



Resource Centre

# From our Churches

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## **Division or Unity-in-Motion? Probing the Possibility of Disagreement as the Work of the Spirit**

TS 600: Thinking Theologically  
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Since 2009 Mennonite Church Canada has been engaged in a denomination-wide process of discernment called the “Being a Faithful Church” (or “BFC”) process, which is currently focused on matters of human sexuality and understandings of same sex relationships. Given the divergent understandings *and* the desire for unity expressed by congregations in earlier phases of the process, the most recent BFC documents<sup>1</sup> pose – among others – the following questions:

*“Is the same Spirit leading us to differing understandings of faithfulness in regards to same sex relationships? ... Is the challenge for us now to see the fruit of this discernment as also being led by the Spirit of God?”<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Full disclosure: the author of this essay is the son of Robert J. Suderman. Robert Suderman has been lead writer for a number of the BFC documents, former Executive Secretary of Mennonite Church Canada (2005-2010), and is a current member of the BFC Task Force.

<sup>2</sup> General Board, “Being A Faithful Church 5.1: Between Horizons: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality, Assembly 2014 Discernment Guide,” *Mennonite Church Canada* (April 2014): 2.

In this essay I intend to explore some of the implications and possibilities suggested by these questions. I will do so by drawing upon a range of ecumenical voices. While the BFC process is an “in-house” conversation within Mennonite Church Canada, and these questions are posed specifically to the congregations and members of that particular church body, they are important and provocative questions for the broader church as well. By the same token, it is hoped that ecumenical reflections on unity and diversity in the church may also bring insights and perspectives to bear on these questions in a way that may be helpful in this process of discernment.

After some brief initial comments on the context of the questions in play, I will draw upon the work of various theologians – Mennonite, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Emergent (or “New Monastic”) – working in the area of ecumenical relations and reflecting on matters of unity and diversity in the church. Finally, having probed these questions from various angles and perspectives, I will summarize common elements and offer further remarks and possibilities (if not definitive answers) to the important and challenging questions at hand.

## **Context for the Questions**

The focus of this essay is theological, not procedural. The intention here is to explore the nuances and implications of two of the questions that the BFC Task Force is posing; it is not to chart the ins and outs of the debates and controversies going on in the church about same sex relationships, nor to analyze or evaluate the BFC process itself.

That said, the questions under consideration have arisen out of the BFC process as it has unfolded so far, and they constitute theological reflection on the experience of that process. The “procedural” dynamics in the life of the church are reflective – in fact,

constitutive – of the “theological” as well. A number of the BFC documents point to precisely this fact; it is not only the result or outcome of discernment that is significant, but the process of discernment itself. This is true both in terms of the health and spiritual growth of the church, and in terms of its witness “before the watching world.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, while this essay does not include a “procedural” analysis of the BFC process as such, it must be emphasized that the specific questions under consideration are not disembodied, abstract, academic questions. They are profoundly ecclesiological, they arise out of an intensive and ongoing process within a particular ecclesial body, and that is why, in my view, they are so important and compelling.<sup>4</sup>

Can it be that, in the context of a vigorous and ongoing process of discernment, the current disagreements within Mennonite Church Canada about same sex relationships may be understood as the work of the Spirit among us? What might it mean, when discernment does not result in agreement, to heed the apostle who “begs” his readers “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3)? “Is the same Spirit leading us to different understandings of faithfulness in regards to same sex relationships?” Or is it possible that this suggestion represents a cop-out or a loss of nerve – a way of blessing or baptizing the strongly held views of different “sides” and short-circuiting an ongoing process that seeks (or

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<sup>3</sup> “The primary issue is not what exactly we will decide about the challenges that face us; the primary issue is whether we can be the church in doing so.” Robert J. Suderman, “Being a Faithful Church 1: Testing the Spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment,” *Mennonite Church Canada* (March 2009): 3.

BFC 3 elaborates further: “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... 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.” Robert J. Suderman, “Being a Faithful Church 3: A Plan to Discern Faithfulness on Matters of Sexuality,” *Mennonite Church Canada* (March 2009): 4.

<sup>4</sup> Please see Appendix 1 for further context of the BFC process and the specific questions explored in this essay.

should seek) a more unified understanding and a clearer articulation of a “position” as a national church body?<sup>5</sup>

These are real and urgent questions. Let us now turn to a series of voices, deeply engaged in ecumenical conversations about unity and diversity in the church, to hear what they may contribute to our reflection on these matters.

### **Jeremy Bergen – the Holy Spirit amidst division (ecumenical dialogues)**

Jeremy Bergen’s examination of international bilateral dialogues provides a rich survey of various ways that the Holy Spirit is understood to be at work in these ecumenical efforts. Bergen begins by stating that “the modern ecumenical movement is widely interpreted as a sign of the movement of the Holy Spirit for the unity of the church.”<sup>6</sup> Noting that “Ephesians 4 already displays the tension between the unity that exists as a gift from God... (v. 4)... and the unity which is threatened and is therefore a calling... (v. 3),”<sup>7</sup> Bergen lays out his agenda to “identify several basic modes in which the international bilateral dialogues understand the Holy Spirit to be bringing about the unity that does not yet exist among Christians.”<sup>8</sup>

Already at this point the comparisons with the BFC questions are striking. BFC 5.1 and BFC 6 ask whether it may in fact be the work of the Spirit to be bringing about *difference* – rather than “the unity that does not yet exist” - in understandings of faithfulness regarding same sex relationships. Is this moving in a different direction than “unity”? Or might the

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<sup>5</sup> As is evident in the Appendix 1, I have a great deal of respect for the BFC process and the way it has been conducted. At the same time, I do have “procedural” concerns about the latest phase of the process that has given rise to the specific questions that are the focus of this essay. My description of that stage of the process reflects those concerns (see Appendix 1, pp. 22-23).

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Bergen, “The Holy Spirit and Lived Communion from the Perspective of International Bilateral Dialogues,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 49, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 193.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

Spirit's work in bringing about *difference* be, in this case, a mode or a stratagem for the sake of the longer-term goal of unity?

This is, in fact, one of the possibilities raised in Bergen's discussion of "The Spirit in Division; the Spirit in Spite of Division." While it is not surprising that the "dialogues have spoken about the presence of the Spirit in the events of division and their persistence in history,"<sup>9</sup> what is perhaps more remarkable is Bergen's note that "the Catholic-Evangelical dialogue appears to have gone further in its claim that the breaking of communion *may* be understood as mandated by the Spirit"<sup>10</sup> (emphasis added in the original). In parsing the wording of this particular dialogue, Bergen asks "Does this suggest that the enduring essential unity, the basis on which 'offenders' may remain 'brothers or sisters,' may at times require a (temporary) breaking of fellowship for the sake of (future?) lived communion, jointly, in the fullness of apostolic faith?"<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in the Methodist-Catholic dialogue, Bergen says the Catholics maintain that "the 'continual reformation' must be undertaken within the framework of the visible continuity of the church, [whereas] the Methodist perspective evokes the possibility of a providential ordering of division. We may not see just what the Spirit is doing, and perhaps even provisional divisions are in the service of a more profound unity."<sup>12</sup> The record of that particular dialogue goes on to quote Pope John Paul II: "Could it not be that these divisions have been a path continually leading the Church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ's Gospel...? Perhaps all this wealth would not have come to light otherwise..."<sup>13</sup> All of these statements represent striking possibilities in light of the questions before us about whether we can understand our different understandings as fruit of the Spirit's leading.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 202-203.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 203, quoting International Methodist-Catholic Dialogue Commission, "the Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church," Seoul Report (2006), no. 14, quoting Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), p. 153.

In the Disciples-Catholic dialogue, Bergen highlights the suggestion of Spirit-inspired “diversity within the Bible as a paradigm of unity-in-diversity.”<sup>14</sup> This too holds some promise for our theme.

Finally, it is worth underscoring Bergen’s concluding reminder that “texts are not dialogues,” and that “a final report, even an agreed statement, does not capture the relational process by which it came about.”<sup>15</sup> As Bergen says, “the new social reality created in dialogue is difficult to convey to sponsoring churches, magnifying the challenge of reception. Yet, new social realities are certainly at the core of what lived communion would entail.”<sup>16</sup> These insights correlate very closely to the dynamics experienced within Mennonite Church Canada in working through the “Being a Faithful Church” process and agenda.

### **Gerald Schlabach – the practice of stability (“hanging in there” despite disagreement)**

Gerald Schlabach’s 2010 book *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age* speaks directly and powerfully to the issues raised by the BFC process in Mennonite Church Canada and to the specific questions under consideration in this essay.<sup>17</sup> Schlabach’s own summary of the book is “what Protestants can learn from Catholics about sustaining Christian community... by hanging in there with each other and the church itself, even when they disagree.”<sup>18</sup> What follows in the book is a sustained consideration of the practices and virtues needed to “sustain Christian community,” as well as analysis of the ways in which the “Protestant Principle” (the need for continued and constant “prophetic” critique and reform of all human institutions, including the church)

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<sup>14</sup> Bergen, *Bilateral Dialogues*, 212.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> In fact, were I in a position to do so, I would seek to make this book (along with Tim Otto’s *Oriented to Faith* which we will consider shortly) “required reading” for leaders and congregations involved with the BFC process.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald W. Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 9.

becomes the “Protestant Dilemma” (elevating such critique to the status of foundational principle for the identity of the church, which tends to undermine and corrode the very possibility of community life).<sup>19</sup>

This articulation of “the Protestant Dilemma” already speaks to the question of whether disagreement may itself be the fruit of the Spirit’s leading. Is the BFC’s question an example of “the Protestant Dilemma” in action? That is, the conviction that of course the work of the Spirit leads to disagreement (“protest” and “prophetic” critique), with the implication that to be true to our “prophetic” stance, though it troubles us, we must separate from those who believe differently. I expect this is precisely the dynamic at work in a number of the Mennonite Church Canada congregations relating to the BFC process, including those whose views lie at opposite ends of the spectrum regarding same sex relationships.

Or does the question about disagreement as the work of the Spirit represent an attempt to find ways to “hang in there with each other, even when we disagree”? This is evidently the intention of the BFC Task Force in its discernment of which questions to bring forward for the discernment of the church,<sup>20</sup> and I expect it is the dynamic in a number of other congregations participating in the process. In fact, it may not be far off the mark to understand the BFC Task Force’s questions as a means of prodding the church to grapple with precisely the “Protestant Dilemma” that Schlabach is describing.

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<sup>19</sup> See Shlabach, p. 24 for an initial articulation of these themes that are re-stated and explored throughout the book.

<sup>20</sup> The following are the three main questions to which the BFC Task Force is inviting feedback: “Question #1: God’s gift of unity is not invalidated by our disagreement. How shall we maintain our unity in Christ as congregations, Area Church/National Church while understanding matters of same-sex relationships differently?

Question #2: Most responses indicated a desire to better understand individuals who are same sex attracted and to demonstrate the love of Christ towards all people. Describe how your congregation hopes to reflect this desire.

Question #3: Based on your reflections in questions 1 and 2 above, what additional counsel do you have for the Area/National church?”

General Board, *BFC 5.1, 2*.

Schlabach himself has an interesting vantage point from which to consider these questions, as “a Mennonite who has entered into full communion with the Catholic Church.”<sup>21</sup> He goes to some lengths to insist that “this book is not about encouraging people to abandon Protestant churches... Rather, it is about virtues that all Christian communities need to sustain their communal lives, whatever their ecclesial location.”<sup>22</sup> In addition to hoping to make such a contribution *within* Christian communities, Schlabach also hopes his book “promotes conditions for the possibility of greater church unity” *among* and *between* different ecclesial bodies as well.<sup>23</sup> Space permits brief mention of only a few of the salient points in Schlabach’s discussion that relate directly to the questions at hand.

First, Schlabach draws attention to a key insight articulated by Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) and Cardinal Kasper (president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity): “Both have insisted that the proper goal of ecumenical dialogue is not that long-separated Christians move closer to one another but rather that together we grow closer to Christ.”<sup>24</sup> While this insight is articulated in the context of ecumenical relations, it would seem to be highly applicable to churches facing internal disagreement as well. To emphasize that the call is not for one “side” to win over the other but for “the conversion of all to Jesus Christ”<sup>25</sup> could be an argument in favour of the possibility that different understandings in different communities (or within the same community) may be understood as the work of the Spirit. If the movement is understood to be not primarily toward each other (that is, toward adopting the “position” of one “camp” or another) but toward Christ, then “different understandings” may in fact represent different-

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<sup>21</sup> Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism*, 9. Schlabach goes to some lengths to acknowledge and reflect on the ambiguities and complexities of his own journey, including what may be perceived as the irony of advocating passionately for the importance of “hanging in their with each other” when his decision to be confirmed as a Roman Catholic could readily be interpreted as not doing so in relation to the Mennonite church.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> This phrase is from Cardinal Kasper, as quoted in Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism*, 16.



but-necessary way-stations for communities (and individual Christians) with different starting points but all on the journey toward greater Christ-likeness and, thus, greater unity.

A second fundamental insight underlying Schlabach's work is that "what the Christian church has to offer... must in the first instance be its own life."<sup>26</sup> This corresponds closely with the insistence in BFC documents that "the primary issue is not what exactly we will decide about the challenges that face us; the primary issue is whether we can be the church in doing so."<sup>27</sup> Schlabach's discussion of stability and dissent within the church helps to unpack how the church can in fact "be the church," and continue to "offer" itself to the world, even (especially) in times of disagreement.

Key to Schlabach's discussion in this regard is his reflection on a "tradition of dissent," drawing especially on the history of North American Mennonites in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Highlighting the category of "dissent" as a crucial one for John Howard Yoder, who understood such dissent to be at the core of the Anabaptist way of following Jesus,<sup>28</sup> Schlabach describes how Stanley Hauerwas has seen more clearly the centrality of a tradition characterized by the practices and virtues that make such dissent possible. That is, whereas Yoder emphasized the tradition of *dissent*, Hauerwas (and Schlabach) are calling attention to the importance of a *tradition* of dissent.<sup>29</sup>

How does it look when such a "tradition of dissent" is operative in a concrete community? Schlabach explores these issues with a study of "the practice of stability" in the Rule of St. Benedict and in Benedictine communities, in the Roman Catholic Church "writ

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>27</sup> Robert J. Suderman, *BFC 1*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> "In one of Yoder's earliest essays, written in 1952 and published in 1954, he had labeled the very logic of Anabaptist ways of following Jesus as that of dissent. What Anabaptist-Mennonite disciples most of all dissent *from*, according to Yoder, are violent ways of ordering the world, along with the pattern of sanctifying such worldly violence that has characterized so much of Western Christianity." Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> "Dissenters almost always owe more to tradition than they know. And Hauerwas has noticed the debt that has made Mennonite dissent possible in the first place, even when dissenters have been relying on tradition far more parasitically than they dared to admit." Ibid., 49.

large” vis-a-vis the experience of Vatican II, and in a further chapter on “Stability in Hard Times: Loyal Dissent.” The result is a nuanced treatment of the intricate dance between tradition, dissent, stability, fidelity, authority, leadership, disagreement, discernment and faithfulness in the church.

Multiple points in this discussion speak directly to our theme. One is the insight that “dissent is meaningless outside of communion.”<sup>30</sup> Schlabach’s case studies of “five loyal dissenters” within the Catholic Church help to demonstrate the meaningfulness and indeed the feasibility of this claim.<sup>31</sup>

Another insight is the observation – derived from Schlabach’s discussion of Vatican II – of the possibility of “real though ‘incomplete’ communion with other Christian communities.”<sup>32</sup> This resonates with what we have heard in Bergen’s discussion of ecumenical bilateral dialogues. And still another is Schlabach’s note that “as important as fair procedures are... no procedural clarity can substitute for charity, patience, and courage, as well as the community virtue that holds these together through difficult times: fidelity to one

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 162. Schlabach describes this linkage well in the following paragraph: “Loyal dissent, in other words, must be an expression of the very practice of stability that holds loyalty and dissent together. Whether loyalty is virtuous or instead is blind conformity will depend on whether it has the courage to contemplate dissent, however reluctantly. Dissent itself is an act, not a virtue, so it can either express a bad habit of discontent or express the virtue of courage in the face of injustice. By holding loyalty and dissent together, therefore, stability shapes both for the better. As a practice that keeps people involved constructively in their communities through good times and bad, stability ought always to be operative in our lives. Loyal dissent, however, is but one way to act conscientiously in hard times.” Ibid., 110.

<sup>31</sup> While arguing strenuously for “hanging in their with each other, even when we disagree,” Schlabach does acknowledge the reality of, and sometimes need for, separation. Even in these instances he articulates the positive function and possibility of the practices and virtues of stability: “Tragically, some who once participated in a tradition will find at some point, amid such a crisis, that they need to leave it, switch allegiances, or start over in another community. If they have cultivated the virtue of fidelity through the practice of stability, however, those who are morally mature and not simply resentful will do well to consider their departure a state of exile, not schism. Likewise, those who do not seek to depart, yet are expelled, will do well to call the bluff of their judges by narrating the purpose of the community they then must form not as rivalry but as service. In any of these cases, where the practice of stability does its work, the witness that a reconstituted community or tradition embodies will aim for the healing and the good of the whole.” Ibid., 111.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 139.

another through the practice of stability.”<sup>33</sup> This too echoes Bergen’s comments about the difference between “texts” (in the shape of “final reports,” etc.) and “dialogues” (the means to the creation of “new social realities”<sup>34</sup>).

Clearly there is a great deal here that bears directly on the question of whether it might be possible for different understandings – even deeply held disagreement – to be understood as the fruit of the Spirit’s leading. While Schlabach’s treatment is frank about the experience of disagreement with the church, his strong advocacy for the practices and virtues of stability and “hanging in there with each other, even when we disagree” provides another angle and another lens for understanding the way the Spirit may be at work in such situations.

### **John Zizioulas - “the one” and “the many” in eucharistic ecclesiology**

John Zizioulas’ book *Being As Communion* is dense and complex in its discussion of philosophical theology, ontology, patristic studies and ecclesiology rooted in the structures, categories and traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church. A number of Zizioulas’ emphases in *Being As Communion* speak directly to matters of unity and diversity in the church in a distinctive way that raises questions and highlight issues that are significant for the BFC process.

First among these is the centrality of ecclesiology. “The Church is not simply an institution. She is a ‘mode of existence,’ a way of *being*. The mystery of the Church, even in its institutional dimension, is deeply bound to the being of man, to the being of the world, and to the very being of God.”<sup>35</sup> While the language here is not the same, this emphasis resonates with the insistence we have already heard that “the primary issue is whether we

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>34</sup> Bergen, *Bilateral Dialogues*, 216. See note 18 above.

<sup>35</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (USA: St. Vladimir’s University Press, 1985), 15.

can be the church” (BFC 1)<sup>36</sup> and that “what the Christian church has to offer... must in the first instance be its own life” (Schlabach).<sup>37</sup>

Second, for Zizioulas and in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, ecclesiology is, by definition, eucharistic. “The eucharist was not the act of a pre-existing Church; it was an event *constitutive* of the Church, enabling the Church to *be*. The eucharist *constituted* the Church’s being.”<sup>38</sup> This emphasis plays itself out in every direction, in terms of understanding the dynamics between “local” and “universal” church, and in terms of the function of leadership and church structure. I wonder what difference it might make, in our concern with “disagreement” and “unity” in the BFC process, if eucharistic practice were understood and experienced to be at the centre of our discernment.

Third, in Zizioulas’ articulation of ecclesiology, as a prominent voice in the Orthodox tradition, the function of leadership is crucial. The scriptural dynamic of the “one” (one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, etc.) and the “many” (many members, many gifts) is embodied, for Zizioulas, in the way leadership functions in relation to the whole of the Church. “The role of the bishop as the visible center of the unity of the eucharistic community is precisely what has made him so vital for the unity of the Churches both in space and time.”<sup>39</sup>

This emphasis raises a host of questions for Mennonites and for the BFC process, where there is often a great deal of confusion about the proper function of “leadership” or

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<sup>36</sup> Suderman, *BFC 1*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism*, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 238. A particularly striking articulation of the role of the bishop vis-à-vis the “one” and the “many” comes in the midst of Zizioulas’ discussion of church structure: “If we arrive at the importance of the episcopal succession via the idea of continuity of *structure*, we can appreciate the traditional assignment to the bishop of the role of the sole ordainer. Because of his place in the structure of the community, especially in its eucharistic form, the bishop is the one through whom all charismatic manifestations of the Church must pass, so that they may be manifestations not of individualism but of the *koinonia* of the Spirit and the community created by it. Extraordinary or (as they are called today) “charismatic” ministries have their place in the Church and must be encouraged. But it is only if they are parts of the structure of the community that they are not in danger of becoming the kind of individualistic manifestations which St Paul fought so vigorously in Corinth. All these extraordinary ministries, therefore, become integral parts of the apostolic continuity in the synthesis I am expounding here, if they go through the bishop, in whom the entire structure converges and the “many” become “one” in a particular existential milieu.” *Ibid.*, 199.

“authority” in the church. The conception of “the bishop as the visible center of unity” is a foreign and, I dare say, a suspicious-sounding one to contemporary Mennonites. When the “unity” or “oneness” of the church is understood to be expressed in a *person* or *office* – how does “discernment” proceed in such a system?

Mennonites may recoil at such a prospect because it smacks of “elitism” and “authoritarianism.” And yet Zizioulas is careful to articulate – in conjunction with this high calling for the role of “bishop” – the practice of accountability to/with “the many” as crucial and inherent in the leadership role. Zizioulas states: “because of the relational nature of ordination, no ordained person realizes his *ordo* in himself but in the community. Thus if he is isolated from the community he ceases to be an ordained person...”<sup>40</sup> In this system, *conciliarity* (that is, the gathering of the bishops) is essential. And yet “no decision of a council is authoritative in itself unless it is *received* by the communities.”<sup>41</sup>

A final note about Zizioulas’ articulation of an Orthodox eucharistic ecclesiology. In his discussion of the history of conciliarity, Zizioulas makes the strong statement that “no local Church could be a Church unless it was open to communion with the rest of the Churches. Schism between two or more Churches was as intolerable as divisions within one community, and conciliarity was concerned that that more than anything else.”<sup>42</sup>

How would Zizioulas respond to the question about the possibility of disagreement between churches as the work of God’s Spirit? I don’t know, although my guess, in light of what we have seen, is that such a possibility would not be easily countenanced. That said, it is interesting to note Zizioulas’ thoughts on how “the divided communities of our time” might move toward greater unity (speaking here of the broader ecumenical context). He counsels against “trying to recognize each other’s ‘orders’ as such,” suggesting instead to “try to recognize each other as ecclesial communities (sic) relating to God and the world through

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

their ministries in the way that is implied in the mystery of Christ and the Spirit. This is not a matter of 'confessional' agreements, but of a more existential *rapprochement* to which divided Christendom is called."<sup>43</sup> In this Zizioulas too, despite the significantly different tradition and understandings that he articulates, resonates with what we have heard from others about the priority of relationship (what Zizioulas here calls "a more existential *rapprochement*") over written documents or "confessional agreements" in the concrete work of furthering Christian unity.

### **Paul Avis – whence ecumenism?**

Paul Avis, an Anglican priest and longtime General Secretary of the Church of England's Council for Christian Unity, gives a "state of the movement" address in his book *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology*. While still passionately convinced and committed to the mandate of "the full visible unity... of the whole Church,"<sup>44</sup> his tone is frequently weary and somewhat chastened. "There is a need for greater realism about what unity means and how we can reach it," he says. "The days of ecumenical pipedreams are over."<sup>45</sup>

Avis knows about the trends and the rhetoric, and is calling for a reappraisal of the work of ecumenism. "Many church leaders and theologians saw the ecumenical movement as a new work of the Holy Spirit, but now it appears all too human... although it is sometimes said that as we seek Christ we will find one another, and that in strengthening our unity with him we strengthen our unity as his Body, this has not proved true in any straightforwardly empirical sense."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole?* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 194.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., vii.

Avis strongly articulates both “the imperative of unity” *and* “an imperative of diversity.”<sup>47</sup> He situates both convincingly in the context of mission. “It is the effectiveness of mission, as the gospel is spoken into different cultures and contexts, that is the real source of diversity in the Church. The process is circular and self-perpetuating: diversity of expressions of the gospel is an instrument of mission, corresponding to the diversity of cultures... Therefore just as mission creates diversity, it also demands unity, so that the diversity remains rooted in the one gospel.”<sup>48</sup>

On the subject of disagreement, Avis says clearly and approvingly that this is to be expected in the church. “Those with different views, passionately held, are all bound together in the baptized Body. That is no doubt how the Good Lord designed that his Church should be.”<sup>49</sup> Later, however, when discussing specific challenges within his own Anglican communion (such as the ordination of women and the issue of same-sex unions), he does not sound so convinced.<sup>50</sup> It would seem that, for Avis, diversity manifest in disagreement is acceptable and even positive in the ecumenical realm, but more problematic within specific denominational bodies.

Avis also references the possibility of “degrees of communion” that are real and significant but fall short of “full communion.”<sup>51</sup> And like Schlabach, Avis cautions strongly against leaving one’s communion, drawing particular attention to the detrimental effect of such a move on the very possibility of discernment: “... to put ourselves out of communion is to put ourselves outside the process of reception, and to put ourselves outside the process of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>50</sup> “The life of a church is synonymous with its experience of communion with God and its members and that communion comes to its highest expression in the Eucharist. But that eucharistic expression of communion itself depends on agreement in faith and a common ministry of word and sacrament, set within a common framework of oversight...” Ibid., 167. Here it sounds like “agreement” is non-negotiable, as compared to “disagreement” as a to-be-expected-and-embraced feature inherent in the diversity of the church (cf. pp. 95-96).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 152.

reception is to put ourselves outside the sphere of the Spirit's guiding."<sup>52</sup> Such a statement, while intended as an urging to remain a part of "the Body" or "the Vine"<sup>53</sup> and a welcome call to take the process of ecclesial discernment seriously, seems overly limiting of the Spirit's capacity to guide. Avis is on surer ground when he makes the ringing claim that "our primary obligation to our fellow Christians is to be in communion with them."<sup>54</sup>

### **Tim Otto – transforming the conversation**

Tim Otto represents the last in our survey of ecumenical voices speaking to questions of whether divergent understandings of faithfulness regarding same sex relationships might be the fruit of the Spirit's leading. This does not reflect negatively on the usefulness and importance of his work in addressing these questions – in fact, the opposite is true. Otto is a long-time member and pastor at the Church of the Sojourners, a Christian community in San Francisco that is part of the "new monasticism." As a gay man, Otto has "lived the questions" in a very real way, and his book *Oriented to Faith: Transforming the Conflict over Gay Relationships* is very well suited to help the church discern these questions faithfully.<sup>55</sup>

In fact, the primary purpose of Otto's book is to just that: to seek to understand, in the midst of deep disagreements, what God is doing. The BFC process has been seeking "the right question" for discernment, and here is Otto's suggestion: "how is God working for the good? How is God working for the good through the controversy in the church around homosexuality? How is God working for the good through Christians who identify themselves as LGBT?"<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>55</sup> As I indicated in a note in my earlier discussion of Gerald Schlabach's book – if it were in my power, I would make Schlabach's *Unlearning Protestantism* and Otto's *Oriented to Faith* required reading for all leaders and congregations engaged with the BFC process.

<sup>56</sup> Tim Otto, *Oriented to Faith: Transforming the Conflict over Gay Relationships* (Eugene, OR:



Otto begins from the bedrock conviction that God is at work, and that it will be more fruitful to ask “what is God doing” than to ask (or proclaim) who is “right” and who is “wrong” regarding same sex relationships. In terms of our question of whether current disagreements in the church can be understood as the fruit of the Spirit’s leading, Otto would respond with a resounding “yes!” In fact, Otto frames his purpose for writing in terms that are very close to the questions being asked by the BFC process. “I’m writing this book because I have both conservative and liberal Christian friends, and I have seen something of what they have to offer each other... Just as Scripture makes it clear that Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free are one in Christ, conservatives and liberals need to know one another as ‘one’ in Christ.”<sup>57</sup>

Otto’s interest and concern is thoroughly missional and ecclesiological. He is concerned for the health and witness of the church. “We are at a crucial point in the life of the church,” he writes. “As a community of believers, we must look through the lens of faith and ask the question, ‘*What is God doing in all of us?*’ We can fight one another while the world watches us with bemused cynicism, *or we can discern how God is using our struggles to help the entire church become more faithful.*”<sup>58</sup> (emphasis added).

These are precisely the questions that the BFC Task Force is asking the congregations of Mennonite Church Canada to consider. And Tim Otto’s book is a remarkable resource for that discernment. Assuming disagreement, Otto points a way forward. For those individuals and communities who are convinced of a “traditionalist” stance, he invites and challenges them to move toward a posture of “compassionate traditionalism.”<sup>59</sup>

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Cascade, 2014), xvi.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 85-97.

Those convinced of an “affirming” stance he invites and challenges to move toward a posture of “committed affirmation.”<sup>60</sup>

And from there he proceeds to a chapter entitled “May All Be One,”<sup>61</sup> pointing to ways that the church can remain “diverse” while still being “one.” Outlining ways to be in healthy relationship and “hang in there with each other, and with the church, even when we disagree” (in the words of Gerald Schlabach). Describing what it might look like for individuals and communities who disagree with each other to “move toward Christ” (in the words of Cardinal Ratzinger and Cardinal Kasper). Indicating how different congregations with different understandings may be missionally responsive in offering good news in their own contexts (as suggested by Avis). In other words, Tim Otto’s book draws together a great many of the threads that we have been identifying throughout this study.

## **Conclusion**

Let us return once more to the questions that prompted this study. *“Is the same Spirit leading us to differing understandings of faithfulness in regards to same sex relationships? ... Is the challenge for us now to see the fruit of this discernment as also being led by the Spirit of God?”*

Having engaged various ecumenical voices, I believe that it may be possible to say “yes” to these questions. I am persuaded by the logic that says all are called to “conversion toward Christ” – that’s it’s not a matter of one side “winning over” another to its “position,” but a matter of all journeying toward Christ. I am persuaded that the unity-in-diversity represented in the Biblical canon can serve as a model for unity-in-diversity in the church. I am persuaded of the importance of the “practices and virtues necessary for sustaining Christian community,” acknowledging diversity and “hanging in there with each other and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 98-108.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 109-119.

with the church, even when we disagree” (including a role for “loyal dissent”). The questions posed by the BFC Task Force may help point a way toward “sustaining Christian community” for the sake of the health and witness of the Mennonite Church Canada and its healing, shalom-bringing life and ministry for all people. They may.

But I am also concerned. I am concerned that these questions may represent a short-cut and a cop-out, a way of enabling some to avoid the hard work of discerning together. I am concerned that some congregations will see these questions (or the possibility suggested by these questions) as a way of blessing or baptizing existing views, without adequately committing to or engaging in the hard work of discernment. I am concerned that these questions may constitute a premature foreclosure of a discernment process that should not be too quick to “settle” for disagreement, and should not be afraid to work longer in pursuit of greater unity. And I am concerned about the dynamics of undertaking this denomination-wide process of discernment at a time when face-to-face assemblies are decreasing, making it more challenging to regularly worship and share “eucharistic fellowship” with those in the broader body with whom we do not agree.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, despite these concerns, I share the conviction so amply evidenced by the scholars surveyed in this study. God is at work. Jesus is present. The Spirit is leading. Even if these realities are hard to see. May we indeed “lead a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:1-3).

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<sup>62</sup>It is evident that a great deal of my concern has to do with the most recent phase of the BFC process, which I understand to have taken a surprising and potentially troubling turn. See Appendix for an overview of the process.

## Appendix

As this essay seeks to explore some of the questions raised by the BFC process, it is appropriate to provide some account of the context and experience that has resulted in those questions being asked in the first place.

The first document of the BFC process, entitled “Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment,”<sup>63</sup> established the context this way: “The General Board of Mennonite Church Canada monitors the spiritual health of our church. This is not an easy task, because it is not easy to be the church, in Canada, in the 21st century.” The document goes on to say “the ongoing health of our church requires that we continue to strengthen our overall capacity to discern the mind of God as the church engages the critical agenda of our time,” identifying five themes in need of further discernment.<sup>64</sup>

This is significant for a variety of reasons. The document emphasizes that the task of discernment is the ongoing, normal, and positive vocation of the church in the world. It encourages the church to take this vocation seriously, and expresses a great deal of confidence in the capacity of the church to faithfully carry it out. By identifying “human sexuality in the life of the church” as the fourth of five major themes that are in urgent need of discernment, the document places this discussion as part of a broader agenda of issues that are all important for the church at the present time. That is, the BFC process is carefully constructed so as not to be a “crisis” or “conflict management” situation. It is a structured

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<sup>63</sup> Full disclosure: the author of this essay is the son of Robert J. Suderman. Robert Suderman has been lead writer for a number of the BFC documents, former Executive Secretary of Mennonite Church Canada (2005-2010), and is a current member of the BFC Task Force.

<sup>64</sup> The five themes identified are:

- a) Unity and Diversity in the life of the church;
- b) Being a Peace church;
- c) Confessing and Witnessing to Jesus Christ as Lord in a religiously pluralistic context;
- d) Human sexuality in the life of the church;
- e) Ecological concerns from a perspective of faith.

effort of the church to help the church to do what it has always done and always needs to do – to engage in the process of “seeking clarity in faithfulness in Christian life” which “is the never-ending, non-optional vocation of God’s people.”<sup>65</sup>

Undeniably, however, it is the fourth in that list of five current issues that has been at the forefront as the issue with the most potential, at the present time, to split the church. The BFC 1 document puts it this way: “As a national church we are facing the complex reality that while different parts of our Body (Priesthood of Believers) are reflecting on the same foundational scripture, guided by the same Holy Spirit, revealing the mind/will of the same God, we are discerning what appear, at times, to be contradictory and irreconcilable directions in understanding Christian faithfulness.”<sup>66</sup> The BFC process, then, was and is positioned as an intensive, multi-year, church-wide effort to engage in rigorous discernment together, as a national church body, around these issues. This process “is designed to energize, not drain, the missional capacities of the church. When we understand discernment as fulfilling the vocation of the church, we will be able to see this as an opportunity and not as a problem. This will energize our identity as a church.”<sup>67</sup>

That was in 2009 (five years ago, as of this writing). In July 2011 the Mennonite Church Canada delegate body approved a suggested timeline (BFC 3) for the next stage of the BFC process that would deal specifically with discernment about “human sexuality in the life of the church.” This part of the process has unfolded over the past three years, beginning with a focus on how we understand and experience the role of Scripture in our discernment (BFC 4 and BFC 4.1), and then a broad look at “Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality” (BFC 5 and 5.1). Each of these steps has invited and received extensive feedback and participation from local congregations in response to specific questions posed by the

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<sup>65</sup> Suderman, *BFC* 1, 2.

<sup>66</sup> Suderman, *BFC* 1, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Suderman, *BFC* 1, 4.

documents. These steps have been framed as “exercising our interpretive muscles” (BFC 4.1) – that is, building up our capacity to discern, and discern well, seeking to use the Bible in helpful ways and to avoid using it in unhelpful ways (BFC 4).

BFC 5 invited the church to reflect and give feedback on what the “right question” should be for the next stage of discernment. BFC 5 was positioned as a response to “congregational feedback during the last two stages of the BFC process [that] clearly indicated a need to examine sexuality in very broad terms,” and it did not specifically address questions of same sex attraction and relationships. This broad “overview of sexuality in the Bible” was preparatory to more specific reflection about same sex relationships, calling for feedback on “the right question” to guide the next stage of discernment.

In BFC 5.1, the BFC Task Force indicated that “we do not see a specific question emerging from within the responses.” In fact, even though BFC 5 did not yet specifically address questions of same sex attraction and relationships, and did not ask congregations to respond to those questions, BFC 5.1 articulates in considerable detail that many of the responses received did include specific articulations of congregational “discernment” about these questions. Thus, whereas BFC 5 was positioned as preparatory for further study and discernment regarding same sex relationships, BFC 5.1, in reflecting the responses received, speaks as though that study and discernment has already happened in the broader body, with the result of “congregations not being able to reach consensus.”<sup>68</sup>

This, then, is the context for the questions under consideration in the present essay. I will include the paragraphs from BFC 5.1 that include those questions, along with their context:

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<sup>68</sup> General Board, *BFC 5.1, 2*.

*The next step in the BFC process has been to identify the specific question to be discerned regarding same-sex attractions and relationships. However, we do not see a specific question emerging from within the responses.*

*The responses clearly indicate that the Spirit of God has placed a deep felt desire for unity in our hearts. We yearn to be together in congregations, Area Churches, and the National Church. **Is the same Spirit leading us to differing understandings of faithfulness in regards to same-sex relationships?***

*From the beginning of the BFC process we have prayed for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We have invited congregations to surround their discernment in worship and prayer and we have seen much evidence of that. The responses have revealed significant differences of understanding of the will of God, even while Scripture has been the foundation. **Is the challenge for us now to see the fruit of this discernment as also being led by the Spirit of God?**" (emphasis added)*

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