



Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment A Plan to Discern Faithfulness on Matters of Sexuality

Being a Faithful Church Part 3 was presented at the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 2011 (Waterloo), where received the approval of the delegate body based on the following recommendations:

Delegate Actions: Mennonite Church Canada Delegate Assembly, July, 2011:

We approve this document as a framework and plan to guide the ongoing discernment in Mennonite Church Canada on matters of sexuality.

Our approval is also a commitment to encourage and support the General Board as it continues to provide the leadership needed to implement this plan, and to encourage our congregations and Area Churches to participate as fully as possible.

Action recommended by General Board, Mennonite Church Canada; July, 2011.

Brief Review:

The questions, responses, and plans articulated in this document are built on the previous two resources that have been processed with the delegates of Mennonite Church Canada at Assemblies 2009 and 2010.¹ It is important to understand this document as fruit of a process that we have already engaged. What is articulated here needs to be processed by the delegates of Mennonite Church Canada congregations and Area Churches.

- a) The first discernment paper (June/2009) emphasized several important points:
- b) Discerning the will of God is the ongoing task of the church;
- c) Christian Scripture is foundational for the ongoing discernment of the church;
- d) Christian Scripture can be interpreted in different ways depending on which voices gain dominance and which ones are less dominant;
- e) The church will want to speak what it understands so that it can live accordingly;

- f) We do not discern in a vacuum; we have previous statements (e.g., The Confession of Faith) and these are sufficient as a foundation for our life together until something else is discerned;
- g) Through discernment, the church speaks again and either confirms what it has said before, modifies what it has said, or changes what it has understood.
- h) We can trust that God's Spirit will guide our discernment;
- i) It is important to discern in a "churchly way," and focus on that, rather than pre-determine where we want to get to;
- j) What is most important is that we have exercised the discernment in a Spirit-filled manner befitting the Body of Christ, and have done so as well as we can.

The second discernment paper (July/2010) applied some of the basic principles of reading and interpreting the Bible to the question of being a Peace Church:

- a) We identified the form of scriptural interpretation that has led us to affirm our Peace Church-Pacifist identity;
- b) We identified how we have dealt with the scriptural voices that are used by others to deny a Peace Church-Pacifist emphasis;
- c) We identified contextual realities that pressure us to change the style of our discernment and the conclusions we reach;
- d) We indicated that we need to define the criteria that we would need in order to test the spirit of the voices within and beyond scripture;
- e) We indicated that this same ongoing discernment is needed for any challenge facing the church.

Sexuality in the life of the church:

Issues related to sexuality in the life of the church are among the challenges that precipitated the General Board's sense that we need to strengthen our corporate capacity to discern the will of God. The challenges we face are many. It is important to discern the appropriate response of the church to the realities it faces, such as: cohabitation and common law marriage, same-sex committed relationships, extra-marital sex, pornography, and perhaps others. There is some public disagreement in our Body, and this causes private pain that is very real. We yearn to be healthy, but we are hurting. These hurts and the potential divisions lead us to a sense of urgency to discern again our understanding of sexual fidelity in the Christian life and in the Church.

¹ Being a Faithful Church: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment (Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 09); Being a Faithful Church 2: Being a Faithful Church 2: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment: "Peace Church" as "Pacifist Church" (www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre)

Our sincere desire is to be a witness to the presence of God's reign within us, among us, and in the world.

The General Board has discerned that it is important at this time to reconnect the broader discussion about discernment with the specific challenge of issues related to sexuality in the life of the church. The church needs to face these challenges, and needs to do so as part of the joyful task of being the church in Canada in the 21st century.

A suggested timeline for this stage of the "Becoming a Faithful Church" process:

- 1) July 2011 Assembly: Discussion of parameters for the next 4-5 years. Process to be adapted and approved by delegates.
- 2) September 2011- March 2012: Discussions of criteria to guide interpretation of Scripture.
- 3) July 2012 Assembly: Approval of criteria for interpretation. A study theme will focus on scriptural interpretation.
- 4) Sept 2012 to March 2013: Begin discussions on sexuality in the life of the church with reference to specific questions such as cohabitation and common law marriage, same sex relationships, extra marital sex, pornography, or other issues, and prepare a presentation for the 2013 Assembly.
- 5) July 2013 Assembly: The Church will begin to speak into issues as it is ready.
- 6) Sept 2013 to March 2014: All parties are invited to reflect on preliminary discussions/decisions made at Assembly.
- 7) July 2014 Assembly: Mennonite Church Canada will speak again on some of the issues identified in this process.

Next steps:

We are a Christian/Mennonite denomination. Different parts of the denomination play different roles in discernment. This paper focuses on the role of the central denominational structure in moving discernment forward. It is important to understand this limitation. This paper does not outline processes that may be used in congregations or Area Churches.

While the first two papers suggested a framework critical for communal discernment to happen and applied this framework to the challenge of being a Peace Church, this paper takes us into the nitty-gritty of healthy, ecclesial discernment. An important part of such discernment is to name and agree to basic issues of who, what, where, when, and how. To facilitate delegate discussion, the General Board has identified some of the key questions that require common understandings to move ahead. There may be others that should be named as well. The General Board has also provided responses to these questions. These responses represent the framework of a plan. They need to be tested/edited/ approved by Mennonite Church Canada delegates. In this way, we hope to move forward together.

As we begin:

- 1) We need to be intentional about inviting our discernment to be guided by the Holy Spirit. How can we do that?
 - a) We invite the Holy Spirit into our discernment when we undergird the process with our best spiritual disciplines, like prayer, careful study of scripture, worship, meditation, fasting, use of the arts, and more (Some of these have already been laid out in the previous papers.)
 - b) Listening well to our community is central to allowing for the leading of the Holy Spirit. Good listening will include sharing our experiences of God's leading, practicing respectful conversation, allowing for silence, and being clear on the ground rules of discussions.
 - c) We invite the Holy Spirit to guide us when we resist the temptation to predetermine the outcome of our discernment.
 - d) To allow the Spirit to lead, we are intentional about opening ourselves to wisdom from outside of ourselves and our immediate circles. We acknowledge that God's Spirit blows where it wills, and sometimes God's wisdom surprises us and comes from unexpected places.
 - e) We pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us to agreement in our discernment, but we recognize that we may feel the Spirit nudging us in different directions. We commit ourselves to listening carefully in an ongoing way to the dissenting voices and recognize that the Spirit is also guiding the church through them.
 - f) We invite the Holy Spirit to deepen our understanding of how the life of Christ and his cross unite us in spite of our differences and disagreements.
- 2) We understand scriptural authority as foundational in the life of the church. How do we make this real?
 - a) We understand that the Bible's authority comes alive in the life of the church when Scripture is open, in the midst of the church, with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of such discernment guides the life and faith of the church.
 - b) The participation of the membership of the church is, thus, critical to the process of discernment.

A) Questions about responsibility and authority:

- 1) Who has the responsibility/authority to lead and facilitate the discernment process for the whole denomination?
- 2) Who has the responsibility/authority to set the timeline that will guide the process?
- 3) When a multi-stage process of discernment is going on, who has the responsibility/authority to declare an acceptable consensus to move ahead to the next stage?
- 4) Who has the responsibility/authority to speak on behalf of the church?

Response:

- a) Mennonite Church Canada's polity identifies two levels of membership: congregations and Area Churches. Final responsibility/authority lies with the delegates chosen to represent these members.
- b) Mennonite Church Canada's by-laws give responsibility/authority for the ongoing care and decision-making process to an elected General Board and its officers. This board has representatives from Area Churches, congregations, program councils, Faith and Life Committee, and members-at-large.
- c) There are other key circles of consultation and discernment that help the General Board in its discernment. One is a group made up of the Area Church Moderators and Executive Leadership, and the Area Church Ministers. Another is the Faith and Life Committee. Another is the Executive Staff of Mennonite Church Canada. Another is the Executive Committee of the General Board. Others are the Program and Finance Committees of Mennonite Church Canada. The General Board also consults broadly with other groups as needed.

B) Questions of Process:

- 1) How will we assure that we have a process that allows all concerned to participate?
- 2) What is the time-line that will be used for decision-making?
- 3) What is the process that will be used to "speak again?"
- 4) What are the key questions that will be addressed?

Response:

- a) Study and feed-back instruments will be designed, and the Mennonite Church Canada constituency will be encouraged to respond.
- b) Care will be taken to make the mechanisms of response as user-friendly as possible.
- c) These responses can be individual, congregational, or by interest-group.
- d) All responses will be compiled and considered seriously as the process moves ahead.
- e) This plan (*Being a Faithful Church 3*) will be recommended by the General Board to the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly in July 2011. Delegates will have opportunity to amend, approve, or reject the plan.
- f) Some parts of the plan (see below) will be worked at after July 2011, and a comprehensive report for discussion and affirmation will be presented to Assembly/2012.
- g) It is hoped that in this process, the key questions that need to be asked and answered will emerge. These questions will be presented and approved in Assembly/2013.
- h) Depending on the questions that are identified, and the time needed to prepare for them, Mennonite Church Canada will begin to "speak again" in Assembly/2014. It is anticipated, however, that this will be a multi-year process, because it is unlikely that all questions can be addressed at the same time.

C) Questions of Content:

- 1) What criteria will be used to weigh the voices of scripture so that they will help us decide whether our "speaking again" will be saying the same thing, modifying our previous speech, or saying something new?
 - a) This very important question needs careful attention and must be addressed for discernment to happen in ways that have spiritual integrity. We will encourage broad participation and feedback from all constituents who wish to shape the discernment. The criteria will be shaped together.
 - b) A feed-back tool will be developed to facilitate this participation. We are confident that this exercise will strengthen our sense of being a biblical people, and offer guidance to our congregations and beyond to others who also are struggling with issues of discernment.
 - c) The spiritual discernment will be sifted, organized, and compiled so that the sense of the respondents can be identified. The hope is that a framework will emerge that will help us interpret the voices of scripture in faithful and relevant ways.
- 2) What alternatives within the Body will be available for those who will choose to exercise an alternative understanding?
 - a) The fruit of the process of discernment should not be the injury and division of the Body, but the faithfulness of the Body. Yet, it is possible that not all will embrace the outcomes. Sometimes faithfulness involves the creation of new cells within the Body.
 - b) Together we need to think seriously about the ongoing role and presence in the Body of those who disagree with the outcomes of the discernment. The "democratic" answer, namely that if 51% are "right" then 49% must be "wrong" is not good enough for the church. The answer that that you are "either for us or against us" is also not good enough for the church. Nor is the oft quoted political slogan "love it or leave" good enough for the church. There is no blueprint; it will need to emerge from our discernment process.

A way ahead:

Not everything can or should be defined at the beginning. Flexibility, informed by the process itself, is needed. But it is prudent and realistic to assume that some of the processes and decisions will require more time than others. It is also possible that the process itself will point to paths that are not yet contemplated in this document.

These are not sequential processes but parallel ones, i.e., they all need to be worked at simultaneously. The framework is before us. The General Board is presenting this plan for delegate approval.

A Watching World:

The challenges presented by the questions around sexuality are complex and can be divisive. There are lessons but there is no easy "menu" that we can borrow from other denominations to apply to our own process of discernment. Rather, our approach needs to be home-made, taking seriously the sensitivities, ethos, and processes that are assumed by Mennonite Church Canada[ians]. We need to apply our best expertise with boldness and humility, recognizing that we depend on God's grace

and timing and not our hopes and skills alone. In that spirit of bold humility, we move forward in hope that, by God's grace, the process and decisions we make will be what we can own as ours; that it will energize and unite us as a people; and that it will be a faithful witness to the watching world.

Having said this, we are keenly aware that others are watching closely: our young people and young adults (within and beyond our denomination); our sister Anabaptist denominations in Canada; our sister denominations in the USA; the leadership, and beyond, of Mennonite World Conference members; the ecumenical worlds we move in (EFC, CCC); the inter-faith world we are connected to; the disenchanting Mennonites (and others) who are no longer active in church life; the public media and press; and so on.

Will there be squabbling, in-fighting, power-plays, back-stabbing, anger, gossip, threats, and division? We want to be a people confident of our identity as faithful Christians, going about the vocation that is ours, practicing the love, forgiveness, burden-bearing, truth-telling, humility, sincerity, trust, and nonviolent spirituality that are embedded in our identity, our formal Confession, and our proclamation to others.

Will we understand the need for such a process as an unwelcome burden imposed on Christ's Body? Or will we understand the potential witness to others that this process offers? Will we engage each other with the joy of our vocation, which is to "discern the times [kairos]" (Luke 12:54-56), to "test the spirits" (I John 4:1), to "be worthy of our calling" (Eph. 4:1), "to live our life in a manner worthy of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27), and to be a "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) to a watching world?

We are boldly stepping into a risky conversation. We need to keep seeking God's help and depending on God's grace and timing for this to be a positive witness to a watching world. Without that, our human efforts will fail. We believe that the final outcome of our discernment will pale in comparison to the missional potential of the witness offered by the process itself if we yield our spirits, our wills and our path boldly and humbly to God.

Conclusion:

We need to live what we proclaim, namely that the unity of the church is not of our doing, but is a gift of the Spirit that we celebrate. The Faith and Life Committee helped us understand this profound insight in 2006. They stated:

According to the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, unity is not our doing. We are bound together by something bigger than our own efforts and immeasurably greater than our failures. Unity in Christ is not something we choose to create; rather, it is the blessing of Christ's death on the cross granted to us. In Ephesians 2, Paul is talking specifically of how Christ broke down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. In Paul's mind there could be no division more radical, yet God through Christ broke down the barrier and placed the two enemies into one family.²

And we conclude with them:

There is nothing that can usurp the preeminent place of faith in Jesus Christ. In Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith and nothing else. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3: 28-29). We are chained together in peace by Christ through his death on the cross (Eph. 4:3).³

Mennonite Church Canada General Board
July, 2011

2 The Unity of Christians in the Body of Christ; Presented by the Faith and Life Committee at the Annual Assembly in Edmonton (July 2006), p.2. (<http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre>)

3 Ibid. p.3.