



Mennonite Church Canada

# agreeing disagreeing *in love*



Guidelines for Mennonites in Times of Disagreement

*"Making every effort to maintain the unity  
of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3)*



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# GUIDELINES for Mennonites in Times of Disagreement

## IN THOUGHT

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Accept conflict  | 1. Acknowledge together that conflict is a normal part of our life in the church. Romans 14:1-8, 10-12, 17-19; 15:1-7   |
| Affirm hope      | 2. Affirm that as God walks with us in conflict we can work together through it to growth. Ephesians 4:15-16  |
| Commit to prayer | 3. Admit our needs and commit ourselves to pray for a mutually satisfactory solution (no prayers for my success or for the other to change but to find a joint way). James 5:16 |

## IN ACTION

- |                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Go to the other...           | 4. Go directly to those with whom we disagree; avoid behind-the-back criticism. Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-20  |
| ...In the spirit of humility | 5. Go in gentleness, patience and humility. Place the problem between us at neither doorstep and own our part in the conflict instead of pointing out the other's. Galatians 6:1-5   |
| Be quick to listen           | 6. Listen carefully, summarize and check out what is heard before responding. Seek as much to understand as to be understood. James 1:19; Proverbs 18:13   |
| Be slow to judge             | 7. Suspend judgements, avoid labeling, end name calling, discard threats, and act in a nondefensive, nonreactive way. Romans 2:1-4; Galatians 5:22-26  |
| Be willing to negotiate      | 8. Work through the disagreements constructively. Acts 15; Philippians 2:1-11 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify issues, interests, and needs of both (rather than taking positions).</li><li>• Generate a variety of options for meeting both parties' needs (rather than defending one's own way).</li><li>• Evaluate options by how they meet the needs and satisfy the interests of all sides (not one side's values).</li><li>• Collaborate in working out a joint solution (so both sides gain, both grow and win).</li><li>• Cooperate with the emerging agreement (accept the possible, not demand your ideal).</li><li>• Reward each other for each step forward, toward agreement (celebrate mutuality).</li></ul> |

## IN LIFE

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Be steadfast in love  | 9. Be firm in our commitment to seek a mutual solution; be stubborn in holding to our common foundation in Christ; be steadfast in love. Colossians 3:12-15   |
| Be open to mediation  | 10. Be open to accept skilled help. If we cannot reach agreement among ourselves, we will use those with gifts and training in mediation in the larger church. Philippians 4:1-3  |
| Trust the community   | 11. We will trust the community and if we cannot reach agreement or experience reconciliation, we will turn the decision over to others in the congregation or from the broader church. Acts 15 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In one-to-one or small group disputes, this may mean allowing others to arbitrate.</li><li>• In congregational, area church or denominational disputes, this may mean allowing others to arbitrate or implementing constitutional decision-making processes, insuring that they are done in the spirit of these guidelines, and abiding by whatever decision is made.</li></ul> |
| Be the Body of Christ | 12. Believe in and rely on the solidarity of the Body of Christ and its commitment to peace and justice, rather than resort to the courts of law. 1 Corinthians 6:1-6   |

# BACKGROUND for Mennonites in Times of Disagreement

Mennonites are not immune to conflict. We face it in our homes and churches, in our neighbourhoods and work places. Whenever we interact with other people, we experience conflict.

Too often conflict becomes destructive because we try to avoid it, or because we don't know how to face it well. But we can make it an opportunity to grow, to become more faithful to Jesus, to model Christ-like love for one another.

To work constructively with conflict, we need skills. "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love" outlines approaches to conflict that will help us live out our calling to be Christian peacemakers.

As Christians who care about our sisters and brothers in the church and about our witness to others, we want to address our inevitable conflicts in ways that show our love for each other.

The Peace and Justice Committee of the Mennonite Church developed these guidelines, in consultation with General Conference Mennonite Church leaders. The general boards of both groups approved "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love," and it was then adopted by the General Assembly (MC) and the Triennial Sessions (GC) meeting in Wichita, Kansas, in 1995. Both bodies commend these guidelines to congregations, area conferences (now called area churches), and churchwide agencies.

## BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Bible guides us to seek reconciliation when we disagree. Scripture teaches us that conflict can be an arena for God's revelation.

- Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. Through Christ we are reconciled to God, who gives us the ministry of reconciliation. Romans 5:1-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20
- Reconciliation with others in the church is a prelude to genuine worship. Matthew 5:23-24
- Jesus describes a process for addressing conflict and restoring relationships in the church. Matthew 18:15-22
- Groups in the early church came together to talk about their differences, to seek the Spirit's leading as they worked for consensus. Acts 6:1-6; Acts 15:1-3
- The church needs each person's gifts and perspectives; no one has the corner on truth. 1 Corinthians 12-14
- God's chosen ones are to bear with one another, to forgive each other and to clothe themselves "with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Colossians 3:12-17
- We are to grow in unity and maturity by speaking the truth in love. Ephesians 4:1-16
- God calls us to act and speak with respect for each other despite differences of culture or conviction. Romans 14:1-7; James 1:19; John 7:51; Ephesians 4:25-32; Matthew 7:1-5; 1 Peter 3:8,16
- God's people do not seek the absence of conflict but the presence of shalom, a peace based on justice. Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; Isaiah 58; Matthew 23:23-24; Luke 4:18-19

## ADOPTING THE GUIDELINES

We encourage congregations, area churches, church boards and agencies to commit to these guidelines for agreeing and disagreeing in love, and to use them.

Design a process to study these guidelines and propose them to your congregations. Your process design could include these pieces:

- A. Define the issue: Should our group adopt these guidelines?
- B. Identify goals: To enhance our commitment and ability to deal constructively with conflict.
- C. Clarify steps and timeline:
  1. Approve the process design. The appropriate decision-making body acts to do this.

2. Study the guidelines and the biblical foundations.
    - a. Offer a Sunday school class on conflict resolution skills for congregations.
    - b. Invite a resource person to present a Saturday workshop on the topic.
    - c. Encourage committees and small groups to study the guidelines.
  3. Talk together about using the guidelines.
    - a. Discuss ways to use the guidelines in your context.
    - b. Integrate the guidelines into constitutions, bylaws, personnel policies.
    - c. Note concerns that arise and work to resolve them.
  4. Implement the decision rule (see D. below).
- D. State the decision rule: Identify who will make the decision, and how it will be made.

## USING THE GUIDELINES

After your group has adopted the guidelines, you can:

- Display the "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love" poster in rooms where committees meet.
- Include training on the guidelines in new member classes or orientation sessions.
- Use reconciliation and conflict resolution as a focus for worship from time to time.
- Include articles in your newsletter about the guidelines and your experience with them.
- Appoint a process observer for your meetings, to monitor your group's use of the guidelines.
- Every year evaluate how your group is working with conflict.

## SEVERAL CAUTIONS

The guidelines should not be used as a substitute for the proper exercise of authority. When laws have been broken or people abused, mediation would only be appropriate at later stages, when offenders have taken responsibility for their actions and victims are requesting face-to-face meetings as a step toward their own healing.

The guidelines may inform disciplinary or grievance procedures, but they are not intended as a substitute for such procedures. In inter-cultural settings, the guidelines should be adapted to fit the context.

## SOME BASIC MEDIATION PRINCIPLES

In interpersonal and group conflicts, many of the steps identified in the guidelines can be taken without the help of an impartial third party. When conflict escalates and the principal parties cannot resolve it by negotiating together, outside help should be sought.

In mediation, disputing parties come to their own agreement with the assistance of an objective third party. Those serving as mediators should be trained; attempting to mediate a dispute without having the necessary skills can make matters worse. Trained mediators can help people come to agreement on issues and also aid in healing broken relationships.

If mediation fails to resolve a dispute, arbitration could be sought. The disputing parties would agree in advance to abide by whatever decision the arbitrators make. The arbitrators listen to each party's case, consult with each other, and agree on an outcome that attempts to address the interest of all the parties.