well as to benefit from shared initiatives possible only through collaboration and cooperation (e.g., education, mission). [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>15</sup>**While this seems counter intuitive, redemptive church discipline (or formal church accountability) is a key component of being a loving spiritual family.** Redemptive church discipline is not about group power or control over individuals but about restoring the person “gently” (cf. Gal 6:1-5). Redemptive discipline is about actions intended to help us move back in the direction of Jesus so that we can “reject every kind of evil” (1 Thess 5:22), experience “life to the full” (John 10:10), and “be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:23).

If discipline is not motivated by the kind of love that searches for and rescues the “lost sheep” (Luke 15:4-7), it is not worthy of the name. Discipline stands up against all that steals, kills, and destroys—both in the life of the individual and in the life of the church corporately. This seems to be the only redemptive motivation for why Paul can say emphatically “Expel the wicked person from among you” (1 Cor 5:13). Neglecting discipline in cases of harm to the local church family and its witness in the world, is not a sign of how loving a church has become, but a sign of its lack of willingness to stand up against these destructive forces. **Doing nothing in such cases is neither loving nor gracious.**

Healthy, truly loving, and ultimately redemptive church discipline practices emerge from explicit New Testament teachings that exhort believers to be accountable to each other (Rom 12:3-8; Gal 6:1-5). Jesus provides a process for addressing sinful and destructive behaviours within the church (Matt 18:15-20). A faithful church cannot ignore Jesus’s direct instructions even though Holy Spirit wisdom is needed for each situation.

**Jesus instructed the church on how to be a disciplining community**

**(Matt 18:15-25) with a restorative/redemptive rather than a punitive purpose.** The goal is always to restore your brother/sister (Matt 18:15; cf. Gal 6:1-2; Eph 4:25; 1 Cor 5:1-8; 2 Cor 2:5-11). “To bind and to loose” (Matt 18:18) recognizes Jesus’s authoritative presence in the community as the church engages in a process of discernment and seeking consensus about what it means to be faithful.

**Mutual accountability that is redemptive for both the individual believer and the church family must be marked by a love that cares deeply for the well-being of the other while at the same time is faithful to the church’s identity and calling.** We must seek a heart of repentance and acknowledge that much of what has been practiced as accountability in our history has lacked this love and turned into something punitive rather than redemptive. But these historical failures must not stop us from aspiring to live into mutual accountability in the way of Jesus.

Church accountability is about obedience to God by loving and speaking humbly into each other’s lives, and inviting them to repentance, healing, and reconciliation. It is also about each of us hearing and respecting the voices of others who are doing the same for us because each of us will sin (Luke 17:1, Rom 3:23) and we may, at times, require intervention from the community of believers before choosing to repent (Matt 18:15-17).

However, those who “refuse to listen even to the church” (Matt 18:17) should no longer be treated as members of the community but as a “Gentile or a tax collector” (NRSV). This is not a permanent or irreversible declaration since it is not a person’s sin that leads to their formal placement outside the church family (if it were, no one would be worthy of inclusion in the church at all), but only their refusal to respond to the church’s invitation to repentance, healing, and reconciliation. But without a positive response to the invitation, the church must consider the person in the category of an outsider, visitor, or neighbour (viz., “Gentile or a tax collector”). **However, since Jesus, known as a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt 11:19), constantly expressed loving invitation to just such people and even ate with them, the church must never stop embodying this same loving invitation.** (For more on this, see “Article 6: Living the Confession (FAQs)”—Questions 8 and 9.) [[Return to article](#)]

<sup>161</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:5 describes “different kinds of gifts” which verse 7 calls a “manifestation of the Spirit” given to “each one” for the “common good.” Paul defines a “spiritual gift” as what happens when the Spirit is “manifested” through a believer in order to build others up. 1 Corinthians 12-14 highlight how all these gifts are to be exercised in the context of love. These three chapters provide key implications for how spiritual gifts should function

in the church today:

First, because all believers (male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, etc.) have received the Holy Spirit, **each and every believer has at least one of these gifts given for ministry in the church and in the world** (cf. 1 Cor 12:11; 1 Pet 4:10). Therefore, the hope is that every believer will become a member of a local church using their gift(s) “to build up the church and to minister in the world.” Local churches wanting to function at the highest capacity will need to encourage widespread involvement from each and every member as they use their individual spiritual gifts.

**Second, the Spirit has distributed church leadership gifts (e.g., apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, pastors, cf. Eph 4:11-12) to many people rather than concentrating them on only one or two individuals.** Therefore, local church leadership structures should include multiple leaders who meet together regularly to pray, discern, and serve the congregation, rather than placing all leadership and decision making into the hands of only one leader.

**Third, no one should take individual credit for the spiritual gift they have received since this would be a fundamental denial of the nature of a “gift” (cf. 1 Cor 12:11).** While we want to be people of gratitude to those serving well in our churches (cf. Heb 13:17), excessive veneration of certain individuals with very public spiritual gifts loses sight of how God’s gifts have been given for the well-being of the church and its mission (cf. 1 Cor 3:21-4:1). Disciples of Jesus have been given gifts so that “in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 4:11). The emphasis is on the praising of God and the building up of the body.

**Fourth, all spiritual gifts are to be exercised in the “way of love” (1 Cor 14:1; cf. 13:1-3) “to serve others” (1 Pet 4:10).** Gifts are to nurture and strengthen the entire church rather than function to benefit solely the one entrusted with the gift (Phil 2:3-4). Individuals who lose sight of this larger purpose are betraying the Holy Spirit’s purpose.

When all the New Testament texts about the Spirit’s gifts are brought together (1 Cor 12-14; Eph 4:11-16; Rom 12:3-8; 1 Pet 4:10-11), it becomes clear that the Bible does not provide a single comprehensive list of these gifts. It could well be that the Spirit gifts individual believers in many ways beyond those mentioned in the New Testament, based on the specific needs of the church at a given time.

**Some of the spiritual gifts, often called the “sign gifts” or “miraculous gifts,” have been the source of much debate and dispute in the history of the church (cf. 1 Cor 12:9-10).** These include the gifts of “tongues/languages” where the Holy Spirit gifts a believer with the ability to speak in an unlearned human language (cf. Acts 2:4-11) or possibly in an unlearned “angel” language (1 Cor 13:1; 14:1-2); the gift of interpretation of these

tongues/languages (1 Cor 14:27-28); the gift of miraculous powers where people experience healing through the prayers or actions of a human agent given this gift (1 Cor 12:9); and the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 13:2) where an individual is able to speak God's words into specific situations that leads to building up the body of Christ and to unbelievers being "convicted of sin" (1 Cor 14:24).

For many reasons, these gifts have been at the forefront of disputes between Christians. Many Christians argue that the Holy Spirit gave these gifts out during the very first days of the early church as recorded in Scripture, but the Holy Spirit has ceased giving them out to Christians today. Many other Christians argue that the Holy Spirit continues to distribute these spiritual gifts to faithful believers who are open to receiving these gifts. Although there is no uniform practice in local Mennonite Brethren churches around the praying for, reception of, and practice of the so-called "sign gifts," the MB Confession of Faith does not put any restrictions on these gifts. [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>17</sup>**The New Testament teaches that the church needs leaders** (Phil 1:1; Eph 4:11; 1 Tim 3). The purpose of church leadership is to equip, enable, and oversee the diversity of gifts God has given to the church through each member.

While it is positive for disciples of Jesus to "aspire" to serve as leaders in the church (1 Tim 3:1), God through the Holy Spirit is the one who calls people to lead in the Body of Christ and the leader's purpose should always be "to equip the church for ministry" (cf. Eph 4:11-13). While everyone in the church has been gifted by his Spirit to serve ("ministry" and "service" mean the same thing), Christ has gifted leaders specifically with the purpose of enabling others to use their gifts. The word "equip" can mean "to put in order," "to prepare," or "to restore," which carries the sense of coaching, training, and discipling (cf. Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians* [Herald Press, 2002], 183-184).

**Leadership in the church is not about power or ruling over others, but about serving others for their ultimate spiritual growth and well-being** (John 10:42-45; 13:12-17; Matt 20:25-28; Luke 22:25-26; Phil 2:3; 1 Pet 5:1-4). [\[Return to article\]](#)

<sup>18</sup>**This section of Article 6 highlights both the central priority of leaders to "model Christ" and the responsibility of each local church to discern leadership and affirm, support, and correct them.** The emphasis here is that church leaders' guiding leadership philosophy is to model Christ in their personal, family, and church life (1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). Church

leaders are called to take responsibility for a personal life of prayer, worship, community, integrity, service, and generosity that reflects that of Jesus. Christian leaders, single or married, must live out family obligations to those in their family circle in a way that reflects Jesus (cf. John 19:26-27). Christian leaders can model Christ in their church life by seeing themselves, above all else, as “servants of Christ” (1 Cor 4:1-2; cf. Titus 1:7), as they shepherd God’s flock on behalf of the “Chief Shepherd” (1 Pet 5:2-4; cf. Acts 20:28).

Modeling Christ means that leaders in every context possible demonstrate a love that involves the sacrificial desire for the other to grow more into the person God has called them to be. For church leaders, love means that their actions are done not for personal gain, but to “equip [God’s] people for works of service” (Eph 4:12; cf. Phil 2:3-4). Love means that all individuals are respected and protected, while simultaneously encouraging them toward maturity in the way of Jesus.

Church leaders modeling Christ will not “lord it over” others but will lead by means of sacrificial service because Jesus himself “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:25-28; 1 Pet 5:1-4). But even with godly and Christlike servant leaders, local churches still need a willingness to live out “submission” to leadership for that community to be healthy and unified together. Hebrew 13:17 exhorts the readers to have “confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.” While these commands to “have confidence” and “submit to... authority” are present here, church leaders must not wield these verses for evil and selfish benefit—but must live lives in Christ and exercise leadership in ways that are worthy of this confidence (Matt 18:6; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1-4). These texts should be seen as very sobering warnings against leaders who exploit and harm those within the church family.

**Local church families have the responsibility to discern leaders prayerfully.** This means that the local church, rather than the individual, is the central context for leadership discernment. This means that church leadership is a divine calling and not a right based on one’s own feelings of giftedness, educational achievements, charisma, or personal calling. While a sense of divine calling is an important element in the discerning of ministry leaders, this should be submitted to the prayerful discernment of the local church community (Acts 13:1-3; 15:22). The final affirmation of a God-given call to leadership and to a specific ministry location is not in the hands of the individual but in the hands of the prayerful local church community.

Centering the locus of discernment to the local church means also

that the local church can rightfully provide accountability to leaders in their leadership life. **The additional phrase “in the spirit of love” is the comprehensive guiding principle for the purpose, goal, and method of all church accountability processes.** [\[Return to article\]](#)

**DRAFT**

## ARTICLE 6

# Nature of the Church

## LIVING THE CONFESSION

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### 1. **With all the failure and hypocrisy in the history of the church, why is it so important for each and every Christian to become an active member of a local church congregation?**

We must acknowledge that there is much failure and hypocrisy in the historical and global church and within each and every local church. While both failure and hypocrisy are part of all human reality until Jesus returns again to establish the fullness of his Kingdom, we want to confess these failures and by the power of the Holy Spirit, pray for greater faithfulness to our calling embodying God's character and purposes before the watching world. But while we want to confess and repent of our failures, and embrace greater faithfulness, the New Testament does not focus on the failures and hypocrisy of the early church but on its incredible calling.

**Despite all its failures, God has not given up on the church.** God has taken a huge risk to identify himself so closely with the church called to incarnate his character and mission. One might assume that God would have been nothing but embarrassed by the Old Testament people of God. However, in reference to the Old Testament patriarchs, Hebrews 11:16 notes that God was “not ashamed to be called their God.”

In the New Testament, Jesus also was well aware of all the weaknesses and failures of the disciples and yet this did not stop him from creating the church. The eleven disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane fell asleep when they should have been praying, fled when they should have stood with him, and betrayed him when they should have declared his name (cf. Matt 26; Mark 14). And yet the risen Jesus gave the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20) to these same eleven disciples. When Paul was persecuting and imprisoning Christians, Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus and said: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). For Jesus, persecuting the church was the same as persecuting him. Ephesians 5:25 declares that “Christ loved the church and give himself up for her.” While church failures and hypocrisy today need to be confronted and repented of, these are not reasons for disciples of Jesus to abandon the body of Christ. **Scripture demonstrates that we worship a God not ashamed to identify with the church and a God who has not given up on the church.**

This must motivate us to have the same attitude and commitment to the church that we see God having. Scripture reinforces this with numerous



reasons for why the local church is important in God's plans and mission:

**The first reason for joining a local church is because, according to Scripture, God dwells among his people in a way unlike anywhere else in all creation.** The church incarnates Christ's body in the world (1 Cor 12:27; 4:11-13) and contains "the fullness of him [Christ] who fills everything in every way" (Eph 1:23). In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul describes the church in Corinth as "God's temple" where God's Spirit dwells (cf. 2 Cor 6:16; 1 Pet 2:5). He continues with a solemn warning: "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, you together are that temple" (v.17). The New Testament writers had a very high view of the importance of the local church.

**The second reason is that the New Testament has no category for Christians who want to follow Jesus independent from a local congregation.** The New Testament use of the word church describes physical gatherings of disciples who worship together, fellowship together, participate in teaching and evangelism, and so on. The word church is always a team word which means it is incongruous to claim "membership" in the Church global or universal without pursuing active association with a local church. The New Testament metaphors for the Kingdom are corporate or group metaphors like banquet (cf. Matt 22; Luke 14) or Holy City (cf. Rev 21). Christians are called into communities of worship and mission.

**The third reason is that the church has a central and indispensable role in God's Kingdom mission.** Throughout the Bible, God has been creating a new people for a missional purpose. God promised Abram that he would make him into a "great nation" (Gen 12:2) as many as the stars in the sky (15:5) and "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (12:3). This "people" was freed from Egypt (Exod 5:1) and became a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). As Christopher Wright notes, God is "totally, covenantally and eternally committed to the mission of blessing the nations through the agency of the people of Abraham" (*The Mission of God* [IVP, 2018], 63).

The New Testament people of God (called the church) formed around Jesus is the extension and completion of this Old Testament Abrahamic people of God, and now carries the same missional purpose. The church pushes back the "gates of Hades [death]" (Matt 16:18) which cannot withstand this Spirit-empowered community.

Article 6: Note 1 makes several key points about the role of the church in God's mission:

*...it is hard to overemphasize the role of the church in God's mission of bringing the Kingdom to earth as it is in heaven (Matt 4:23; 6:10; 10:7; 24:14; Luke 4:43). God's Kingdom is what Jesus came to announce was now*

coming and present in his ministry. God's Kingdom is where God reigns as Creator, Redeemer, and King over all creation and where the spiritual and physical powers in opposition to God's Kingdom have been defeated. God's Kingdom is where God reigns as Creator, Redeemer, and King in the midst of his people who respond to his grace and love with repentance, worship, and obedience. God's Kingdom is most evident as his people model God's character and purposes to the watching world....

**God's Kingdom has at its center the creation of a Kingdom people from all nations saved by Jesus and indwelt with God's presence through the Holy Spirit.** This Kingdom people participates in God's mission of bringing everything into subjection under Jesus's feet. This is accomplished most directly by prayer and worship in honour of King Jesus; by seeking first God's Kingdom and his righteousness (Matt 6:33); by embodying the values and priorities of the Kingdom; by doing good deeds in the world; and by inviting all people to salvation and discipleship in Jesus (Matt 16:17-20; 28:16-20)....

The faithful church worships and gives primary allegiance to a different King, lives by the ethics of a different Kingdom, and has a different hope for how the story will end. By these actions, the church challenges and dethrones the physical and spiritual structures and powers of this age ("the gates of Hades will not overcome it" [Matt 16:18]) and is a present witness to and embodiment of the future coming of the Kingdom of God in its fullness.

While God's Kingdom is universally present across the cosmos and specifically across our world, it is not universally welcomed, acknowledged, and pursued. This is why the people of God, Old Testament and then New Testament, are at the centre of God's Kingdom because God's people welcome, acknowledge, and pursue both King Jesus and the Kingdom that Jesus brought, is bringing, and will fully bring when he returns again. God's Kingdom is larger than the church, but the Kingdom is most evidently present in the midst of his gathered people who worship, serve, and declare his name in the world.

The church is not a building or a human institution but the very "body of Christ" (Christ here means Messiah or King). As the body, the church is the only collection of people in the world called and empowered to embrace, declare in words, and embody these truths about God's Kingdom. The church is symbolically the "firstfruits" of the new creation (2 Thess 2:13; Jas 1:18) displaying the nature and beauty of the future Kingdom in the present.

Scripture paints a highly exalted portrait of the nature and mission of the church in God's Kingdom mission. The church is not an optional add-on for individual disciples of Jesus but is central to God's Kingdom work in the world. When Jesus said that he would build his church (Matt 16:18), he was establishing the primary means through which God has chosen to model and embody his Kingdom in this world as God's agent of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-19).

In light of the New Testament exalted description of the role of the church in God's mission, joining a local congregation is an act of obedience to Jesus (cf. Matt 28:16-20), an act of faith that God is active and working in the world when it is not always evident, and an act of hope that the church will ultimately be vindicated when the King returns to fully establish the Kingdom.

**The fourth reason is that every believer needs a local church family for their discipleship journey and the local church needs believers to live out its mission.** The local church family prays for, assists, equips, and holds accountable those who have joined the family. The life of discipleship was never meant to be a solo journey. Jesus created a family of disciples, sent out disciples in groups, and when he prayed for his followers, he prayed that "all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21). Jesus would not need to pray that individual believers become "one" unless he knew that these believers would form communities and these communities would be threatened by disunity and conflict.

The local church also needs disciples of Jesus or there will be no local church where God can dwell by his Spirit and no body to worship God together and embrace Kingdom mission. The New Testament assumes that believers will form church communities for mutual support and more effective mission. The Lord's Supper is about disciples eating together in community. Baptism is about joining a community.

If believers refuse to form local church communities, there will be no local church witnessing to the diverse Kingdom community that Jesus is creating. There will be no local church community doing things together in the name of Jesus that are bigger than individual believers can accomplish. (The vast majority of Christian educational institutions, mission organizations, and local ministries have grown out of local church efforts [or groups of local churches] efforts rather than from Christians not connected to a local church.) There will also be no local church encouraging, praying for, and holding believers accountable in their discipleship journeys.

Even with all the evident failures that we can see within the lives of local church congregations, these do not outweigh the many powerful reasons for why each and every Christians should become an active member of a local church congregation.

**2. If an individual Christian is already a "member" of the universal church and can freely attend church gatherings, participate in the Lord's Supper, and actively serve within a local MB congregation, why is it important to "become a member" of that local congregation?**

The New Testament does not seem to address this question in the same way that is prominent today. This may have been because the first century world had a more corporate rather than individualistic sense of identity that deeply valued membership within the group (viz., family, community, religious group, etc.). The New Testament describes many individuals as being “members” of various groups (e.g., John 3:1; Acts 5:17; 6:9; 7:54; 17:34; 22:30) so it seems that it was assumed that those baptized into a church group were members of that local church and then members of something larger (cf. Rom 12:4-5; Eph 2:19; 3:6; 4:25; 5:30; Col 3:15).

However, since our present cultural setting deeply values the individual (viz. personal identity, freedom, happiness, etc.), group membership often conflicts with these values. In past decades, the size of a local MB congregation was measured in terms of “members” while today most local churches are more likely to report average church attendance or the total number of those who see themselves as affiliated with that church. Because of the diminished interest in formal membership, many local churches have deprioritized membership to the point that there seems to little practical difference between active members and active attendees apart from voting privileges at annual meetings and eligibility for some leadership/staff positions. In addition since some active attendees are more committed and involved than some members, churches wonder whether this invisible dividing line is still meaningful or necessary.

Formal membership in a church simply means that the individual Christian is signalling that they want to be all in—affirming the church’s mission, values, and theological/ethical convictions and committing themselves to the mutual love and care, mutual edification, and mutual accountability that is part of life in community. This also provides clarity for the church that this disciple of Jesus committed to being part of everything that the church is about. Formal membership should be a blessing to both the individual and the church.

When the majority of attendees in a local church are formal members committed to speaking into and voting on the church’s mission and vision priorities, its staff choices, and its financial priorities, this limits the ability of only one leader (or a small group of leaders) to singlehandedly exert power over these things. It honours the theological truth that every Christian has access to the Holy Spirit and the truth that the church is a team sport rather than a collection of spectators. While there are many reasons why avoiding formal membership might be attractive to Christians today, formal membership is important for the well-being of the both the individual Christian and the local church.

**When it comes to the claim that local church membership is not necessary since one already has membership in the “universal church,” we**

**should examine the attitude of the New Testament writers toward both the larger church and the local church.** It is very true that the church is not centrally a building or a legal entity (although for many churches they have these as well). The church is fundamentally a community of transformed believers gathered around the worship and mission of Jesus. The expression “universal church” (a term never used in the Bible) is commonly understood to refer to the total community of all disciples of Jesus in the world—past, present, and future. Because the New Testament sometimes uses “member” language to refer to something bigger than one local congregation (e.g., one body [cf. Rom 12:5; Eph 3:6; 4:25; 5:30; Col 3:15] or God’s “household” [Eph 2:19]), some have interpreted New Testament membership language to refer to the universal church rather than a local congregation.

But it seems like the New Testament writers understood membership in the church universal as beginning with membership in a physical local church community where real people gather to worship, pray, encourage, share communion, baptize, and do mission together. The New Testament originally was read by local groups of Christians who saw themselves as churches. Most New Testament letters addressed life in local congregations and what it meant to be members of that local congregation. These letters declared that Christians are to love one another (Rom 13:8; 1 Thess 4:9); honour one another (Rom 12:10); serve one another (Gal 5:13); accept one another (Rom 15:7); live in harmony with one another (Rom 12:16); agree with one another (1 Cor 1:10); forgive one another (Col 3:13); encourage one another (2 Cor 13:11; 1 Thess 5:11; Heb 3:13); submit to one another (Eph 5:21); admonish one another (Col 3:16); spur one another on (Heb 10:24); and offer hospitality to one another (1 Pet 4:9).

If the universal church is independent from local church gatherings (something that seems not to be in the minds of the New Testament writers), the universal church would then be lacking a physical presence, a physical voice, and physical arms and legs, making all these “one another” instructions impossible to obey. Only local churches can meet together, pray together, serve together, and do Kingdom mission together. Only local churches can provide real belonging and real community which are fundamental human needs.

While there may be a very few special circumstances where membership in a local congregation is not possible for a Christian, the norm in the New Testament and throughout church history is for Christians to join and become members of local church congregations for personal and corporate mutual encouragement in discipleship and mission. Moving away from this pattern conflicts with this Scriptural and historical pattern and jeopardizes both personal discipleship and corporate mission.

**3. Article 6 connects baptism with being united with the local congregation and then uses the words “church members” to refer to these baptized individuals. What is the connection between baptism, incorporation into the local church, and “membership”?**

Mennonite Brethren practice “believer’s baptism” which means that baptism is a voluntary event done by individuals who have reached the age where they can adequately understand its meaning. Critical to this discussion is that Mennonite Brethren deeply value the local church as key to God’s work in the world. As a result, while many Christian denominations see baptism as only a sign of personal salvation and one’s commitment to Jesus, Mennonite Brethren understand believer’s baptism as having a double focus. Baptism is both a sign of one’s personal salvation and a sign of one’s desire to be incorporated into the people of God as lived out by that local congregation. Individual believers are “baptized into Christ” where there is “neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27-28). Baptism is about entry into the body of Christ and not simply into a spiritual state of salvation.

Ideally, this means that it is the local church who baptizes believers and then welcomes them into a membership-type relationship in that congregation. Membership within the congregation is not so much a legal status or a list of special privileges but a relational status where mutual obligations are recognized and practiced for the growth and wellbeing of both the individual and the congregation. Membership in the local Mennonite Brethren church necessarily involves both believer’s baptism and a willingness to accept the obligations of life within the congregation. Since believer’s baptism is meant to be a one-time event, disciples of Jesus baptized upon their own confession of faith who move from one congregation to another and are willing to commit themselves to the membership commitments of that new congregation are not expected to be re-baptized. The new congregation welcomes them based on their previous baptism, their personal testimony, and their commitment to the membership commitments.

This deep connection between believer’s baptism and church membership raises many challenging questions about actual church practice related to the necessity of membership, the differences between members and non-members, and the legal definitions of membership within a government-recognized “society.” But being a member of a local church is not primarily about receiving special membership benefits or about membership privileges (e.g., voting on budgets, programs, etc.), but about committing oneself to become a deeply integrated part of that church community by supporting and contributing to the mission, values, theological/ethical convictions,

and overall life of that local church.

For responses to related questions about baptism and church membership, see Article 8: Living the Confession (FAQs).

- When should baptism occur after a person's conversion?
- Do we advise a minimum age for baptism?
- Are there times when a local church might baptize someone and not have them become part of this community?
- What does "being a member of a local church" mean?
- Are those baptized as infants required to be baptized upon their own confession of faith?
- Can a Christian who has been baptized upon their confession of faith be baptized again?

#### **4. Article 6 refers to the church as "one body of believers, male and female, from every nation, race and class." Should local churches reflect this type of multicultural diversity?**

**It is a common temptation for local churches to become mono-cultural where people who share the same racial, economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds come together.** This can often feel more "comfortable" and some have argued that it is more effective in attracting new people who also share those characteristics. Our towns and cities are often divided along racial, economic, education, and cultural lines and it can be easy for churches to simply accept these divisions.

However, one implication of the gospel and the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross is evident in Matthew 28 and Acts 2 when the hostility of dividing walls between nations, race, and class is transcended in Christ (cf. Gal 3:28; Eph 4:4-6). The Bible portrays the Kingdom of God community as profoundly diverse where people from every "nation, tribe, people and language" stand before the throne of Christ, waving palm branches and praising God (Rev 7:9-10). The gospel calls believers to "regard no one from a worldly point of view" but to live out the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:16-21). The gospel overcomes the world's racial, ethnic, caste, language, economic, and cultural barriers that divide. One of the strongest pieces of evidence that Jesus has indeed been sent by God (cf. John 17:21) is when believers who earlier were separated now become "one." This kind of church is an evangelistic light on a hill.

It is a strong testimony to Matthew 28 and Acts 2 when local churches visibly demonstrate that these previously existing dividing walls are being broken down in Christ. If the local church desires to be faithful to God's vision of the Kingdom and to the gospel of Jesus Christ, it needs to care about all its "neighbours" and welcome all those "who [are] being saved"

(Acts 2:47). **The temptation will always be to create homogenous local communities where individuals of similar ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds gather but this weakens their witness to the gospel (cf. Eph 2:14).** Local churches that live in a neighbourhood of ethnic, racial and cultural diversity and try to continue as mono-ethnic, mono-racial, and mono-cultural groupings, should consider how they can live more faithfully into God's calling for the church. While it may be that some individuals will be hesitant to come to a church that overcomes these dividing lines, we should not be ashamed of the gospel (cf. Rom 1:16) when it does the work that it is able to do. Local churches wanting to "seek first [God's] kingdom" (Matt 6:33) need to reflect the beautiful diversity of that coming Kingdom even now.

**5. Article 6 mentions the following in a small footnote: "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." If "footwashing" was commanded by Jesus in John 13:15, why do we not practice this and make it an ordinance like baptism and the Lord's Supper?**

Some actions in the New Testament have deeply rich and symbolic meaning and both the action and the meaning are easily carried over to today. Sharing the Lord's Supper (communion) together continues to carry rich symbolic meaning as we together eat the bread and drink the cup (see Article 9: Lord's Supper). The baptism of new believers communicates richly symbolic actions today for both the baptized individual and the church (see Article 8: Baptism).

However, other symbolic actions described in the New Testament are not so easily carried over to today's world and may even express meanings in our culture that directly conflict with the original intentions. For example, it was a New Testament expectation that believers would express family affection toward each other by greeting each other with a "holy kiss" (Rom 16:1; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; cf. 1 Pet 5:14). But offering kisses while greeting people in our churches would not likely be welcomed by most people. Therefore, we try to substitute other forms of greeting which better communicate this meaning.

Footwashing in the ancient world was both a deeply necessary and a very common action offered by lowly household servants whose masters expected it from them. The recipient received an important benefit (viz. clean feet) while the household servant kneeled in humility providing this service. The surprise in the New Testament is that Jesus reversed everything.



In humility, Jesus turned the tables and voluntarily became the servant who washed his disciples' feet as if they were the masters. Jesus then commanded them to take the role of servant and do this much needed service voluntarily to each other (John 13:1-20). In the early church, footwashing became a symbol of humility, taking on the role of a servant rather than a master, and embracing sacrificial service for the well-being of others.

Some churches today embrace footwashing as an ongoing and regular church practice because it was commanded by Jesus—even though it is a ritual action quite foreign to our culture. For these churches, footwashing can effectively symbolize sacrificial love and service. Other churches have eliminated footwashing as a practice largely because it is foreign to our culture and is not effective at communicating what was originally intended. For them, footwashing is like the holy kiss command where we need to embrace the intended attitude but not necessarily embrace the specific action.

Local Mennonite Brethren congregations in Canada reflect both responses to the practice of footwashing. Some include footwashing as a church practice but most MB churches in Canada no longer practice it at all. This is different from Mennonite Brethren congregations outside of North America who are far more likely to embrace the practice.

Churches need to find ways to obey Jesus's command in John 13 and demonstrate that disciples of Jesus follow his example of sacrificial love and humility by kneeling down to become servants of others within the church family—and also be willing to let others express sacrificial love and humility by kneeling down and serving them. Both are important for the well-being of the church family. Local churches will need to reflect carefully on how footwashing might be contextualized for them, but simply ignoring John 13 conflicts with our other convictions about faithfulness to Jesus.

## **6. What if I start meeting regularly with a few of my Christian friends and we start doing “church” together? Is this not “church” since two or more are gathered in Jesus’s name (cf. Matt 18:20)?**

The desire to meet regularly with Christian friends for mutual encouragement, prayer, and worship is very positive. The question, however, is whether these sorts of gatherings are what the New Testament writers had in mind when they were describing the “church” or whether meetings of Christian friends together should instead be called a discipleship group, a home group, or something else?

**It is very true that the New Testament writers did not expect a church to have a particular size or a property since churches met in homes and had no buildings.** A local church was a gathering of disciples

centred on Jesus, welcoming the Holy Spirit, worshipping God together, and participating in God's Kingdom mission. Local church communities gathered for teaching, fellowship, prayer, praise, baptism, mutual support, the Lord's Supper, and mission (cf. Acts 2:42-47). The New Testament writers expect churches to share theological/ethical convictions and protect those convictions from external and internal threats (cf. Acts 20:28-30; 1 John 4:1-6; Titus 1:6-16; 2 Pet 2).

While it is very positive for Christian friends to gather regularly for mutual encouragement and discipleship, they must ask themselves if they are open to actually being a local church as articulated in the New Testament—not a human institution but a local expression of the global body of Christ. Are they open to making disciples of “all nations,” baptizing them, and discipling them to obey everything Jesus has commanded them? **If a group of Christian friends embraces the New Testament holistic description of the church's nature and mission calling, that group could self-identify as a “church.”** However, if a group of Christian friends is not open to embracing the nature and mission of a local church, they should not make their regular meeting together a substitute for participating in a local church. The local church has a high calling and every believer should embrace the important place God has for them there (see FAQs #1 and #2).

### **7. Article 6 says that the church “share[s] material resources as there is need.” What does it look like today for local churches to share material resources with individuals in need?**

**The New Testament has high expectations for the mutual support and well-being of those in a church family.** While the local church provided spiritual and relational support, many new converts needed more than this. Many converts from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds would be losing their biological families, their religious community, and the relational and economic support that was part of those networks. This would put many new converts into tenuous economic situations after leaving behind family housing, jobs, etc. In an ancient world that was without insurance policies and any government sponsored social safety nets, the financial redistribution efforts that we see in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 4:32-35; 6:1-4; 1 Tim 5:3-16) were essential for the personal survival of new converts and others facing ongoing vulnerability.

In today's world, there are some new converts to Christianity who experience these same practical vulnerabilities so local churches will need to explore how to provide assistance (viz., housing, new jobs, etc.) for those moving out of one biological/religious community into the church community. There are also many other ongoing challenges and vulnerabilities

to consider such as job loss, natural disasters, addictions, health issues, etc. Thankfully, there are often governmental programs, insurance programs, and family support that can be explored first, but there are times when the local church is desperately needed to step into the gaps.

As Article 6 states: “The church is a covenant community” and this community “share[s] material resources as there is need.” Article 6: Note 13 says the following about this section:

*The church, local and global, is a “covenant community” or to use everyday language, a caring “family” (cf., John 1:12-13) with shared obligations and expectations (cf. John 13:34; Eph 4:1-6, 31-32; 1 Pet 4:8; 1 John 4:7-10). A covenant community is a group who have entered a relationship of mutual obligation that is deeper than that expressed in a contract. Covenants involve a deep sense of mutual love, a commitment to care for each other in spite of the shortcomings and failures of others in the group, and a long-term tenacious desire to stand with each other through whatever circumstances life brings. This is why the family metaphor fits so well for the church as a spiritual body with Christ as the head.*

While the individual believers in a local church are now “spiritual family” with all others, this spiritual family language must not be separated from practical care and support that we normally associate with biological and adopted family relationships. **If the church family is to be a real family, mutual tenacious love and commitment needs to be evidenced not only through relational/prayer support but also by practical and financial support precisely in the moments when those in the church face crises.** This need for practical support raises several large challenges for local churches today as they try to provide support for Christians in their midst who are facing personal and financial crises:

**First, local churches need to be aware of their legal requirements as registered charities and what that means for distributing funds to individuals in need.** Legal requirements may vary by province but some churches have opted for holding special “benevolence fund” offerings which are not eligible for donation receipts and therefore provide greater opportunity for them to be distributed to those in need.

**Second, local churches need to act with wisdom about fair distribution of practical assistance.** They must decide whom to help (viz., only members of the church, all “committed” attendees, new believers, etc. [cf. Gal 6:9-10]). They must decide the most meaningful and effective means of help, and they must decide how to help without creating ongoing dependency. It is also difficult for local churches to fully avoid being taken advantage of by individuals inside and outside of their congregation. Because of our cultural values of personal privacy and our limited opportunities to fully know people’s

stories, trustworthiness, character, etc., it is increasingly difficult to be totally confident about whether practical assistance is actually needed and/or how it will be used. Because of these complexities, some churches may just throw up their hands and do nothing—but this is not way of the New Testament church.

**Third, local churches can immediately become overwhelmed with practical and financial needs** as increasing numbers of those in the church and in the community face emergencies related to job loss, housing loss, marital breakup, and so on. It is one thing to assist by giving out a few grocery store gift cards and another thing entirely to assist individuals and families facing eviction and homelessness.

The New Testament churches lived into their spiritual family status by demonstrating practical assistance to individuals in need within the family (cf. Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; 6:1-7). They even extended that practical assistance to Christians suffering in other geographic locations (Acts 11:27-30; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8:1-10). While it is difficult to know exactly how to follow their model, it is important that local churches embrace their identity as families and the relational, spiritual, and economic components that are part of that identity.

### **8. Article 6 expects local churches to practice “redemptive church discipline.” Since there are so many dangers involved in a process that involves group intervention and confrontation with the possible outcome of exclusion, should we not just leave restoration work to the Holy Spirit?**

It is an ongoing temptation to avoid all efforts at redemptive church discipline because there are so many possible pitfalls:

- Many people associate all church discipline with pride, judgmentalism, legalism, and condemnation. While there have been failures in the past, redemptive church discipline is still something that the New Testament commands.
- Few people seem to respond well to intervention and confrontation, and may simply go to a different church or leave the church community entirely. While this may be true, it does not negate that a loving church community who cares both about the person and the church’s witness must consider what will happen if the church never takes steps to address sin and evil in its midst.
- It is also possible that an erring person today may threaten legal action around privacy concerns—something incomprehensible in the New Testament church. Again, while wanting to do everything possible to respect each person in the church, doing nothing is not a sign of love but of its absence.

However, Mennonite Brethren are part of an Anabaptist tradition with a high view of the church as the body of Christ living out the Kingdom way of Jesus as a “light on a hill” for all the world to see (Matt 5:14-16). This means that how people in the church live really matters in our mission. Unlike some Christian groups who have high expectations for Christian leaders but low expectations for all others in the church family, MBs believe that all disciples of Jesus are called to the same discipleship expectations, and when empowered by the Holy Spirit, disciples can grow and become more faithful followers of Jesus. This does not mean that MBs hold that a disciple can be morally perfect, but that following Jesus faithfully is our calling. Even though failure and sin are inevitable along the way, we are called to practice ongoing repentance, receive forgiveness, make things as right as possible, and return to the discipleship path. Following Jesus is not a one-time conversion decision but an ongoing and daily embrace of Jesus’s path toward life to the full (John 10:10).

**While the theological rationale and even the process of redemptive church discipline is well articulated in Scripture, the practical application of the process has been very challenging throughout our history.** As a result, it is a huge temptation to simply abandon efforts altogether and proclaim that the Holy Spirit needs to convict individual believers who have wandered off the path—and the church should just continue to welcome the individual and wait for the Holy Spirit to reveal God’s will to them. There are, however, three reasons why churches should not embrace this increasingly popular option and do nothing.

**First, in Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus commands a process for redemptive church discipline and places this responsibility upon each individual believer and the church corporately.** If the better option were to leave this work to the Holy Spirit in a person’s life, then why would Jesus give us this active process of individual and group intervention? In addition, when followers of Jesus move away from faithfulness to Jesus, it is unlikely that the individual is actively pursuing the Holy Spirit and giving the Holy Spirit an open door to convict them. We are all capable of self-deception and blindness that, like David in 2 Samuel 12, we may need someone else to step in and speak truth to us. Galatians 6:1 says: “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.” The command here is for those who “live by the Spirit” to intervene for restoration on behalf of the one “caught in a sin.” Jesus and the New Testament writers place responsibility for redemptive church discipline on individual disciples of Jesus as they are receptive to the Holy Spirit.

**Second, redemptive church discipline is about loving one’s fellow believers enough to intervene and encourage them back to the path that**

**produces life and not death (cf. Deut 30:15-18; John 10:10).** If following Jesus in discipleship is the way to life, then those who reject discipleship are embracing death which will inevitably cause harm to themselves, the church community, and everyone else in their life—even if all the death-producing effects of sin are not immediately evident. Redemptive church discipline is all about the covenantal and sacrificial love of Jesus for other people, loving enough to intervene when someone walks away from life toward death. A community that claims to follow Jesus but refuses to intervene in such cases, is in essence failing in its responsibility to love deeply.

**Third, redemptive church discipline is about being faithful to the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) and the Great Commandment (Matt 22:34-40).** Because the church is called to be a light on a hill, the testimony and witness of each and every member of the church matters in the corporate testimony of Jesus before the watching world (1 Pet 2:12). If church is like a “team sport,” then it matters whether team members are living out together their commitments expressed together. Redemptive church discipline is about loving our neighbours so they might be drawn to God; about being faithful to our role as a light on a hill drawing the nations to Jesus. But for church discipline to be positive in terms of our witness in the world, it does need to follow a process that is redemptive, loving, and gentle. If not, the testimony of the church before the watching world will be damaged yet again. (For a description of the biblical process in Matthew 18, see FAQ#9.)

Redemptive church discipline is about faithfulness to Jesus’s commands, about loving others in the church family enough to step in hoping to reverse the effects of death and have them move back toward life, and about recognizing the importance of the church’s witness before the watching world. While challenging to do well, abandoning redemptive church discipline altogether is an evasion of what faithfulness to Jesus and love of neighbour requires.

### **9. Is Matthew 18 the required pattern for dealing with all types of “sin” within the church community?**

There may be times when Matthew 18 is not the first element in the process for dealing with sins committed between individuals in a church family. For example, in cases of attempted murder, rape, abuse, and/or other types of violence, we would not expect the victim to go on their own to confront the perpetrator. In certain cases of extreme harm, the first intervention step must involve the stopping of the harm itself and the protection of the victim from further harm.

This will likely involve the full disclosure and reporting of these evil actions to the authorities who have the mandate to stop these evils and

protect the victims. In cases of extreme harm and ongoing vulnerability, it would be difficult to imagine Jesus insisting on victims walking through the Matthew 18 process if doing that would simply perpetuate and increase the harm done to them because of their increased vulnerability. The same Jesus who commanded the process of church discipline, declared in Matthew 18 the following words of warning: “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (v.6). While forgiveness and reconciliation are the long-term goals of redemptive church discipline, in certain cases the immediate need to stop the ongoing harm and protect the victim will mean that the Matthew 18 process of church discipline may need to be delayed until the harm is stopped and the victim protected.

## 10. How can a local church today effectively practice “redemptive church discipline”?

It is important to pause and reflect on the word “effectively.” Since church discipline is ideally about restoration, we do want the process to be as effective as possible, but it is only the Holy Spirit and not our efforts that produce repentance and restoration. If the process is about avoiding increased damage to the witness of the church family before the watching world, we need to explore how to do that more effectively. If the process is about being faithful to Jesus’s instruction in Matthew 18 (and to other instruction in the New Testament), how can we be both faithful and effective?

According to Matthew 18:15-20, the pattern for church discipline follows a **three-step process** moving from an informal personal intervention, and if necessary to an informal small group intervention, and if necessary to a more formal church leadership intervention. The goal is none other than reconciliation and restoration of the believer to faithful discipleship. The moment that happens, the process is successfully completed.

**The first step (informal personal intervention) begins with prayerful and humble discernment concerning a Christian brother or sister who has “sinned”** (cf. NIV; NASB; or following some ancient manuscripts has sinned “against” us [cf. ESV; NRSV]). Matthew 18 does not respond to the many questions we might like to ask about this sensitive and delicate situation (e.g., How do we know for sure the person has sinned?; What if the person has not specifically sinned “against us”?; Does every outward sin require this level of personal intervention?; Should we not check with a trusted church family member for wisdom and prayer before we go?). Jesus commands us to go and “point out their fault” (18:15). Other New Testament texts provide additional guidance about our responsibility to

speak the truth in love to each other (Eph 4:15), express love and care for our brothers and sisters (cf. 2 Thess 3:15; 2 Cor 2:5-11), and “restore that person gently” (Gal 6:1).

While Matthew 18 does not dwell on this, there are two possible outcomes from this first personal intervention step. The first involves a resolution of the situation. We may have totally misunderstood the situation and the person has not sinned after all. This would of course, resolve the situation positively. Another option is that the person repents and joyfully returns to faithful discipleship. Again, another possible positive resolution. Both options would end the whole process. However, there is also a serious possibility that the brother or sister might deny the sin (when it is clear that it cannot be denied), or alternatively they admit the sin but reject the opportunity to repent.

**This lack of resolution triggers the second step where we move forward to involve one or two additional Christian disciples to participate in the conversation.** The desired goal is resolution all through the process.

**However, if again there is lack of resolution, the third step is initiated which involves telling it “to the church” (18:17).** The word “church” has been interpreted by some to mean every person in the church, and by others to be a clear reference to the leadership of the church. While the first option may have been workable in the context of house churches, certainly today it would seem best that each church would have a smaller discernment group (four or five) who would be entrusted by the leadership group of the church to respond to these requests. This group would be responsible for honouring privacy and moving forward in a way that reflects loving admonition.

This group representing the church would be responsible to listen to those bringing the situation to their attention, prayerfully discern next steps, and then meet with the individual member to listen and bring forward the concern. Again, the hope is for nothing other than resolution and restoration.

**Jesus declares in Matthew 18 that if the person continues to reject admonition, the church should “treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (v.17).** This has two practical applications:

- the person would no longer be considered a full church family member (cf. 1 Cor 5) so those within the church family would have a different relationship with the individual. Paul in 1 Corinthians, talks about an extreme case when an individual was excluded from the church family but continued to claim that his behavior was fitting for a brother in Christ (v.11). The command here is not to eat with such a person (v.11).
- the person would, however, now be an object of loving



invitation to the church family in line with the way Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors (cf. Matt 11:19). It is hard to reconcile this entirely with 1 Corinthians 5 since Jesus did eat with Gentiles and tax collectors.

While all believers are responsible for initiating loving intervention (Matt 18:15-20; Gal 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 Pet 5:1-4; Heb 13:17). Leaders are accountable to the church and must model a willingness to accept loving admonition themselves regarding their own sins.

Because of all the challenges related to redemptive church discipline, many local churches have been trying to find positive procedures to maximize the possibility of a positive outcome:

1. Redemptive church discipline is better done by a small Care Team of well-respected and Spirit-led individuals than by the church as a whole. The limiting of information to the fewest number of individuals possible while still ensuring accountability on the part of that team is an important step.
2. Redemptive church discipline is more likely to be effective if church “members” are provided with clear information about what being a family member in the local church involves. Many local churches have created short membership covenants that explain what being a member of that local church involves in terms of shared community life, shared convictions, shared mission, and shared understandings and processes related to accountability. Redemptive church discipline will be exceptionally difficult without clarity about these things from the beginning.

Membership covenants should express minimally the following commitments:

- A commitment to pursue spiritual growth in Christian character and living in faithfulness to Jesus.
- A commitment to love the church family by praying, encouraging, blessing, and using one’s gifts.
- A commitment to active participation in the life of the church (viz., attendance, financial giving, etc.).
- A commitment to affirm and support the church’s mission, vision, and theological/ethical convictions.
- A commitment to serve in some capacity that fits one’s own giftings and the church’s needs.
- A commitment to being open to receive accountability and correction from the Care Team.

The membership covenant should conclude with some recognition that

failures in these commitments are significant and impact both the individual and the larger family negatively. Ongoing failure without repentance and change could lead to an accountability conversation with the Care Team. While those conversations are meant to be redemptive, continued voluntary actions that break one's membership commitments could lead to the formal ending of one's membership.

**11. Article 6 mentions the Holy Spirit giving gifts for the building up of the church. Does this include the “sign gifts” (miracles, prophecy, tongues/languages, interpretation of tongues/languages)? If so, why do we not see more of these gifts present in our MB churches?**

The New Testament teaches that all disciples of Jesus have received gifts (or “manifestations”) by the Holy Spirit for ministry in the church and in the world (1 Cor 12:14; Eph 4:11-16; Rom 12:3-8). **These gifts are to be exercised solely for the nurture and strengthening of the entire church.** Every local church should pray regularly for a greater filling of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), for the increased transformation of every disciple in terms of the “fruit” of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), and for Holy Spirit gifts that can build up the body (1 Cor 12:4-7; Eph 4:11-16; Rom 12:3-8).

Article 6: Note 16 speaks to the question of the “sign gifts”:

*Some of the spiritual gifts, often called the “sign gifts” or “miraculous gifts,” have been the source of much debate and dispute in the history of the church (cf. 1 Cor 12:9-10). These include the gifts of “tongues/languages” where the Holy Spirit gifts a believer with the ability to speak in an unlearned human language (cf. Acts 2:4-11) or possibly in an unlearned “angel” language (1 Cor 13:1; 14:1-2); the gift of interpretation of these tongues/languages (1 Cor 14:27-28); the gift of miraculous powers where people experience healing through the prayers or actions of a human agent given this gift (1 Cor 12:9); and the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 13:2) where an individual is able to speak God’s words into specific situations that leads to building up the body of Christ and to unbelievers being “convicted of sin” (1 Cor 14:24).*

*For many reasons, these gifts have been at the forefront of disputes between Christians. Many Christians argue that the Holy Spirit gave these gifts out during the very first days of the early church as recorded in Scripture, but the Holy Spirit has ceased giving them out to Christians today. Many other Christians argue that the Holy Spirit continues to distribute these spiritual gifts to faithful believers who are open to receiving these gifts. Although there is no uniform practice in local Mennonite Brethren churches around the praying for, reception of, and practice of the so-called “sign gifts,” the MB Confession of Faith does not put any restrictions on these gifts.*

In the past, some of these sign gifts have been misused in ways that have

hurt the church, created division rather than building unity, and harmed the witness of the church in the larger community. Some individuals became prideful regarding their spiritual state because of being given one of these very public and amazing gifts. Others became suspicious about the authenticity of the giftings that a person had claimed for themselves. For these and other reasons, many local congregations have become very cautious about praying for and practicing the sign gifts in the life of the congregation. It seems like the sign gifts have the potential for amazing fruit but also for significant division and harm.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul speaks about these special Holy Spirit giftings with the assumption that they are present in the church, but Paul's constant priority is the well-being of the church (vv.5, 12, 17; cf. Eph 5:12-17) rather than the practice of this or that spiritual gifting. What matters most to Paul is the overall impact of that gift on the church body, a priority that he highlights in his own life (cf. 1 Cor 9). Our goal and top priority should always be the health and mission of the church which involves "unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph 4:13). As we pray for this maturity, God may or may not provide us with people who have these giftings. We must live with an open posture to what God wants to give us, but also with a spirit of trust that God has and is giving us all that we need to thrive and be a healthy faithful church in our context.

**12. Article 6 says that leaders "are to model Christ in their personal, family, and church life." How "perfect" do leaders need to be to meet this expectation? Would this not rule everyone out as unfit for leadership?**

While leaders are to model Christ in their lives, this is also the expectation of each and every disciple being "conformed into the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29). Leaders, like all other Christ followers, will fail and need to pursue repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. Church leaders are on the same discipleship journey as everyone else in the church family. It would be better to suggest that leader discernment is about the pursuit of maturity rather than perfection.

Article 6: Note 18 says this in relation to discerning church leaders:

*The emphasis here is that church leaders' guiding leadership philosophy is to model Christ in their personal, family, and church life (1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). Church leaders are called to take responsibility for a personal life of prayer, worship, community, integrity, service, and generosity that reflects that of Jesus. Christian leaders, single or married, must live out family obligations to those in their family circle in a way that reflects Jesus (cf. John 19:26-27). Christian leaders can model Christ in their church life by seeing themselves,*

above all else, as “servants of Christ” (1 Cor 4:1-2; cf. Titus 1:7), as they shepherd God’s flock on behalf of the “Chief Shepherd” (1 Pet 5:2-4; cf. Acts 20:28).

*Modeling Christ means that leaders in every context possible demonstrate a love that involves the sacrificial desire for the other to grow more into the person God has called them to be. For church leaders, love means that their actions are done not for personal gain, but to “equip [God’s] people for works of service” (Eph 4:12; cf. Phil 2:3-4). Love means that all individuals are respected and protected, while simultaneously encouraging them toward maturity in the way of Jesus.*

*Church leaders modeling Christ will not “lord it over” others but will lead by means of sacrificial service because Jesus himself “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:25-28; 1 Pet 5:1-4). But even with godly and Christlike servant leaders, local churches still need a willingness to live out “submission” to leadership for that community to be healthy and unified together. Hebrew 13:17 exhorts the readers to have “confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.” While these commands to “have confidence” and “submit to...authority” are present here, church leaders must not wield these verses for evil and selfish benefit—but must live lives in Christ and exercise leadership in ways that are worthy of this confidence (Matt 18:6; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1-4). These texts should be seen as very sobering warnings against leaders who exploit and harm those within the church family.*

While Article 6 follows the New Testament writers in containing mature character expectations for church leaders (cf. 1 Tim 3:2-10; Titus 1:6-11; 1 Pet 5:1-4), it assumes that there will be Christians of godly character who will be present in local church families to be discerned for leadership roles. Since leadership roles do represent great responsibility for the well-being of the church, they carry with them opportunity to do great harm to vulnerable individuals. Jesus gives an extremely stark warning to anyone, leader or otherwise, who does harm to the vulnerable (Matt 18:6). Because of this potential for great harm, these high character expectations must not be relaxed for pragmatic reasons or out of desperation to find leaders. The better approach is that of corporate prayer to intercede to the God who calls out leaders to assist in the search for a leader with the Christlike character needed for the role.

While perfection is a not a prerequisite for church leadership, church leadership is a high calling that will be limited to those who demonstrate strong Christian character in line with the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:13-16).

### 13. Does having children who are not Christians disqualify a leader from church leadership?

This question has certainly caused many Christian leaders and churches significant anguish. 1 Timothy 3:4-5 says the following: “He [the church leader] must manage his own family well and **see that his children obey him....**” Titus 1:6 says: “An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, **a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.**”

These two texts imply that church leaders whose children are disobedient and/or do not “believe” are not good managers of their households and thus should be disqualified from leadership in the church. There are several ways of responding to these texts. It seems clear that the texts are describing “children” (tekna) who are younger rather than older. Even the very best Christian parents are not immune from older children walking away from the faith. God as represented by the father in the “Parable of the Lost Son” (Luke 15:11-32) had an adult “son” who was disobedient and wild. Jesus the very best leader had at least one unbelieving disciple. It is important to differentiate between young children and older/adult children whom God has given the freedom to make their own spiritual choices—even if they conflict with their parents.

In addition, while Titus 1:6 is often translated as “a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient,” this could just as easily be translated as “having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination” (NKJV). This puts the onus on faithfulness to the parents rather than on their spiritual belief status. This would fit better with 1 Timothy 3:4-5 which talks about children who “obey him.” This also would eliminate the problem with a leader who has very young children. If the requirement for leadership is that a leader’s children believe, then how would this be possible for children in the first few years of life?

It would seem that these biblical stipulations lean primarily toward younger children rather than older children. Secondly, they are not about children needing to be “believers. Thirdly, they are primarily concerned about a church leader’s younger children being obedient which in that ancient culture would be a strong indicator of a person’s leadership qualities.

A possible response to this question is that churches discerning leaders should explore whether prospective leaders who have children are demonstrating positive care and parenting of these children. While there may be complex reasons behind an individual child’s behaviour, it should certainly cause the church to do a deeper exploration of the prospective leader’s abilities if their younger children are disobedient and/or wild. However, the expectation that a church leader’s children from infancy to

adulthood will necessarily profess Christian faith seems to go beyond the New Testament expectation—not to mention how this will put potentially harmful pressure on both children and parents facing this situation.

#### **14. What does Article 6 tell us about how our local congregations should be structured?**

The New Testament does not prescribe an absolute or an entirely prescriptive form of church organization, but it does teach that the church should do all things decently and in order, for the purpose of building up the whole church (1 Cor 14). While there is no detailed New Testament list of church organization principles, there are many pointers that can guide churches today:

- **Since the true head of the church is Christ, every human church leader (pastor, elder, etc.) is a “sub-leader” under Jesus.** This means that sub-leaders are not the real founders of the church, not worthy of all praise, not the final source of authority, and not anything other than servant leaders put there by Jesus. Sub-leaders are ultimately answerable to Jesus to model his sacrificial leadership and steward the congregation in a way consistent with the love and care that Jesus has for each and every person in the congregation.
- **Since God gifts every disciple of Jesus with one or more spiritual gifts, every congregation member has a contribution to make for the edification of the whole body.** Therefore, church structures need to allow opportunity for all members based on their gifting to participate in the building up of the church. Church structures must reflect how the church is not a spectator sport with the large group watching and cheering as the few super-gifted individuals are entrusted to do the ministry of the church.
- **Since God gifts the Holy Spirit to each and every disciple of Jesus (1 Cor 6:19; Gal 4:6), church structures should reflect the reality that Holy Spirit wisdom is not limited to individual church leaders but resides within the whole community as they discern God’s will together.** Church members should be able to participate in the discernment process around important decisions that need to be made. We see some congregational involvement in the appointing of church leaders in Acts 6:1-6, even as many of the earliest elders were appointed by the Apostles (e.g., Acts 14:23; Titus 2:5). Paul implies that church members following an appropriate process can rightfully

correct church leaders (1 Tim 5:19) and it would seem to follow that the subsequent groups of elders were discerned and appointed not by outside leaders but within the congregation itself. From this pointer, it seems that church congregations today can prayerfully discern and call out church leaders. Church congregations today are also the prayerful discernment group who rightfully can say yes or no to leaders who have sensed a divine call to leadership in their context.

- **Because Jesus sent out his disciples in groups of two (cf. Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1) and each early church appears to have had plural leadership (cf. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 20:28), local churches today are best served by a multiple leader model rather than endowing only one person with leadership.** The New Testament also speaks regularly of shared leadership by using the plural for the equipping gifts (Eph 4:11), for “deacons” (1 Tim 3:8; Phil 1:1), and for “elders” (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; Jas 5:15). While the single leader model may be more efficient and follow successful business organizations in our world, it is not the New Testament model. Churches are best served by multiple leaders who can share responsibility and accountability.

**Because of these biblical pointers, most MB churches lean toward an adapted congregational structure** where a) congregations affirm the mission, vision, and theological/ethical convictions of the local church; b) congregations discern, call, and affirm leaders; c) all leaders regularly report to and are held accountable to the larger congregation for their leadership and actions; d) leadership is shared within smaller groups (e.g., Leadership Teams, Elders, etc.) rather than held by one individual; and e) major financial, missional, personnel, and strategic decisions are brought for approval to the congregation (usually leading to congregational meetings at least once but up to a few times per year).

## **15. Why doesn't Article 6 say anything about the issue of women in church leadership?**

**Article 6 does not address the question of whether certain church leadership roles should or should not be limited to only male disciples of Jesus.** Mennonite Brethren hold the conviction that the Bible affirms that both men and women are created in the image of God, called to actively serve as disciples of Jesus, and gifted by the Holy Spirit with gifts to build up the church. The question is only whether within these truths, the New Testament commands any limitation on churches about discerning women

for leadership roles with the church family.

Between 1981 and 1999, Mennonite Brethren had officially welcomed gifted and called women into local church leadership roles with the exception of that of lead pastor. In 1999, there was a continuation of this one limitation (viz., lead pastor of a local church) but there was a greater encouragement and recognition of the eligibility of gifted and called women into leadership “on Conference boards, in pastoral staff positions and in our congregations, institutions and agencies.... We call the church to be increasingly alert to the gifts of women and to become more active in calling them to minister.”

Then, in 2006 the Canadian MB Conference passed a new resolution that addressed this lead pastor limitation for women by stating, “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.”

The present situation in MB churches across Canada is that there is diversity between congregations in terms of this question. The admonition from 1999 holds as much truth for then as now: “We further call people in the Spirit of Christ to relate to one another in mutual respect as brothers and sisters in Christ.”

## **16. What is the relationship between the New Testament church and the Old Testament people of God Israel? What are the implications for how Christians should relate to ethnic/national Israel today?**

The first is an age-old question and the second hotly debated since the beginning of the state of Israel in 1948. Article 6 provides no specific clarity about these questions. Here are the three most common models and their implications for how Christians should relate to the nation of Israel today:

- 1. The Church and Israel are Separate.** In this view, God worked through ethnic Israel from the time of Abraham and has an ongoing plan for them that involves the physical promised land and the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophetic promises. The church, which began at Pentecost, is distinct and different from Israel. Ethnic/national Israel continues to exist separately from the church, and continues to be called into the covenants and promises within the Old Testament even if it is in a sort of “holding pattern” during the present age of the church. At some point, ethnic/



national Israel will begin to play a very significant role in God's end-time plans.

### **Implications for our relationship with ethnic/national Israel?**

If the church and Israel are separate in God's economy, God must have an ongoing and significant role for ethnic Israel from the first century until the final return of Jesus. The establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 and the preservation of the nation of Israel since that time demonstrates the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel recorded in the Old Testament (Isa 11:11; Jer 29:14; Ezek 36:24-26; Amos 9:14-15; Zech 8:7). Because God continues to work in and through ethnic/national Israel, Christians should actively support and pray for ethnic Jews, for the nation of Israel itself, and for the fulfillment of restoration promises around priesthood and temple (cf. Ezek 40-48). Support of ethnic/national Israel is also part of God's larger plan that "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:25-32).

2. **The Church Replaces Israel.** In this view, the Old Testament people of God (Israel) ends, because of their rebellion and rejection of Jesus their Messiah, and Israel is replaced by the church. God's covenants with Israel were conditional, so because of Israel's rebellion, God ended them and initiated a "new covenant" in Jesus (cf. Jer 31:31, Luke 22:20; 2 Cor 3:6-7; Heb 8:6-13; 12:24). This new covenant (Heb 8:8-12) replaces the inferior older obsolete covenant. The Kingdom has also been taken away from Israel and given to others (Matt 8:10-12; 21:43; Mark 12:1-12).

### **Implications for our relationship with ethnic/national Israel?**

While there seems to be a variety of opinions here, consistency with this position should mean that Christians express the same concern for ethnic/national Israel as they would for any other national or people group.

3. **The Church is the Continuation and Fulfillment of Israel.** In this view, God's plan involved the calling of Abraham to a relationship of faith which was intended always to bless the whole world (cf. Gen 12:3) and include gentiles (Ruth 2:10-12; Isa 56:1-8). All through the Old Testament, there is a distinction made between "true Israel" and the "not my people" Israel (cf. Hos 1:10; 6:7). True Israel is the Israel that lives by faith, worship, and God's mission which means that ethnic Israelites like Ishmael and Esau (and their offspring) are not true Israel (cf. Matt 3:9; John 8:39-56; Rom 9:8; Gal 6:16). Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament hopes

and promises (Luke 24:27, 44-45; 2 Cor 1:20; Heb 13:4), the one and only means of salvation (1 Tim 2:5; Acts 4:12), and the one who sends out the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:26; Acts 1:8).

True Israel is the Israel that responded in faith to Jesus's preaching of the good news of God's coming Kingdom. True Israel is the "olive root" (Rom 11:17-21) and Jesus the true vine (cf. John 15) that is at the base of the New Testament church. Unfaithful Israelites are those who reject Jesus the Messiah, Israel's true King (Eph 2:12; Rev 3:9) and are therefore pruned from the tree (Rom 11:20-21).

Gentiles who respond to Jesus's Great Commission are grafted on to the tree. As a result, the church and true Israel are one and the same (cf. John 10:16; Eph 2:11-21). The church, by faith, is the "Israel of God" (Gal 6:15-16; cf. Eph 2:11-13), the true children of Abraham (Gal 3:7, 29), the "circumcision" (Phil 3:3), and the recipient of the promises to Israel. The church is "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession" (1 Pet 2:9) which mimics the description of Israel in Exodus 19:5-6. The new covenant (cf. Jer 31:31, Luke 22:20; 2 Cor 3:6-7; Heb 8:6-13; 12:24) is not so much "new" as "renewed" and extended. It does not replace all the earlier God and Israel covenants but it is a continuation and fulfillment of them. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the land and people fulfillment promises of the Old Testament and is bringing a Kingdom that is not "of this world" (John 18:36; cf. Luke 17:20-21; Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 15:50) and is only entered into by means of spiritual renewal (John 3:3-5).

**Implications for our relationship with ethnic/national Israel?** If the church is the continuation and fulfillment of true Israel and faith in Jesus is the only road to reconciliation and salvation, ethnic/national Israel is outside of true Israel and stands in the same need of repentance and conversion to Jesus as do all other nations. Since Christians should love all their neighbours, express compassion to all people in conflict and suffering, and pray that all people would come to follow Jesus and become part of God's Kingdom story, this is certainly true for Jewish people with whom we share a common story and many common ancestors. Christians should pray for safety, protection, and peace for all people in our world and this includes Israel. Christians should also pray against injustice and violence that leads to war and suffering.

As part of this, Christians will need to stand in opposition to those who attack national Israel, and also times when, like the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Isa 1, 5, 10, 58, 59), Christians will need to stand in opposition to national Israel when it promotes policies and actions that encourage injustice and violence. In all cases, Christians are not anti-Muslim or anti-Semitic but pro-peace, pro-reconciliation, and pro-invitation to Jesus.