

being a faithful church 6.1

General Board
Mennonite Church Canada



BFC 6.1: Summary and Analysis of BFC 6 Responses¹

1. Introduction

We are grateful to God for the time dedicated by congregations and individuals in responding to the Being a Faithful Church 6 (BFC 6) discernment request in 2014/2015. We received about 100 pages of thoughtful and helpful responses for BFC 6 from more than 50 congregations and about 25 individuals and groups. There were many expressions of appreciation for the opportunities provided for congregational discernment. There were also testimonies indicating that the congregational conversations were helpful and that interest was very high.

We begin by thanking each group, congregation, and individual for your insightful and helpful responses.

It has been our privilege to read the reports, reflect on them, and utilize them for further recommendations.

2. BFC6 Summary: What did we ask? And what did we hear?

BFC 6 asked for feedback on three questions:

1. *How shall we maintain our unity in Christ as congregations, Area Church/National Church while understanding matters of committed same-sex relationships differently?*
2. *How will your congregation strengthen Christ's love to those who are same-sex oriented?*
3. *What additional counsel do you have for the Area/National Church?*

As a Task Force we have worked hard at reading, understanding, and charting the responses. In this report we wish to identify the key common threads that we saw in the responses. We also want to identify some of the "shorter" threads: important perspectives expressed, but less often.²

¹ We refer to the "Discernment Guide" that went to the congregations in October/2014 - together with the responses from congregations - as BFC 6. We refer to the analysis and summary of the responses by the Task Force as BFC 6.1.

² The narrative nature of the responses received does not allow for quantitative numbers or percentages to be assigned, but 'key common threads' reflect unanimous, independently arrived at, conclusions of Task Force members.

Key common threads.

- a) Discernment on how to respond to committed same-sex relationships is best exercised in the context of congregational life.
- b) We have not disagreed well in the past; that is, we have not dealt well with conflict in our congregations, and we do not have good models for stepping into disagreements or disputes.
- c) The tone and content of the responses indicated that there was a deep level of engagement in the discussion around BFC 6.
- d) Responses indicated a strong sense of the need for hospitality toward those with whom we disagree. Some of the phrases/words used to indicate this were: "safe place," "listening," "respect/respectful."
- e) There was a call for engaging (listening to/hearing) more stories from the LGBTQ community.
- f) The responses indicated a continuing desire for unity in the Body and a hope that fragmentation or splintering would be avoided.
- g) Relationships make a difference. Congregations that have first-hand experience with same-sex attracted people in their midst are more ready to engage in the conversation.
- h) There was a call to provide room for disagreement. There was an additional call to provide "space" for those congregations who have discerned that God has called them to greater acceptance of committed same-sex relationships.
- i) There was recognition that unity is not simply a matter of agreement. It is a deeper commitment to each other and to the Body, even where there is disagreement.
- j) Some suggested that the first priority must be agreement on "truth" and "faithfulness" and the concern for unity must be secondary. In the same vein, others suggested that unity in Christ and organizational unity are not the same thing. (Both short threads.)
- k) The BFC 6 responses indicated an increased number over BFC5 and earlier BFC feedback of congregations and individuals with a desire/intention to move towards greater inclusiveness.
- l) Responses mentioned the important role of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* as a guide. Others viewed it as a basis for discipline (shorter thread). Still, others called for it to be changed (shorter thread).

- m) Responses received from individuals tended to be more definitive in tone than the responses from congregations. Many of the “congregational” responses indicated that they did not represent the entire congregation, but only a particular group within it, like the Council, Sunday School class or special discussion group.
- n) Responses indicated that ongoing biblical study is required and that discernment is not yet finished.
- o) Responses indicated a reluctance to discipline others, either by excommunication or removal of credentials. A shorter thread, however, did call for discipline to be exercised by the Area or National Churches against churches or pastors at variance with the *Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective*.
- p) Responses indicated a desire for the National Church to lead in providing resources for worship, study, and inspiration.
- q) Responses indicated that it is more important to remain focused on core matters of faithfulness and ministry than on matters of disagreement.
- r) Responses indicated that Christ calls us to love all people despite our differences.

Three Key Elements from BFC6

Three key elements in the responses should be noted:

- a) There is a deep yearning for unity among us – unity of the Spirit which is also manifested in unity of ministry, organization, and structure.
- b) Prayerful discernment about how to respond to same-sex realities in our congregations has led us to divergent understandings.
- c) Because the yearning for unity is linked to the reality of difference in discernment, space for difference/diversity is needed.

How do we understand these key elements? Some point to the biblical teaching about forbearance to describe the need to maintain the unity of the Spirit in spite of differences among us. Others point to the necessary role of the prophetic voice calling God’s people to faithfulness, with the understanding that the Body of Christ must constantly engage in “testing the spirits” to see if they are of God. Still others point to the critical role that personal conscience has played in Anabaptist history.

We are grateful for the responses received, and these, along with the previous rounds of discussion and feed-back, will provide the basis for recommending future steps.

September , 2015