

being a faithful church³ Summary Report

General Board
Mennonite Church Canada
September, 2011



Background: The following is a summary of feedback from Assembly Small Group discussion on the Being a Faithful Church recommendation presented at Assembly 2011.

Being a Faithful Church is a guided discernment process whereby the Mennonite Church Canada community of congregations, Area Churches, and National Church joyfully participate in discerning the challenging issues of the church in our time.

By Andrew Reesor-McDowell

The Mennonite Church Canada General Board (GB) has worked on an approach to discernment of important and sometimes difficult issues of faith and practice which is called Being a Faithful Church (BFC). This is part of the vocation of the church and the BFC process is intended to strengthen the capacity of the church to discern God's purposes in matters of faith and practice.

BFC papers were recommended by the General Board (GB) and then discussed and approved by the Delegate Assembly in 2009 and 2010. After careful consideration of how best to approach matters of homosexuality the GB made two important decisions and recommendations to the Delegate Assembly: discernment until Assembly 2012 would focus on key criteria for Biblical interpretation. The General Board would provide a suggested approach and "tool" or guide to support congregations, Area Churches, individuals and interested groups' engagement in this first part of the discernment process. Secondly, the GB recommended beginning in September 2012 that the topic of homosexuality would be discerned more broadly to include the wide scope of matters pertaining to human sexuality. Five sub-topics of human sexuality were mentioned in the BFC 3 paper presented at Assembly 2011. One of the sub-topics pertains to committed same-sex relationships.

The BFC 3 plan had a strong endorsement (almost unanimous) from the delegates at July 2011 Assembly. In addition, the feedback from the small group discussions on BFC 3 gave strong affirmation for the General Board's leadership in these matters.

The most numerous comments on the proposed BFC process from the small group discussion contained the following themes:

1. Affirmation for the BFC process and the leadership of the General Board
2. Hear all voices across the whole spectrum including radical groups and newcomers
3. Take the time needed yet keep the momentum using a clear timetable especially if we have biennial Assemblies.
4. Intentionally invite the Holy Spirit, Scripture and prayer (spiritual disciplines) as an integral part of discernment
5. A Study Guide is a much needed support
6. Affirmation for the discernment on the broad scope of human sexuality
7. Criteria needed for weighing of scripture
8. Engage the Congregations and Area Churches

The next steps in the Being a Faithful Church process:

July 2011 Assembly approved the direction for the next 4-5 years as outlined in the Being a Faithful Church (BFC) paper #3:

- September 2011- March 2012: Discussions of criteria to guide interpretation of Scripture;
- July 2012 Assembly: Approval of criteria for interpretation. The study theme for BFC will focus on scriptural interpretation;
- Sept 2012 to March 2013: Begin discussions on sexuality in the life of the church with reference to specific questions such as common law marriage, same sex relationships, extra marital sex, pornography, or other matters;
- July 2013 Assembly: The Church will begin to speak into specific issues of sexuality when it is ready
- Sept 2013 to March 2014: At the July 2014 Assembly, Mennonite Church Canada will speak again on some of the issues.

The resulting decision saw nearly unanimous delegate approval of the following statement (5 negative votes from a total of 280 delegates) following the presentation, small group, and plenary discussion 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.

The following questions were discussed in more than 40 small groups by delegates and those attending Assembly. Each group was assigned to begin with two questions (of the six) and discuss the other questions as they had time.

Note: The summaries below are intended to give a sense of the discussion rather than a precise count of the number of times a comment was made. There are individual comments that would disagree with the summary statements. The chart of the individual comments is available on request.

Question #1

The General Board is recommending the following action: *We approve this document (Being a Faithful Church 3) 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 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 possible. Can you support this resolution?*

Responses from the small groups:

There was almost unanimous support for the BFC recommendation. Typical comments included: It is a good plan; a good model; a good process; it is clear; we are ready to talk about sexuality; discernment is always the task of the church and this intentional process is a positive step; this is a thorough process; good to focus on scripture; best process seen to date; something we need to do; and, time to be engaged with this topic.

There were concerns regarding the risks of this discussion and the fear that it could lead to polarization; concern regarding both not going too quickly and the length of the process and the impact of biennial Assemblies on lengthening the process; concern that this decision not be driven by a few, or that interest groups get an inside track; that we not neglect other important issues in Mennonite Church Canada; how can we be a global church in this issue; preference to frame the process as a covenant of sexuality; and let's not assume we will have agreement at the end of the process.

There was significant affirmation for looking at sexuality more broadly, which would include same-sex, committed relationships.

The largest number of comments on the BFC process focused on the pace. Most of these said the process should take the time that is needed. Some caution was noted that the time not be doubled if we have biennial Assemblies and that General Board keep up the

momentum of the BFC process. There was encouragement that all voices in the spectrum of opinion be heard. Study of scripture and prayer were seen as important to the process. Local congregation engagement was seen as highly important. It was noted that the process used at Assembly could serve as a model or template for the process at the Congregational and Area Church levels.

Question #2

How can we **ensure that the Holy Spirit is indeed part** of our discernment times? How do you respond to the suggestions in the document? Do you have other suggestions?

Responses from the small groups:

Commit to prayer and scripture study; intentionally make room for the Holy Spirit; practice spiritual disciplines; there are good suggestions in the BFC document; establish clear ground rules and respectful conversation; look for common ground; not assume when there is turmoil that the Spirit is not with us; allow the Holy Spirit to guide and change us; expect God to give us wisdom; not speak critically of those with whom we disagree; do not fear future; create safe places for speaking; use a missional lens; invite the best minds; identify a shepherd for difficult times; dialogue with other Christian bodies.

Question #3

Part A of the document poses questions about **responsibility and authority**. What are your responses and questions?

Responses from the small groups:

There was strong affirmation for the General Board/ National Church to take leadership in this process and set up the communication process even though we are doing this together (Congregations, Area Churches and the National Church). There was some concern that our polity is primarily at the congregational level and the proposed system of authority does not reflect how we experience Mennonite Church Canada as a family beyond the congregation.

Question #4

Part B of the BFC 3 paper spells out a **process** related to our discernment around this and other matters. What are your responses, affirmations and questions?

Responses from the small groups:

Process at Assembly could be used as a template or model for discernment in congregations. There was concern that only interest groups would speak to this topic and not racial groups or newcomers. All voices need to be heard. There were a few comments that suggested that we not vote on this topic in the end. Strongly affirmed in most questions that a study guide is needed.

Question #5

Part C of BFC 3 offers some general comments about content. Do you have any thoughts about the criteria that should be used for **weighing scripture**?

Responses from the small groups:

It is appreciated that Scripture is a living document, with a historical context, is part of the process and that we live under the authority of whole scripture. It would be good to know the history of the issue. The Holy Spirit will help us in this discernment. The Confession of Faith is a framework for discernment. Our approach must be Christo-centric and consistent with variety of Biblical voices. Need to include the church tradition, reason/science, experience (the stories) and culture in weighing scripture. Some discussion involved weighing the church's input and the research done by leaders and scholars. We need criteria to weigh the voices and apparent contradictions. The church is recognized as primary where the process of weighing scripture takes place. We need to avoid proof-texting; need to look at context and overarching principles. We are shaped by the text. Theology and practice are not always parallel. Consider the discernment path on other issues.

Question #6

"We need to live what we proclaim, namely that the **unity of the church** is not our doing, but a gift of the Spirit that we celebrate." How does this comment from the conclusion of the document relate to our discernment?

Responses from the small groups:

We will likely have discussions for many years. We are united in Christ in this decision. Unity is a gift, not a task or a goal, and can be confused with uniformity. Unity was a significant concern of Jesus'. We can take comfort that it is God – not us – building the church. This may take off some pressure and allow the Spirit to work. God creates unity and we do not create unity. We cannot be fear based. Fracturing can be the easy work and unity the difficult path. Our work is yielding and not controlling. Not clear as to the relationship between the decisions between the congregations and the national church. The General Board would have authority after the delegates and all members have opportunity to be heard.