



600 Shaftesbury Blvd  
Winnipeg MB R3P 0M4  
Toll Free 1-866-888-6785  
T: 204-888-6781  
F: 204-831-5675  
E: [office@mennonitechurch.ca](mailto:office@mennonitechurch.ca)  
W: [www.mennonitechurch.ca](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca)

Sep. 4, 2015

Subject: Being a Faithful Church 6.1 & 7

Dear Friends:

Greetings in name of Christ, our Redeemer and Lord!

Hopefully, you are entering this autumn season feeling refreshed and relaxed from the warm rays of summer.

We are pleased to bring you the latest documents in our Being a Faithful Church (BFC) process. This past winter you were invited to respond to BFC 6: Unity, Christ's Love, and Faithfulness in Discerning Matters of Sexuality. The responses have been carefully studied and a summary of responses can be found in the enclosed BFC 6.1: *Summary and Analysis of BFC 6 Responses*.

In preparation for the Assembly in 2016, you will also find a copy of BFC7: *Summary and Recommendation On Sexuality 2009-2015*. Please review and study these documents carefully. Some congregations have studied the material through small groups, Sunday School classes, Sunday evening gatherings or in leadership groups. Again, we invite you to choose the most appropriate forum for your congregation.

After you have studied and discussed the material one final question remains: **"Is there any further response that your congregation or group would like the BFC Taskforce to hear before Assembly 2016?"**

Should there be any difficulty with the attachments, you can also download the documents from the following links:

BFC 6.1: [www.commonword.ca/go/288](http://www.commonword.ca/go/288)

BFC 7: [www.commonword.ca/go/289](http://www.commonword.ca/go/289)

The link to the BFC Bundle: [www.commonword.ca/go/287](http://www.commonword.ca/go/287)

Please send any responses to Willard Metzger, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4 or [wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca](mailto:wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca) by Feb. 15, 2016.

Your ongoing participation has been greatly appreciated and valued by the Task Force and the General Board.

Thanks again for your continued prayerful engagement as together we prepare for Assembly 2016.

In Christ,

Hilda Hildebrand  
Moderator

Willard Metzger  
Executive Director

*"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 3:11*



## Summary and Recommendation On Sexuality 2009-2015

### I. Background

In 2007 the General Board of Mennonite Church Canada embarked on the Being a Faithful Church (BFC) discernment journey which would eventually include matters of sexuality. The first BFC paper was processed and approved by the delegates in 2009. The decision to walk toward this discussion was in response to ongoing ferment around the reality of committed same-sex relationships in our midst, continuous calls at national Assemblies to readdress MC Canada's position on committed same-sex relationships, and the desire to honour the Saskatoon Resolution on Sexuality of 1986 which called for ongoing discussion.

The discernment methodology used by the Task Force has consisted of six cycles of preparing a document, sending it out to congregations and asking for feedback on specific questions. On the basis of the responses received, the Task Force, with General Board approval, has determined the next step in the discernment, resulting in a new round of preparation and response. Over the process of the discernment, 145 churches have submitted responses, as well as groups and individuals. Compared to normal response levels, the discernment feedback can be considered very strong. This final document, BFC7, is based on the entirety of the responses received over the seven years. It is our conviction that the methodology has been consistent with an Anabaptist ecclesiology in which discernment of God's will should happen through the study of Scripture, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in the context of the people of God in local congregations and gathered assemblies. The Task Force is confident that we have heard the prayerful representative voice of our constituency.

The early BFC documents established that discerning the will of God is the ongoing task of the church and the Christian Scripture must be foundational in this discernment. On the basis of this discernment the church speaks again and either confirms what it has said before, modifies what it has said, or changes what it has understood. Early in the process of discernment, the goal was set to speak again on the matter of same sex-relationships at the Assembly in 2016. It was stated that it is important to discern in a "churchly way," and focus on that, rather than pre-determine our final conclusion. We claimed the promise that God's Spirit will guide our discernment.

BFC 4 gave special attention to the question of how to best use Scripture in discernment and this resulted in what has been referred to as the 'Paths and Ditches' document.<sup>1</sup> The document articulated twelve paths we want to stay on in discernment and described the ditches we need to avoid. BFC4.1 brought the focus of discernment more directly to matters of sexuality, which led to BFC5, *"Between Horizons: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality."* The responses to that paper and to the follow-up tasks resulted in BFC6<sup>2</sup>.

### II. What have we learned as a Task Force in the seven year BFC process?

Following are some of the observations and reflections offered by the Task Force after these seven years of denominational discernment:

1. Our congregations deeply value Scripture, yet we differ dramatically in our biblical interpretation. The "Paths and Ditches" is a remarkable document coming out of our congregations which leaves us with a good tool for ongoing discernment.
2. The status of the Bible among our people cannot be taken for granted and needs continued attention. We claim to be a biblical people but sometimes have difficulty in knowing how to use the Bible in discernment.
3. We have trusted in the leading of the Holy Spirit and we have wondered what it means that we have not yet been brought into a place of agreement.
4. We value the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, although the status that it is given in discernment varies. The BFC process has revealed that we do not have an appetite to change the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. This sentiment was particularly evident in BFC5.
5. We value unity in our National and Area Churches, yet we are also congregational and we cherish diversity. In the course of the discernment we have noted a growing realization that unity in Christ is not the same as agreement on all theological, biblical understandings.

1 BFC4, "Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment: Using the Bible in Helpful and Unhelpful Ways."  
(<http://news.mennonitechurch.ca/paths-ditches>)

2 BFC6, (<http://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/43/17279>)

6. We have diversity in our family of faith that can overshadow our common core. The diversity is found within our congregations as well as within the larger Body.
7. We are a people who value individual conscience which leads us to different faith and ethical positions.
8. If we want to be one Body we must also learn to honour those persons with whom we disagree.
9. Congregations, individuals, and particularly pastors are deeply committed to discernment in the church and have given abundantly of their time and energy.
10. We have discovered that the church has the capacity to discern difficult topics together.
11. Our capacity to deal with controversial issues varies from congregation to congregation depending on our particular circumstances.
12. Congregational discernment around difficult issues is not easy for us. Many responses came from groups or individuals within the church who clarified that they were not able to speak for their whole congregation.
13. In spite of the best efforts of the Task Force to plan a process that did not have a predetermined outcome, some still have understood the process to be biased. Communal discernment is complex.
14. Our plan for discernment, when we are open to the Spirit, might take us in unexpected directions. This seemed to happen in BFC5.1 when we discerned a shift from focusing on a specific same-sex question to questions around unity.
15. We are all on a journey when it comes to understanding and responding to the reality of same-sex attraction.
16. Choice of words and terminology is a sensitive matter in discernment. Language carries connotations that we are sometimes not aware of.
17. Accurate, effective communication is critical during times of discernment.

### III. Reaffirming our denominational polity guiding discernment

BFC3 already laid out a framework and plan to guide our discernment in Mennonite Church Canada on matters of sexuality. That document gives detailed attention to questions of responsibility, authority and process within our denomination in any discernment process. Some review of the general division of responsibilities is important as we move forward.

The task of discernment is the function of the whole church. This includes individual believers, congregations, and the larger collective Body — all informed by our context and guided by the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Recognizing that while some dimensions of this discernment belong to the larger Body, much of the on-going discernment and practical implementation is best done in the context of the relationships within the local congregation because:

- i. The community of the congregation provides the pastoral response.
- ii. The community of the congregation provides the context of mutual accountability
- iii. The community of the congregation holds the expectations of discipleship towards growth in Christ

Practically speaking, responsibilities of the congregation include:

- i. Calling of gifts from within the congregation in collaboration with the Area Church.
- ii. Formation, calling to baptism and membership in the congregation.
- iii. Mission and outreach to the community beyond the congregation.
- iv. Calling of leadership to serve the congregation.
- v. Hiring policies of church staff.
- vi. Blessing of marriage.
- vii. Sending of delegates to Area and National Church Assemblies.

Area Church responsibilities include:

- i. Matters of ministerial credentialing and Area Church policy and documents.
- ii. Hiring policies of Area Church staff.
- iii. Maintaining relationships and providing support to congregations involved in matters of discernment.
- iv. Articulating Mennonite Church Canada's position on various matters of faith and practice to the outside world in the Area Church context.

Responsibilities of the National Church include:

- i. Hiring policy of national church staff.
- ii. Appointment of Board members.
- iii. The ownership and care for national policies and documents.
- iv. Articulating and fostering a sense of corporate identity.
- v. Providing resources for matters of on-going discernment.
- vi. Articulating Mennonite Church Canada's position on various matters of faith and practice to the outside world in the national and international context.

## IV. Providing spaces for testing

We have learned throughout the BFC process, but particularly in BFC 5 and 6 that we cherish sets of values which at times find themselves in tension with each other. We deeply value unity and we also value diversity and forbearance even when it leads to differences among us as we seek to be faithful to our understanding of God's will. Our people also have a long history of valuing and acting on conscience in their deep desire to live faithfully.

As we seek to be faithful, we pray that our unity will not be fragmented by our differences. These two foci in dialogue with each other both need to be acknowledged and given consideration. The dissenting voice, after all, may be a prophetic nudging of the Spirit to the entire church, to which we need to give space within our Body for testing, to see whether it is of God or not. Both Scripture<sup>3</sup> and our Confession of Faith<sup>4</sup> call for new insights and interpretations to be tested in the faith community. How can such space for testing be built and shaped in our denominational family while we hold on to our deep desire to remain faithful and united?

## V. Recommendation

Based on what the Task Force has heard in our discernment process concerning same-sex committed relationships, and in the spirit of the church speaking again, the General Board has approved for consideration at the 2016 Delegate Assembly, the following BFC task force recommendation:

- One of our foundations of unity has been the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. We recommend that it continue to serve the church in the ways suggested in the Introduction of the Confession itself.<sup>5</sup>
- We call upon our family of Christ to respectfully acknowledge that there are those among us (congregations and individuals) whose careful study of Scripture and prayerful journey of discernment lead them to a different understanding on committed same-sex relationships than is commonly assumed<sup>6</sup> by readings of Article 19 in our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.
- We recommend that we create space/leave room within our Body to test alternative understandings from that of the larger Body to see if they are a prophetic nudging of the Spirit of God.
- Since continued discernment will be required after Assembly 2016, we recommend that Mennonite Church Canada and Area Churches develop a mechanism to monitor the implementation of this recommendation.

3 I Thess 5:19-22; I John 4:1.

4 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. 1995. Waterloo: Herald Press. pp. 20, 22.

5 "How do Mennonite confessions of faith serve the church? First, they provide guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture. At the same time, the confession itself is subject to the authority of the Bible. Second, confessions of faith provide guidance for belief and practice. In this connection, a written statement should support but not replace the lived witness of faith. Third, confessions build a foundation for unity within and among churches. Fourth, confessions offer an outline for instructing new church members and for sharing information with inquirers. Fifth, confessions give an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times. And sixth, confessions help in discussing Mennonite belief and practice with other Christians and people of other faiths." *Confession*, p. 8.

6 Many understand that the statement, "We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life" while made in reference to heterosexual divorce and remarriage, also prohibits committed same-sex marriage.

## VI. Call to Next Steps Post Assembly 2016

Mennonite Church Canada will continue to use the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* in accordance to the ways suggested in the Introduction to the Confession.<sup>7</sup>

Mennonite Church Canada will acknowledge that after careful study of Scripture and a prayerful journey of discernment some congregations have been led to a different understanding of committed same-sex relationships than is commonly assumed<sup>8</sup> by readings of Article 19 in our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.

Area Churches will determine how they create space for testing alternative understandings which might be a prophetic nudging of the Spirit of God within their congregations.

Congregations will determine how to create space for testing alternative understandings which might be a prophetic nudging of the Spirit of God within their midst.

## VII. Conclusion

The Being a Faithful Church process has been a rich – sometimes frustrating – journey that has challenged our capacity to discern God’s will. We have worked hard at this as congregations for seven years. From the beginning (BFC1, p.3), it was indicated that such a spiritual exercise of discernment must be done in an ongoing context of spiritual disciplines. And this has, indeed, happened. We have worshipped, prayed, studied, and dialogued in our congregations and together at our Assembly gatherings. We have confronted, cried, and come to new places together. It must be acknowledged that some have felt excluded or not heard in the process. Even so, we have persevered together in an arduous process.

BFC1 underscored the importance of such discernment in the normal life of the Church. There we wondered whether our ecclesial muscles were strong enough to withstand the pressures of such an exercise. We asked whether we can be the church in its ongoing vocation of discernment in our time and generation.

We now know. Yes, we do want to be God’s church in our generation. We do want to be a church that is united across cultural lines and the geographic, rural and urban regions of Canada. We do want to continue to be a biblical people. We do want to be disciples of Jesus, and to recognize Jesus as our Lord. We do want to take seriously the polity that has grown out of our Anabaptist identity, and yes, we do want to engage in vibrant ministry and witness to our Lord in our immediate contexts and to our wider world.

For these, and other reasons, this process of discernment has been worth it. The process is worth it because the church is worth it.

As a Task Force we have worked together now for 7 years. We have listened to hundreds, maybe thousands, of comments. We have read hundreds of responses. We have compiled, sifted, and summarized the wisdom that we have heard from our churches. We have identified and recommended the next steps of our discernment. We have requested your participation as congregations, individuals, and organizations. The recommendation before us now is a faithful representation of the lengthy discernment that has happened. We are confident that this recommendation reflects the wisdom of our Body. We believe that the Holy Spirit has accompanied us in our discernment. The Task Force and the General Board commend the fruit of this process into the hands of the delegates of Mennonite Church Canada.

We pray again that in God’s grace and mercy, we can together forge our way ahead. The road may not be lit all the way to the horizon, but we do have enough light to move ahead, because we can see enough of the road to do so in confidence. We know that God is with us.

May God continue to bless us in our desire to be a faithful Church.

September , 2015

---

<sup>7</sup> See footnote #5.

<sup>8</sup> See footnote #6.